

An Opportunity for Awareness and Action: Sex Trafficking in Milwaukee

Does sex trafficking increase during large-scale events? *Maybe*. The evidence is mixed. No matter what, events such as the Republican National Convention (RNC) are an opportunity for increased awareness and action.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The following brief provides background information on sex trafficking both within and beyond Milwaukee and addresses the research around the potential connection between sex trafficking and large-scale events. A few key takeaways include:

- Anyone can potentially be affected by sex trafficking, but some groups may be at higher risk.
- Sex trafficking can be difficult for multiple types of service providers to identify (e.g., law enforcement, healthcare).
- Those experiencing sex trafficking may not report for a variety of reasons (e.g., shame, fear of retaliation, concern about being arrested, relationship with trafficker).
- Sex trafficking is underreported and difficult to measure, and the full extent of victimization due to sex trafficking is unknown.
- Sex trafficking does occur in Milwaukee, although the full extent remains largely unknown.
- Overall, the evidence on whether sex trafficking increases in relation to large-scale events is mixed.
- Yet, large-scale events such as the RNC provide an opportunity for increased awareness and action for the prevention, identification, and reporting of sex trafficking.
- It is important to be familiar with the signs or “red flags” that may be indicators of sex trafficking.
- A variety of resources are available locally and nationally to report suspected sex trafficking or to reach out for help or resources.

BACKGROUND

Sex trafficking, as a form of human trafficking, is known to exist in the United States (US) and across the world and Milwaukee, WI is no exception. Milwaukee, the most populated city in Wisconsin, has been cited as a central point of sex trafficking activity in the state¹ and yet the frequency of sex trafficking incidents is difficult to estimate based upon significant barriers to identification and reporting. There is also a question as to whether large-scale events lead to higher levels of sex trafficking activity into communities. From July 15th – 18th, 2024, the Republican National Convention (RNC) will take place in Milwaukee and is estimated to bring approximately 50,000 visitors to the area over multiple days,² just as the Democratic National Convention (DNC) will do for Chicago, IL the following month.³ Although there are numerous events that draw large crowds into areas of Wisconsin on an annual basis ranging from Summerfest along the lakefront in Milwaukee each summer⁴ to the annual Ironman race in Madison⁵ to each Green Bay Packers Home Game,⁶ the RNC is another large-scale event that will draw a significant number of people into the Milwaukee area from across the country.⁷ The RNC will also be accompanied by temporary changes during the event such as an extension of the time alcohol can be served in bars and restaurants from 2 am to 4 am for both Milwaukee and surrounding counties.⁸ One of the questions that has been raised is whether there should be concern about the potential for human trafficking activity, and in particular sex trafficking, to increase during this event. As discussed further below, the existing literature is inconclusive on whether large-scale events, such as presented by the RNC and DNC, are associated with an increase in sex trafficking activity. ***This brief acknowledges that we should continue to research the relationship between sex trafficking and these types of large-scale events. Regardless of whether there is higher activity during such a period, large-scale events such as the RNC provide an opportunity for increased awareness and action for the prevention and identification of sex trafficking.***

WHAT IS SEX TRAFFICKING?

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines human trafficking as a “...crime involving the exploitation of a person for labor, services, or commercial sex” with sex trafficking being one of the primary forms of human trafficking.⁹ Under this Act, sex trafficking is defined as “...the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age.”¹⁰ Utilizing this definition, sex trafficking typically involves force or coercion, but when someone under the age of 18 is induced to perform a commercial sex act, it is a crime regardless of whether force or coercion is involved.¹¹ This is not the only definition of human trafficking at the federal or state level, which impacts how sex trafficking is measured.¹² ¹³ The differences in definition are important because they impact how law enforcement and others may identify and respond to incidents of sex trafficking and individuals who have been victimized, as well as how these incidents are classified for reporting purposes. Yet at a fundamental level, sex trafficking comes down to individuals being exploited for the purpose of commercial sex, and trafficking is both “...a crime and a public health concern that affects individuals, families, and communities across generations.”¹⁴ Human trafficking is no longer seen as primarily a criminal justice issue, but rather it “...is now recognized as a complex public health issue with wide-reaching consequences.”¹⁵

PREVALENCE OF SEX TRAFFICKING

Anyone can potentially be affected by sex trafficking regardless of age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other factors, but some groups may be at higher risk.¹⁶ For example, individuals experiencing higher levels of vulnerability, such as economic instability, poverty, homelessness, mental health or substance use challenges, exposure to the child welfare system or child protective services, prior history of sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect, and other trauma, or additional factors, may be at increased risk.^{17 18 19}

There are multiple ways the prevalence of sex trafficking can be measured, but quantifying the extent of human trafficking is challenging and therefore full extent is largely unknown. One of the primary available measures is based on law enforcement reporting, most often under Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR), national Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) guidelines.²⁰ These guidelines only capture incidents that are reported to law enforcement and are identified as meeting the NIBRS definition for human trafficking, commercial sex acts. At a national level, there were 1,862 incidents involving sex trafficking reported by law enforcement agencies in 2022 based on IBR data, with 77 of those incidents reported by WI law enforcement agencies.²¹ This was an increase over the 1,782 incidents reported nationally in 2021, with 60 incidents reported for WI.²² In Wisconsin, the majority of reported victims are female, non-Hispanic White, and the most common age group is 10 to 19 years with the majority of reported victims being under the age of 30.

Yet, this is likely a severe underreporting of the number of incidents and individuals experiencing sex trafficking. Although there has been effort to improve data collection related to sex trafficking, research has demonstrated that incidents of sex trafficking reported to law enforcement are relatively low.²³ In addition, law enforcement agencies may have difficulty identifying situations as sex trafficking rather than prostitution or another offense type.²⁴ In Wisconsin, as part of the UCR IBR program, the WI Department of Justice (DOJ) conducted a survey in 2019,²⁵ followed by an additional analysis in 2020,²⁶ to assess some of the key areas related to data quality in reporting of human trafficking incidents by law enforcement under IBR, including sex trafficking. They identified concerns with law enforcement agencies identifying human trafficking incidents, differentiating between sex trafficking and prostitution, and challenges with data entry across the state, which “likely undercounts human trafficking encountered by law enforcement.”²⁷ This led to a series of recommendations to improve the reporting of human trafficking across law enforcement agencies in WI, including enhanced training for both identifying and reporting incidents. Steps were taken to address the issues identified after the initial report was published, and WI DOJ saw an approximately 57% increase in the number of incidents classified as sex trafficking for 2019 over what was initially reported by agencies (from 58 to 91 incidents in 2019). This demonstrates that increased attention to the consistent collection of data can be helpful in having more accurate accounts of what is reported to law enforcement. These types of identification and reporting issues are not limited to law enforcement. Other occupations that interact with sex trafficking victims may also find it difficult to identify that individuals are being trafficked. For example, individuals victimized by sex trafficking may seek healthcare, but if they do not identify themselves as experiencing sex trafficking, healthcare providers may lose the opportunity to connect them with resources.²⁸

Ultimately, we know that sex trafficking is underreported and the full extent of victimization due to sex trafficking is unknown.

One estimate is that up to 80% of those being trafficked will see a health care provider, but they rarely are identified as experiencing trafficking.²⁹ Overall, data from law enforcement and even from service providers working with individuals who may have experienced sex trafficking are thought to capture “...a fraction of the estimated human trafficking victimization in local communities.”³⁰

Sources outside of law enforcement and direct service providers present a substantially different picture of the prevalence of sex trafficking. In 2021, the National Human Trafficking Hotline recorded over 51,000 substantive “signals” related to human trafficking through phone, text, or other electronic forms of outreach such as email, online tips, and webchat.³¹ From the hotline requests, more than 10,300 instances of potential trafficking situations were identified, the majority of which (76%) involved some aspect of sex trafficking and over 11,000 likely victims of sex trafficking.³² This is a much higher estimate of both the number of situations and the number of victims of sex trafficking each year. For Wisconsin, 390 total human trafficking signals were recorded, which is a relatively small percent of the hotline total (less than 1%) and represents a smaller number than some other states,³³ but it demonstrates substantially higher levels of activity than what is reported to law enforcement. Various sources provide a wide range on the estimates of the total number of individuals impacted by sex trafficking and there is work being done to identify alternate methods of estimating the prevalence of human trafficking.³⁴ Ultimately, we know that sex trafficking is underreported, difficult to research, and the full extent of victimization due to sex trafficking is unknown, but it has lasting impacts on individuals, families, and communities.

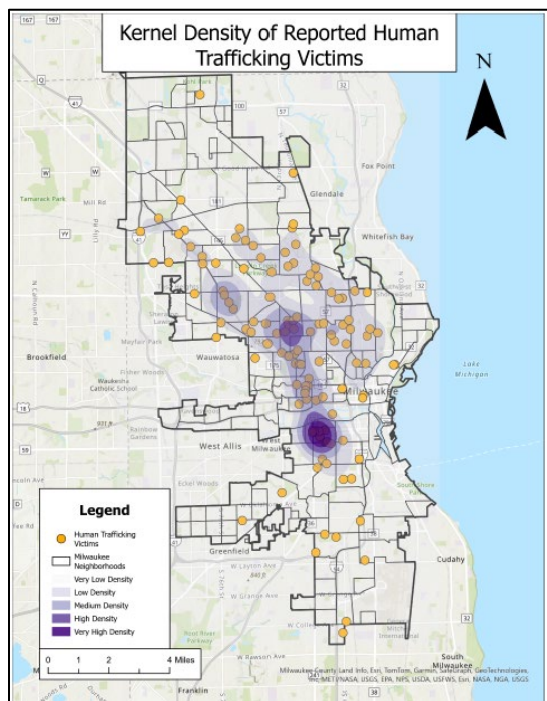
CHALLENGES OF IDENTIFYING AND MEASURING SEX TRAFFICKING

As mentioned, sex trafficking can be difficult for multiple types of service providers to identify. Victims of sex trafficking may be unable or fearful of reporting out of concern about retaliation and harm that will come to them or to others.³⁵ They may experience shame or be concerned that they will not be believed or that they will be blamed.³⁶ Those experiencing trafficking may have had prior interactions with law enforcement or the criminal justice system and may be concerned about being arrested or having other negative ramifications,³⁷ or they may not identify that what they are experiencing as victimization³⁸ or may be unaware of resources that are available. They may know the person trafficking them or may have developed trust with the individual, which the trafficker may then exploit.³⁹ Traffickers may target individuals in different ways such as dating, being recruited through friends, as part of a job opportunity, or other means.⁴⁰ ⁴¹ Those being trafficked may be separated from their family, friends and social network so they may be isolated.⁴² Law enforcement and others may also have difficulty identifying trafficking victims compared to individuals who may be engaged in sex work or prostitution without the component of force or coercion, particularly for adults.⁴³ These factors make it less likely that individuals will be identified as experiencing sex trafficking, even if they come into contact with law enforcement, healthcare workers, or others in a position to identify the situation as potentially involving trafficking and miss connecting individuals with the proper resources. It is also challenging because sex trafficking can take multiple forms. As reported by the National Human Trafficking Hotline, the most common industries or venues for sex trafficking are pornography, illicit massage/spa, operations out of hotels/motels, operations out of residences, street-based sex trafficking, escort services, and commercial sex sometimes advertised through online ads.⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ With more of the advertising and other activity associated with

sex trafficking occurring in an online environment and even through social media, this can pose further challenges for the identification of sex trafficking incidents and those being exploited.⁴⁶

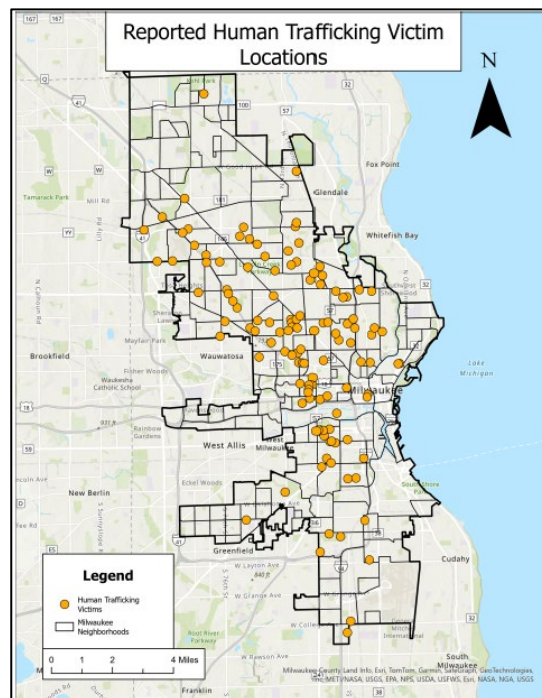
SEX TRAFFICKING IN MILWAUKEE

There have been 139 victims of sex trafficking reported to the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) over the past 5 years (2019 to 2023) based on NIBRS criteria.⁴⁷ Those reported as having experienced sex trafficking are predominantly young and female,



Map 2: Location and Density of Human Trafficking Victims Reported to the Milwaukee Police Department, 2019-2023.⁴⁸

but a higher proportion of the incidents involve individuals who are identified as Black relative to the incidents reported statewide. Reported incidents occur in various areas of the city as shown in Maps 1 and 2 but do tend to be clustered in particular areas of Milwaukee.⁴⁸ A



Map 1: Locations of Human Trafficking Victims Reported to the Milwaukee Police Department, 2019-2023.⁴⁸

report from the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) reported 445 allegations of child sex trafficking across Wisconsin in 2021 with 142 in Milwaukee County (31.9 percent).⁴⁹ A total of 83 of the 445 allegations were substantiated statewide, with 29 in Milwaukee County. Across the overall and substantiated allegations for child sex trafficking statewide and in Milwaukee County, individuals were predominantly identified as female. In terms of racial identity, in Milwaukee County individuals potentially experiencing trafficking were primarily identified as Black or African-American while the majority in the rest of the state were identified as White.

Yet, as with sex trafficking across the US and WI, the reported incidents are likely a significant undercounting of the number of incidents of sex trafficking occurring in Milwaukee. An earlier analysis of police records conducted by the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission focused on identifying potential victims of trafficking age 25 or younger by conducting a broader search than only those incidents classified as sex trafficking.⁵⁰ This analysis identified 340 individuals under age 25 both confirmed and suspected to have experienced sex trafficking between 2013 and 2016. A portion of these incidents were classified under other offenses such as sexual exploitation, sexual assault, prostitution, and other offenses. The report affirmed that those experiencing sex trafficking in Milwaukee were most likely to be female and Black, with the majority having experienced previous trauma and over half specifically having been exposed to sex trafficking prior to

the age of 18 (55%). The analysis was still limited to those incidents that come to the attention of law enforcement. This provides a more complete picture than as the incidence of sex trafficking reported through NIBRS but is still likely an underestimation of how often sex trafficking occurs in Milwaukee as those experiencing victimization may go undetected by law enforcement, as well as other service providers.

It should be noted that here are numerous efforts underway to address sex trafficking in Milwaukee including task forces and community-led efforts. These include but are not limited to: the Milwaukee Joint Human Trafficking Task Force (MJHTTF),⁵¹ Human Trafficking Task Force of Greater Milwaukee,⁵² initiatives such as the Healthcare Collaborative Against Sex Trafficking (HCAST) focused on identifying and addressing trafficking in healthcare settings,⁵³ multiple Victim Services Agencies that work to identify and advocate for trafficking victims many of whom are part of these other efforts, and increased awareness and response from other agencies and organizations across the city and the county. Overall, sex trafficking in Milwaukee requires a multi-sector approach including public health, health care, service providers, and community advocacy groups, as well as law enforcement and the criminal justice system, particularly from a trauma-informed perspective. The purpose of this brief is to utilize the RNC as opportunity to raise awareness about sex trafficking in Milwaukee, as it is an issue that is ever-present and requires consistent resources and attention.

SEX TRAFFICKING AND LARGE-SCALE EVENTS

Given the identification and reporting challenges, why focus on sex trafficking leading up to the RNC? A significant question centers around whether large-scale events, particularly those that bring in a high number of visitors, will lead to an increase in sex trafficking activity. While research specifically on sex trafficking during political events such as the RNC or DNC is extremely limited, there has been more attention on whether there is an increase during other types of events such as major sporting events, as well as some research on the connection between sex trafficking and tourism and the hospitality industry, which can be related to how communities might adjust for large-scale events. It is thought that these events may increase sex trafficking due to both the number of visitors coming into an area and the activities surrounding the events that may impact the demands on the sex industry, which may in turn relate to increases in sex trafficking.⁵⁴ Over time there have been numerous media accounts reporting an increase in sex trafficking in relation to events such as the Super Bowl, as well as other sporting events such as the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup.^{55 56 57} In part, the media accounts have led to an increase in academic research to determine whether this is a “moral panic” around the potential connection between sex trafficking and these types of large-scale events or whether there is a documented increase that occurs around the time of the events.⁵⁸

Overall, the evidence on whether sex trafficking increases in relation to large-scale events is mixed.

Research to assess when and if a measurable increase in sex trafficking occurs during these types of events have used a variety of approaches and have yielded mixed results.⁵⁹ When utilizing measures related to instances of sex trafficking reported to law enforcement, multiple studies have not found a relationship between the events and an increase in reported incidents. For example, Tajalli and Peña (2017) did not find an increase in multiple crime types, including human trafficking, during the month of the Super Bowl across multiple jurisdictions.⁶⁰ Piquero et al. (2019) examined the 2018 F1 Grand Prix and did not find a significant increase in reported sex trafficking in relation to the event.⁶¹ However, these studies are limited in their

utilization of incidents that are reported to law enforcement which are likely an underestimation of all sex trafficking incidents. Another approach used by researchers is to examine whether there is an increase in advertisements related to sex work as a proxy measure for sex trafficking, given that sex trafficking often goes unidentified to law enforcement. Some studies have found an increase in sex ads during large sporting events. For example, Huang et al (2022) found that advertisements for sex work increased during the Super Bowl in 2020 in Miami, FL and 2021 in Tampa, FL.⁶² Roe-Sepowitz et al (2015) similarly found an increase in the number of commercial sex ads in relation to Superbowl events in two states, with the majority of the ads being flagged by researchers as potentially involving sex trafficking (65%), but the authors indicate that this does not necessarily indicate that the Super Bowl caused more sex trafficking.⁶³ Miller, Kennedy, and Dubrawski (2016) examined 33 different public events, selected for drawing large crowds similar to the Super Bowl.⁶⁴ They found mixed results on whether these events are related to an increase in advertising for sex work. They found that some events, such as the Super Bowl, were associated with increases in sex work advertising, but also that other short-term events, such as Memorial Day weekend in Myrtle Beach, SC, demonstrated an increase in particular types of ads while other events did not bear out the relationship. Overall, as these examples illustrate, the literature is mixed on whether there is a measurable increase in sex trafficking during large scale events. Yet, advocates and others working within the community often point to concerns about potential increases during these events. So, what actions can be taken?

WHAT ACTION CAN BE TAKEN?

Where there seems to be more agreement, and where researchers have pointed to opportunities, is to utilize large-scale events to increase awareness about sex trafficking.^{65 66 67} The preparation for the upcoming RNC presents an opportunity to share information and spread awareness on sex trafficking. The information can be shared broadly to support the identification and reporting of potential situations involving sex trafficking.

Where can information be shared?

- Social media and traditional media
- Event organizers
- Hotels and other hospitality locations
- Airport and airlines
- Rideshare, taxis, and public transportation

Action can include seizing the opportunity to utilize large-scale events to increase awareness about sex trafficking.

What are some of the important pieces of information to share?

- Defining sex trafficking for shared understanding in recognizing signs and symptoms of exploitation.
- Identifying the reported numbers of sex trafficking incidents, while noting that there is likely an undercounting of the number of incidents and the number of individuals victimized by sex trafficking.
- Acknowledging that anyone can be the victim of sex trafficking. Sex trafficking happens every day. Some factors may place people at higher risk, but it is an issue affecting individuals and communities across the US, Wisconsin, and in Milwaukee.
- Recognizing that anyone exchanging sex for money deserves support and resources.
- Learning the signs, indicators, and potential “red flags” of sex trafficking.
- Gathering resources and places to reach out to for help or to report suspected sex trafficking.

An information sheet has been developed to serve as a resource for sharing information on sex trafficking.

What are the signs, indicators, or “red flags” of potential sex trafficking?

A variety of potential signs, indicators or “red flags” of sex trafficking have been identified. The following is a list of potential indicators drawn from multiple local and national resources for identifying individuals who may be experiencing sex trafficking: ^{68 69 70 71}

- Seems disconnected from family, friends, community organizations, work, or school
- Appears fearful, timid, or submissive, particularly around certain individuals
- Acts withdrawn, depressed, or distracted
- Displays sudden, dramatic change in behavior
- Signs of physical or sexual abuse (bruises, scars, etc.)
- Signs of having been denied food, water, sleep, or medical care
- Has tattoos or scars that would indicate branding by a trafficker (names, money symbols, etc.)
- Has scars, cut marks, burns, or other signs of self-harm, particularly for youth
- Does not have freedom of movement or experiences unreasonable security measures
- Presents with a third party who seems controlling, will not let the person speak for themselves
- Has lack of control over their personal identification (driver’s license, passport)
- Displays expensive clothes, accessories, shoes without known source of income
- Wears clothing that may be inappropriate for weather
- Has limited personal possessions
- Seems to have a “boyfriend/girlfriend” or romantic partner who is noticeably older
- Appears to be with a group of youth/young adults traveling with an older male or female
- Refers to someone in their group as their “sugar daddy/momma” or to themselves as a “sugar baby”
- Reports receiving money or resources for sexual activity as a minor (under the age of 18)
- Refers to traveling to other cities or towns frequently
- Does not know where they are staying, what city/state they are in, or indicates they are visiting

If you suspect sex trafficking, there are multiple options to connect with resources:

The National Trafficking Hotline – 888.373.7888

BeFree Textline – Text “Help” to 233733 or [chat](https://www.humantraffickinghotline.org) humantraffickinghotline.org

Sojourner 24-Hour Hotline – 414.933.2722

Division of Milwaukee Child Welfare 414.220.SAFE (7233)

Crime Stoppers (anonymous tip line) 414.227.TIPS (8477)

Milwaukee Police Department (non-emergency number) – 414.933.4444

Wisconsin Department of Justice “Starting Point” [map for Human Trafficking Victim Services](#)

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- ³ The Democratic National Convention (DNC) will be taking place in Chicago, IL from August 19th – 22nd and is estimated to draw approximately 50,000 visitors to the area. <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/what-to-know-about-the-2024-democratic-national-convention-in-chicago/3402995/>
- ⁴ Summerfest drew over 600,000 fans over three weekends in 2023. <https://www.summerfest.com/press-releases/2023/07/11/summerfest%E2%80%99s-55th-anniversary-delivers-big-results-2023-festival-celebrates-sold-out-performances-new-sponsors-and-community-impact/>
- ⁵ Ironman in Madison, WI is estimated to draw approximately 45,000 spectators. <https://www.facebook.com/IRONMANWisconsin/>
- ⁶ It is estimated that Green Bay Packer home games bring more than 80,000 people to the Green Bay area. <https://greenbaywi.gov/1123/NFL-Green-Bay-Packer-Home-Games>
- ⁷ The focus of this brief is not on the RNC per se, but rather on the opportunity this type of large-scale event presents to raising awareness and addressing sex trafficking.
- ⁸ Locations with a Class "B" liquor license (e.g. bars, restaurants) in Kenosha, Racine, Walworth, Rock, Milwaukee, Waukesha, Jefferson, Dane, Ozaukee, Washington, Dodge, Columbia, Sheboygan, and Fond du Lac counties will be allowed to have extended hours from 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. from July 15-19th, 2024. <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2023/related/acts/73.pdf>
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