

HUMAN

trafficking

A **\$10 billion** per year industry, the trading of **people as commodities** has long been the misfortune of developing countries. But with the number of trafficked into the United States in the tens of thousands per year, **are we doing enough?**

BY MICHAEL CORY DAVIS

Her name is Paloma.* A young woman with dark hair and eyes, she stands 5'3" and is full of joy when she talks about her plans for the future. She's had much to overcome. In her eyes is a fiery conviction developed from years of hardship. Confident and pretty, Paloma is sure she has the power to make a better life for herself.

At first glance, she seems like any other young immigrant. Paloma came to the United States ready to begin her new life when she was just 16 years old. It would be the start of a journey she hoped would help erase the years of abuse and poverty she had endured in her native Mexico. Upon arriving in Houston, she was immediately awed, believing it matched the impression engrained in her from years of watching American television. As she drove through suburban neighborhoods, she saw children playing on the street, marveled at the expensive tricked-out cars that passed her and looked in amazement at the shopping centers selling all the clothes she imagined wearing one day.

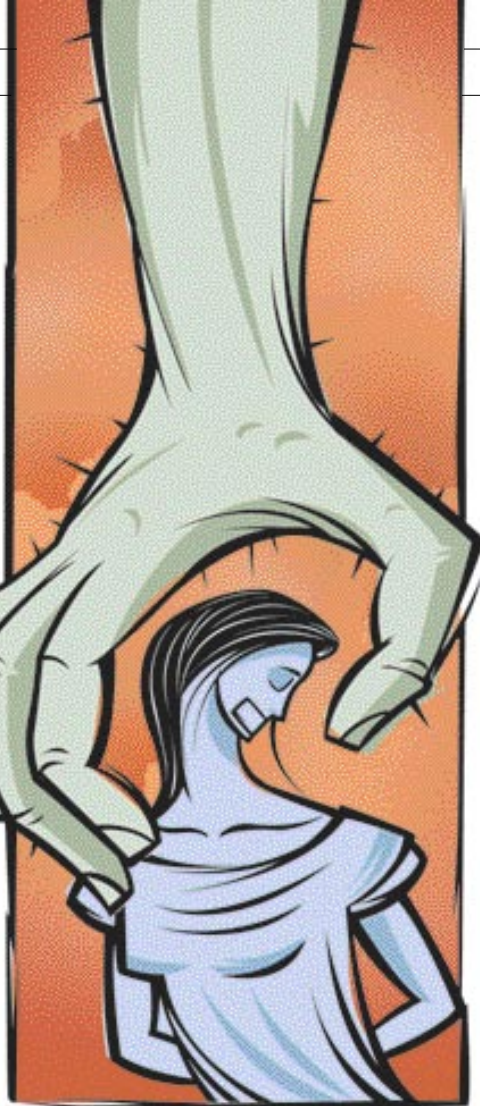
As she neared the apartment where she would be staying, she felt a pit in her stomach, a warning of things to come. The building was a considerable step up from the shack in Mexico where she slept in a room on a mattress, or the bus-stop bench where she sought

to escape the advances of her drunken father or abusive brother.

Although Paloma immigrated to Houston without her family, she did not come alone. An older man approached her in the park one day and offered her a way out. He said he was a prominent businessman with companies throughout Mexico and the United States, and in the small villages he traveled to in Central America and Mexico he was known as a big spender.

When she met Romeo* it seemed as if all her dreams of a better life would come true if she would just leave Mexico and join him when he returned to America, as he asked. He promised to get her into an American school and give her a job as a secretary at one of his companies so she could pay back the debt to smuggle her in the country and send money to her sickly mother. With little keeping her in Mexico and the promise of brighter future in the U.S., she accepted.

But everything changed as soon as she began her stay. Paloma would never see more of the United States than the inside of the apartment where she would be held captive for six months. Paloma recalls that Romeo had simple rules of the house: cook, clean and have sex with him whenever he wanted. To prevent her escape, he kept her documents and threatened



to have her younger sister killed. She had no way to escape. To be sure, he took the telephone with him every day before he left the house and enforced the bolts on all the doors and windows. He brandished a machete he kept under his mattress when she disobeyed. Once inside the apartment, the only other time she would walk through the door would be her last, escorted by two detectives.

How It Works

Paloma's story might seem fictional, but her story is all too common. In 2006 the U.S. State Department estimated that 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked around the world every year; 80 percent of them are women and girls, and up to 50 percent are children. The department estimates that there are 14,500 to 17,500 victims entering the country annually. But even this seemingly high figure is considered by some organizations to be a gross under-representation as thousands of cases go unreported.

*Not their real names.

Legally, trafficking is defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act as the “recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, for the purpose of subjecting that person to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.”

Like Paloma, victims of trafficking are forced to work in horrific conditions, most often as laborers, prostitutes and domestic servants. Though there are many forms, none are as horrific as sex trafficking. In many instances, as in the case of a huge sex trafficking ring discovered in Oceanside, California, victims are brought to America as sexual rewards for the migrant workers who are themselves being used as forced laborers.

Human trafficking is something thought to occur in other parts of the world. How could this happen here? The swell of victims in the U.S. is due to an increase in demand for cheap labor and sex workers. Source countries are often corrupt and impoverished and make it very easy for traffickers to prey on millions seeking escape.

In Central America, gangs are heavily in-

involved in sex trafficking and transport victims to the U.S. through a huge network. Their reputation for violence and taste for murder precedes them, and as a result, Hispanic victims are fearful of speaking to anyone in the community should they have an opportunity.

Traffickers profit steeply from victims’ desperation and fear. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reveals that human trafficking earns an estimated \$7 to \$10 billion a year. It’s more than enough to bribe officials, from police to judges. In certain countries parents of kidnapped and trafficked children are left helpless, as law enforcement is often part of the problem.

Traffickers can hold seemingly respectable positions in the community—pastor, school teacher, police officer, nurse, doctor or family friend—and they can operate as a syndicate or individually. Usually the more professional and successful a person seems to be, the better chances they have at luring victims or deceiving families from poor undeveloped countries. They use fictitious modeling agencies, secretarial jobs, nanny services, restaurant work and the possibility of education as their bait. In reality, victims work in brothels, which operate under the guise of massage parlors, apartment complexes, strip clubs and more.

A Caged Existence

In the case of *U.S. v. Jimenez-Calderon*, the traffickers were a family. Two brothers lured two young Mexican girls to the U.S. by lavishing them with gifts, false courtship and promises of marriage. Upon arrival, the brothers turned the girls, ages 14 and 18, over to their sisters who kept them in servitude and forced prostitution.

“These young women were kept in a state of vile servitude,” U.S. Attorney Christopher J. Christie said in a statement in early August. “The humiliation they endured is beyond our comprehension and the psychological scars they carry are unfathomable.”

At the madams’ sentencing, some of the victims revealed that they lived a “caged-animal existence.”

A common misconception is that these women and children don’t mind the work, otherwise they would just leave. Even in instances when the victims are able to leave, traffickers are manipulative and the real slavery is psychological. Traffickers have a variety of methods to keep victims mentally controlled—they keep

Be an Activist

To learn more about this crime and what to do to help exterminate it log onto:

www.acf.hhs.gov/trafficking/about/fact_sex.html

www.polarisproject.org

www.noforsalecampaign.org

www.cargoinnocencelost.com

www.stophumantrafficking.com

Or call:

Human Trafficking Referral Hotline from
The Department of Health and Human
Services: 888-373-7888

identification papers and threaten that should they disobey, they will be killed and there will be no proof they ever existed. Victims often don’t speak English. Add to that the reliance victims have on their captors for basic necessities, and the traffickers create an immediate dependence.

Reports from victims and NGOs that work with them report some horrific crimes against trafficking victims. Victims have reported that it is customary for traffickers to use violence as a control method. They utilize gang rape, beatings, skin branding, starvation, isolation, cigarette burns and drugging as initiation into their new life of servitude and prostitution. In some extreme cases traffickers have violently forced victims to undergo multiple abortions with unclean instruments, and social workers have reported rescuing young girls, some as young as 12, who have been so injured that they can no longer have children. The traffickers also blackmail their captives. Traffickers take pictures of their youngest victims (often children) in compromising positions so that they can be used against them as evidence to send back to their families. But the biggest intimidation is the threat or use of violence in the home country against the victim’s family members or close friends.

Evading Justice

Traffickers, like their victims, are nearly invisible. They move victims from brothel to brothel so customers and girls don’t ever get to know each other and establish a network. If a trafficker is caught, the case can be difficult to prosecute because victims are too frightened and controlled to talk. For victims, their lifeline to the outside world and to their home country is the trafficker. And victims often believe

What every community can do: three strategies

There are a range of activities that private citizens can take part in to help eradicate the problem.

1. Hold informational film screenings or invite human trafficking task force members to speak and educate those unaware of the crime at their homes, churches, places of employment.
2. One of the best ways to help law enforcement is to learn how to identify victims of trafficking and then call tip lines. More info can be found at http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/global.issues/human_trafficking.html
3. Identify and force out fraudulent businesses in their communities set up to employ victims of trafficking by working with law enforcement.

police to be corrupt and are as fearful of them as their captors.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act passed in 2000 was created to provide victims with security by making resources available. The TVPA, and its reauthorization, acknowledge that victims are held in a climate of fear and need time heal before they can be useful to prosecutors. With these laws, prosecutors have the ability to put traffickers away for life and victims can be awarded with a T-visa allowing them to live in the United States.

IN 2006 THE U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT ESTIMATED THAT 600,000 TO 800,000 PEOPLE ARE TRAFFICKED AROUND THE WORLD EVERY YEAR; 80 PERCENT OF THEM ARE WOMEN AND GIRLS, AND UP TO 50 PERCENT ARE CHILDREN.



The TVPA had bipartisan support. The late Sen. Paul Wellstone (D-MN) and Sen. Sam Brownback, (R-KA) and Rep. Christopher Smith and former Rep. Sam Gejdensen (D-CT), sought both to eliminate trafficking at home and to make combating trafficking and slavery a foreign policy priority.

“The central principle behind the legislation is that anyone who knowingly profits from the severest forms of trafficking should receive punishment commensurate with that given to those who commit other serious crimes, such as kidnapping or forcible rape,” says Rep. Smith.

But the law doesn’t offer much help if the victims are never found. For victims who are rescued, the road to recovery is paved with challenges. Though they may be awarded a T-visa and apply for permanent status, they



have the burden of acclimating to society, usually alone, unable to speak English and still dealing with mental and emotional trauma. It’s very common for victims to have suicidal tendencies when rehabilitating. The government provides some resources, but they don’t last forever—depending on age of the victim, they y eligible for six months to a year.

A World-Wide Trend

This crime is happening all around the world. Victims are taken from every country imaginable and are of most races, cultures and religions. This is a crime about profit and human beings are the commodity.

American children are trafficked as well. According to Richard J. Estes and Neil Alan Weiner of the University of Pennsylvania, it is estimated that about 293,000 American youth are currently at risk of becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

Traffickers prey on American girls using the same methods they do with foreign women—with flattery and romantic attention. Once they are captive, the cycle of violence begins and they become part of a pimp’s stable, trafficked and sold across the nation and taken wherever there will be a swell of men, such as major sporting events and business or political conventions.

The traffickers have preyed on society’s most vulnerable and curtailing their efforts requires arming the community with knowledge, assisting law enforcement and helping rehabilitate victims. Resources are available through hundreds of non-government organizations that rehabilitate victims and do community outreach about the crime of trafficking.

In the end, Paloma spotted an opportunity for escape when her captor left her alone and she was able to call police. Paloma is currently living in America and her trafficker is still a fugitive. Now that she is completing her schooling, she is well on her way to achieving her goal to become a detective. She is presently under the care of a foster mother and lives with other victims of trafficking. **H**

About the Author

Michael Cory Davis, a native New Yorker, relocated to Los Angeles to pursue his career as an actor, writer and director. A commercial, film, advertisement and television actor, Davis wrote and directed the film *Svetlana’s Journey* after traveling to Bulgaria and seeing the devastation of human trafficking and being inspired by a young woman’s story.

Filed over six days with support from the nonprofit Face to Face, MTel, a Bulgarian cell phone carrier and TopForm Studios, it quickly became an educational tool. Davis traveled the country with Face to Face visiting orphanages and public schools screening *Svetlana’s Journey*. In December 2005, Bulgaria’s Nova television aired *Svetlana’s Journey* to more than 2 million viewers.

In the United States, the film won Best Short Subject at the 2005 Hollywood Film Festival and a Deffie award for Best Short Subject and Best Dramatic Short at the 2005 HD Film Festival. Davis has appeared on CNN’s *Live From with Kyra Phillips*, KNBC News and BBC Radio among many international newspapers and magazines. The Los Angeles Police Department, Orange County Police Department, F.B.I., Salvation Army, Women’s Transitional Living Center and Department of Health and Human Services have used the film as an educational tool.

In 2006, Davis made his second film *Cargo: Innocence Lost*, a documentary that examines sex trafficking in the United States. For the film and his efforts, Davis was presented with an award by Anne Archer and the Artist for Human Rights Foundation. Michael has spoken and screened *Cargo: Innocence Lost* for conferences at The U.S Embassy in Sofia, Bulgaria, Simmons College, Vanguard College in association with the Bilateral Safety Corridor Coalition, United Nations Association Film Festival and Cal State Fullerton. Davis has begun to broaden the “I STOP TRAFFICK TOUR,” which screens his films. For more information visit www.cargoinnocencelost.com.