

## Guest commentary: Human trafficking is slavery

By Federal Glover For the Contra Costa Times Contra Costa Times

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-- President Barack Obama

As Christmas approaches, the holiday silence was shattered by gunshots.

As my grandchildren played in our living room recently, I couldn't help but think about the tragedy that came from the other side of the country. I wondered how I might react if the shooting that claimed 26 lives, 20 of them innocent 6- to 7-year-olds, occurred in my grandchildren's school or day care.

The senseless killings that made Newton, Conn., a small town of 30,000, the most recent poster child of anti-violence work.

I started the Dec. 17 "Gangs, Girls and Human Trafficking" symposium addressing violence of another sort with a somber silent moment of prayer for the victims of Newtown and Sandy Hook School. The children of Sandy Hook are our children, too.

In a way, we are all victims of the violence that surrounds us, at home, in the media, in the streets or on the Internet.

The local symposium was sponsored by the Gang Task Force, which I created seven years ago. Next to drug trafficking, the trafficking of people is one of the most profitable criminal enterprises generating \$32 billion a year worldwide.

Even though slavery has been outlawed since 1865 in our country, human trafficking, which includes sex trafficking, is the world's fastest growing crime. California, and the Bay Area in particular, is near the epicenter.

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of the victims are not people from foreign countries. Most of the victims of human trafficking in America are from the U.S. Seventy-two percent of human trafficking victims whose country of origin was identified are American, according to the 2012 State of Human Trafficking report from the Attorney General's Office.

What that means is that the victims -- primarily the sex trafficking victims -- are our daughters, sisters, cousins, nieces or the girl next door.

What is disturbing is in the five years since the first human trafficking report in 2007, the problem has grown and the involvement of street gangs raises the issue to a new level.

"Transnational and domestic gangs have expanded from trafficking guns and drugs to trafficking human beings," said California's Attorney General Kamala Harris.

Domestic street gangs like the Bloods and Crips have set aside traditional rivalries to set up commercial sex rings and maximize profits from the sale of young women, says the report.

The fairly recent involvement of street gangs in exploiting young women has provided another illegal source of money for their activities. Sex trafficking is safer than dealing drugs and is a renewable source of income that can be used over and over.

The gangs prey on the most emotionally vulnerable. Sometimes, other female gang members act as enforcers to keep the other girls in line. In return, the girls get a false sense of belonging and get the impression of being protected, even loved.

The reality is harsher than that, according to a study by the Witherspoon Institute:

The reason girls join gangs are similar to reasons boys join gangs with the mistaken belief of finding someone who will understand why they don't feel understood by their parents. They are disengaged from school and society and as Speaker Meredith Webb said at the symposium, most likely came from dysfunctional families and suffered their first abuse from relatives.

The Bay Area is a hotbed of human trafficking. Contra Costa and Alameda counties are among the nine regions to form the Anti-Human Trafficking Coalition, a cross-agency partnership to tackle the problems associated with human trafficking.

It is ironic that even though America ended slavery more than 150 years ago, we have more people enslaved in the world today than at any other time: 27 million.

The violence perpetrated by people who exploit other people, should not go unanswered. As always, to make change and to educate the public to become more aware of human trafficking, its victims, and its exploiters and to make our communities safer -- we have to start at home, right here in Contra Costa County.

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