

## **'It's a Double-edged Sword': Central Florida Ranks No. 2 on Human Trafficking Reports.**

*Florida Department of Children and Families released 2018 to 2019 data on human trafficking.*

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A mother's longing can wreck a child.

For 33-year-old Savannah Parvu from Central Florida, her mother's yearning for drugs impacted her for years. It made her a victim of human trafficking from age 11 to 15 in the Orange County area.

According to the [United States Department of Justice](#), human trafficking is defined as exploiting a person for labor, services or commercial sex.

But as a child, Parvu didn't know what it was.

"I didn't really know any different," she said. "All I knew is I couldn't talk about it otherwise I'd be taken to the bad place."

### **Parvu's Experience**

A typical day was finding strange men at her bus stop after school. She was taken to either their house or a run-down hotel. The smell of crack was overwhelming. Men were coming in and out crowding her, she said.

She spent her nights being sold to multiple people at a time and forced to have sex with them, Parvu stated. The men were large with bulging muscles and shaved heads.

And although males are trafficked, Parvu didn't recall a single boy in her situation. The only ones involved were those forced to watch her get raped.

To outsiders, Parvu was a normal kid attending school.

She wasn't. Parvu took pregnancy tests to see if a rapist made her a teenage mother and got detention in a desperate effort to avoid the sexual assault for a little longer, she said.

She felt trapped.

"I was hoping she would stop doing drugs so that she would stop letting them do that to me," she said.

But her dream didn't come true. What she considered her daily routine continued – even when separated from her mother.

Parvu was put into the foster care system at 13, she said. This was after her parents attempted suicide in front of her. Her father went first. He had a stroke a few years prior and couldn't speak. Her mother blamed herself. She took shards of glass and furiously cut herself.

After ending up in the system, Parvu moved around because she started to cut herself. That's when she ended up at a group home facility where some staff members were friends with her trafficker.

“I started being trafficked while I was in foster care,” she said. “And after that happened, some of the other girls started being trafficked as well.”

## **Data**

[According to a 2018 to 2019 report from the Florida Department of Children and Families](#), Central Florida has the second-highest number of human trafficking reports per region with 481.

The annual report states the Florida Abuse Hotline received 2,198 reports of trafficking maltreatments. This is an increase from the 2017 to 2018 report showing 2,133. The data has been leveling off since 2016.

In terms of counties, the report states Orange County has the third-highest number of reports at 155. This is behind Broward County with 250 reports and Miami-Dade County with 197.

The report states 14.5% were male victims. Also, 92.5% of reports were listed as human trafficking-commercial sexual exploitation of a child (CSEC). A little over 7% was coded as human trafficking-labor.

Florida ranks No. 3 for the highest number of reports in the United States, said Dee Coleman, executive director of Samaritan Village – a long term rehabilitation program and safe house for adult female survivors of sex trafficking in Central Florida.

However, this data doesn't necessarily mean there's more human trafficking in Florida than in other places.

“It's a double-edged sword,” Coleman said. “What it means is there's an awareness here in Florida and Orange County that people are recognizing and reporting.”

Nevertheless, human trafficking is happening in Central Florida at alarmingly high rates, she said.

## **Reasoning**

There are multiple reasons this could be occurring. For instance, Central Florida – and Florida in general – attracts tourists.

“There's a lot of people who come here for very short periods of time and leave,” she said. “It's really easy to keep people under the radar.”

Other reasons are systemic inequalities like a lack of affordable housing making people more vulnerable and legislation making it difficult for traffickers to resist, she said.

And although sex trafficking seems to be the most popular – especially in Central Florida – there is often an overlap between labor and sex trafficking, Coleman said. Also, the age range of victims varies, but the state average is 10 and 11.

“Traffickers are businessmen,” she said. “There's a lot of money to be made. It's kind of low risk and high reward.”

Besides altering legislation to increase the risk traffickers face, it is also important to educate, she stated.

“Increasing awareness in our community is understanding it [human trafficking] happens in every area of town,” Coleman said.

## **Signs**

Multiple signs could indicate a person is being trafficked, Parvu said. For children, it could be a student who doesn't want to go home, an adult speaking for a child, a child who doesn't speak, a young girl taking a pregnancy test and no parental involvement.

Other signs could be the person is badly beaten, malnourished or doesn't have any possessions, said Sgt. Brad Bakeman of the Orlando Police Department.

Educating the public is essential as it could prevent people from becoming victims, he stated.

“A lot of these guys are searching through Facebook looking for young, pretty girls, and just sending them messages,” he said. “I think some of these girls are a little naïve to what the intentions of these guys are.”

Bakeman gave an example of when a California man contacted a young girl. After spending time with one another, the man offered her a free trip to Orlando, Florida.

She got there, and he took advantage of her, he said. She was forced into prostitution. The man snatched her phone and credit cards. She had no way of contacting her family or paying for a plane ticket. She knew no one.

“She was eventually able to call the police,” he said. “But the damage had been done.”

In terms of law enforcement, it is more reactive to human trafficking, he said. The focus is on recovering victims and keeping them out of the system.

“It's a very difficult thing to combat,” he said. “A lot of times, they are so brainwashed that their handlers are everything to them.”

However, the goal is to become more proactive and start educating before damage can be done.

“It could be going to any kind of youth programs that allow us to speak to them and just show them the signs these pimps may take to take advantage of them – put them under their control,” Bakeman said.

## **Healing**

Parvu didn't get the chance to learn the signs. And her healing didn't start until she found a resource – counseling – at 26. It began after attempting to establish a relationship with her mother, Parvu stated. She was told her mother was sober, but when she arrived at her mother's house, there was a drug party. Parvu was raped by multiple people.

“I felt like my past had repeated itself,” she said. “If I didn’t get help, that was like losing my life.”

Parvu hasn’t contacted her mother since. However, her father has always been involved in her life as best he could. He died a couple of years ago.

In general, Parvu’s life experiences have hindered her relationships with others because she finds it difficult to trust people. She is also not a parent.

But from counseling, Parvu gained the courage to share her story and be a guiding light for those with similar experiences to her. She does this by being a speaker for human trafficking and advocating for other survivors.

She currently has a full-time job as an accountant but is working toward a career on increasing awareness of human trafficking and helping survivors cope.

Parvu encourages others to seek help as she did. Moreover, if they go to therapy, they need to be patient with the process.

“You don’t have to be defined by what is happening or has happened,” she said. “You can still have a good life, freedom and be successful.”