



BY DUO-WEIYANG

Everyday Atlanta commuters probably wouldn't think about their city as an expansive hub for human trafficking.

Metropolitan Atlanta bustles with daily routines of transportation from home to work, but with the city's rank as one of the biggest trafficking scenes according to the FBI, many regular citizens are beginning to see the effects hit close to home.

TRAFFICKING CULTURE

To Spanish teacher Marcy Hicks, the idea of human trafficking in Atlanta isn't difficult to imagine. Two years ago, her neighbors, Michael and Juna Babb, were arrested for owning a slave.

"They were a minister and a wife," Hicks said. "They went to Africa, and they met a woman and told her that she could come and work for them and eventually get her citizenship and some kind of long-term visa."

When the victim arrived in the U.S., the Babb couple "seized her passport and did not even allow her to leave the house."

Hicks still remembers the day when she heard the "tragic" news.

"Oh, I couldn't believe it. I saw it on the news, and I looked at [their] house, and I said, 'That looks like a house that would be in my neighborhood,'" she said. "Then they said the name of the street, and I said, 'Oh my gosh, that's my neighbor.'"

Since then, Hicks is more aware of human trafficking, especially Atlanta's, but feels that others remain oblivious.

"I think it's one of those things people don't like to talk about. We don't think about it until it's brought to our attention," she said. "I think it's a well-kept secret."

Camila Wright, Georgia's human trafficking prosecutor for the attorney general's office, regularly handles cases like what Hicks saw.

"Atlanta is known as a hub for human trafficking, and it is a very serious problem," she said. "I've had victims who got so sick while being trafficked that they couldn't be sold anymore."

In 2014, Wright faced one of her most significant cases.

In Oct. 2012, Derek Spencer, 35, invited two 14-year-old girls into his home and made himself their pimp. For several weeks, he and Kynne Shuler, 34, forced the victims to have sex with clients and perform sexual favors in exchange for food, clothes and toiletries.

The trafficking ended when one of the girls was recognized from a missing person flyer.

"The defendants were in the hotel room, and there was marijuana," Wright said. "[The victims] were recovered hiding in the bathtub in the hotel room."

Authorities discovered the victims in Wright's case several weeks later.

That didn't hold true for Lauren*, who was trafficked for five years.

Both of her parents were alcoholics, which led to her father's suicide when she was 15.

"I became very angry with everyone and immediately turned to drugs and alcohol to

run from how I was feeling. It wasn't long before I was addicted to drugs that I turned to selling my body for the drugs," she said. "Soon after that, I remember meeting a man who was going to put me on with business and 'help me,' and within 24 hours he became my pimp."

For Lauren, it "would take months to describe" in detail what happened after that.

"I was abused physically and mentally on a daily basis by my pimp," she said. "I was put into many terrible situations that I know I am truly blessed to be alive. I was raped more times than I can count by my pimp and men that I did not know."

Lauren agrees that out of all the places she could have been, "Atlanta [was] one of the worst."

"I did not know the extent of [trafficking] in Atlanta until I had been in the life a few years. [It's] a very big industry and, unfortunately, a growing one."

Jeff Shaw, Executive Director of the Out Of Darkness organization against trafficking, also notices great diversity in forms of trafficking.

"There is rural labor trafficking. There are organized crime networks operated by foreign nations under the guise of strip clubs or massage parlors," he said. "There are local pimps and traffickers that operate independently. And there are cases where children are trafficked by their biological parents."

Shaw believes that the trafficking hub runs smoothly, due to Atlanta's characteristics.

"It has an influx of men for business, conferences and sporting events. It is an intersection of large interstates such as I-85, I-75 and I-20 that run through other major cities," he said.

Karen Huppertz, Gwinnett community columnist for the AJC, attributes the problem to similar reasons.

"One, we have an international airport. Two, we have a widely diverse community with a great influx of undocumented residents. And three, we have a significant population using the Internet to obtain sexual services," she said.

Huppertz first heard about Atlanta's trafficking scene when local organizations were raising money to combat the issue. Curious, she researched arrest activities and discovered troubling facts.

The trafficking varied from massage parlors selling women for sexual services to individual homeowners who brought people into the U.S. for domestic help and threatened them with deportation if they didn't follow orders.

"Suddenly, I began looking at local

massage parlors and nail salons with more concern," she said.

Huppertz believes that the problem won't be solved anytime soon.

"I think, like many things, it takes a high-profile person to draw attention to a problem," she said. "Domestic human trafficking doesn't have anyone [nationally] currently taking this on as their mission."

Even when Huppertz doesn't write articles on human trafficking, she keeps an eye on her local community and Atlanta for any suspicious signs.

"[Human traffickers] choose the vulnerable, homeless, the physically-abused, runaways, loners with low self-esteem, as well as immigrants fearful to be returned to abuse or poverty," she said.

PROBLEMS' ORIGINS

Although with a notorious reputation, Atlanta's trafficking doesn't attract much attention from the public.

Hicks believes that this problem stems from unawareness.

"I think it's one of those things where once you hear about it, you might start being more attentive and hear about more incidents. We don't really put it on the forefront, so a lot of people aren't aware of it," she said.

Lauren agrees that ignorance is widespread. For her, "the lack of care" is the main cause.

"It is easy to walk past something or someone hurting and not care because it is not affecting you," she said. "Until it becomes real in their life or someone close to them, [people] will not notice how bad it really is."

DeKalb County District Attorney Dalia Racine thinks the apathy comes from stereotypes. Some people believe that trafficking only happens in third-world countries, not in America, she said.

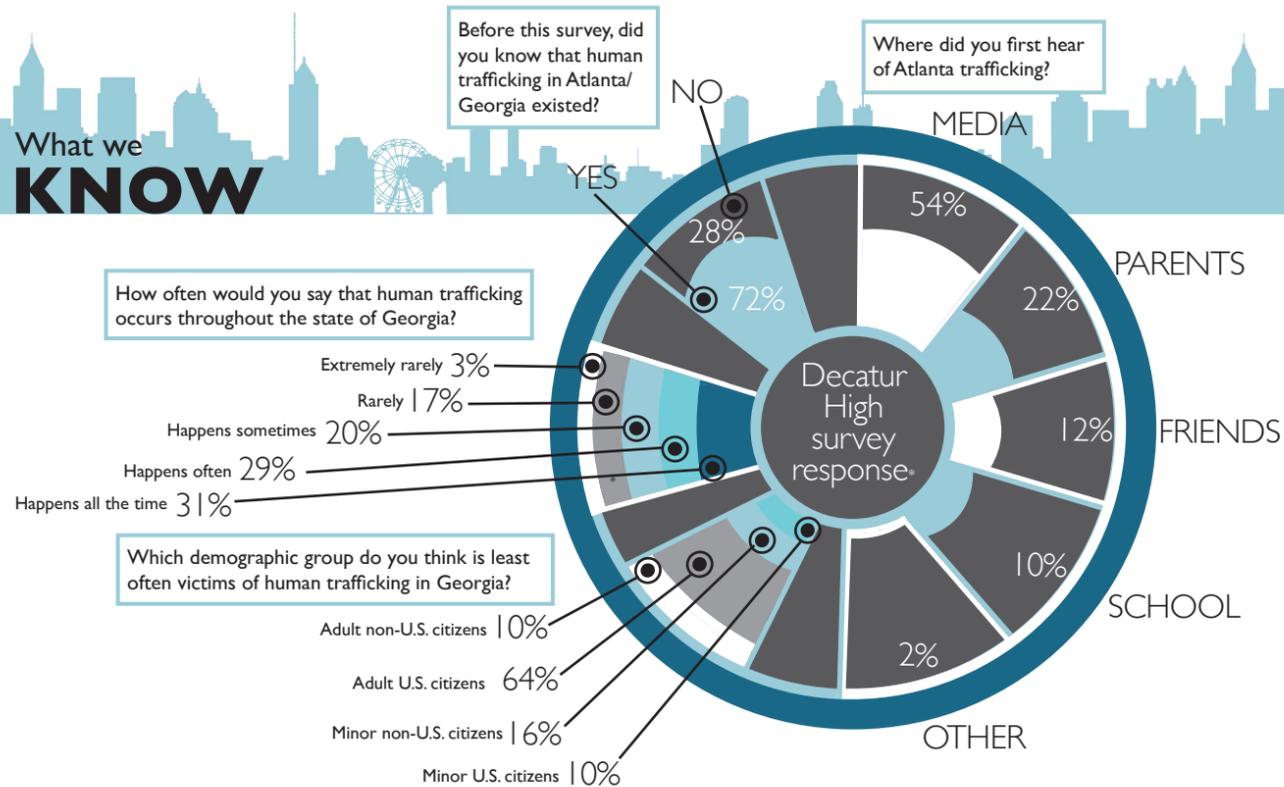
"The reality is that our children are being sold and exploited, and horrible things are done to them just like it's done all over the world," she said. "[People] just don't realize what is going on right underneath their noses."

For Kasey McClure, 36, understanding Atlanta's trafficking scene isn't difficult. McClure was a former stripper dancing in the Gold Club in Atlanta, often seeing pimps who had girls working inside the clubs.

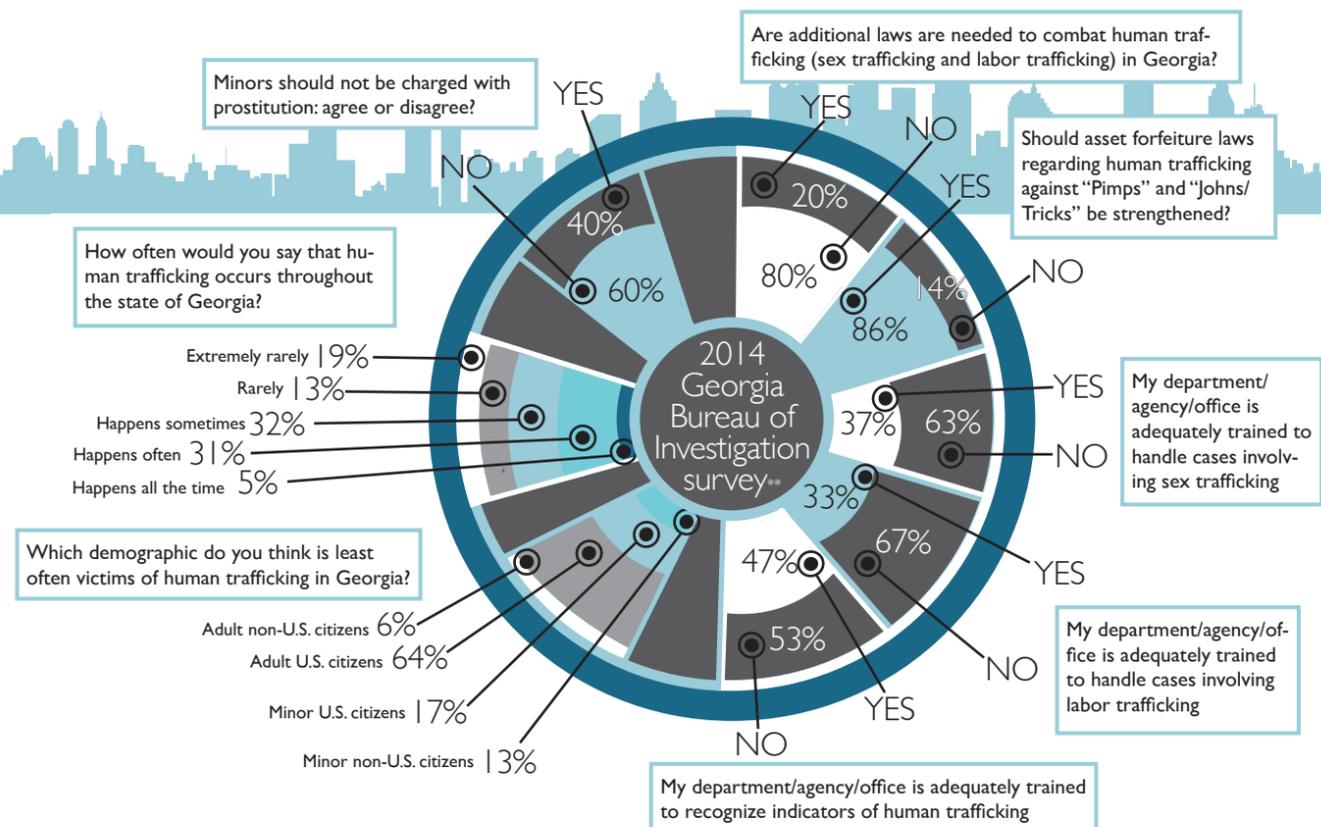
Even after leaving the sex industry in 2003, she is still haunted by memories of her former life.

"After a [person] gets involved in this life, they get used to the attention and money, then become stuck," McClure said. "They might have good intentions and say, 'I will

What we KNOW



*A cluster sample survey of seven advisements in April.
** Law enforcement agencies responded to this survey.



only do this for a year,' but then that year may turn in to 10 years."

She blames part of the problem on the luring methods of sex traffickers. One is a website called backpage.com, a site accessible in over 88 countries where people can purchase trafficked victims any time.

"Backpage makes millions of dollars on their classified ad website selling women and girls for profit," McClure said.

Atlanta's reputation as a film industry location also causes the trafficking issue.

"[People] fall prey to fake casting agencies that make promises of their dreams coming true, but [traffickers] end up pimping them on Backpage," McClure said.

She doesn't have high hopes that the government can change the situation soon.

"The government is limited to what they can do because of laws that still need to be changed with Internet escort websites," she said. "Until the government makes changes to the Internet laws, there will always be an issue with trafficking within the United States and across the world."

LAWMAKERS FIGHT

Despite McClure's low expectations, Georgia's General Assembly debated sexual trafficking in February. Representative Andy Welch, Representative Chuck Efratration and

Senator Renee Unterman introduced a bill to tackle Georgia's sex trafficking problem.

The Safe Harbor Act, also named Rachel's Act in honor of a sex trafficking victim, would tax adult entertainment establishments to fund rehabilitation services for victims of sex trafficking, tighten trafficking penalties and lower the rates of trafficking.

Passing the bill in the legislature was difficult, Welch said.

"It required a lot of people to work together and build a consensus, which takes time and thoughtful deliberation," he said. "On average a bill gets, you know, maybe 30 minutes to an hour worth of vetting and debate within the committee. To have eight and a half hours is exceptional."

For almost two months, the legislators debated for the bill to be considered by both legislative chambers.

To Welch, most of the opposing arguments didn't make sense. "One was a hypertechnical constitutional argument that wasn't valid," he said, "but I think [most] that objected, objected to the idea of the General Assembly levying tax of assessment on what was viewed as 'legitimate businesses.' That was the terminology they used."

He believes that the opposing side had little validity to their argument.

"The only evidence, if you call it, was

their own personal opinion. It was not based on any study or first-hand testimonies of people," he said.

Weeks of debate and testimony later, the legislation passed through both the House and the Senate.

"We were elated. Elated," Welch said. "I think that, speaking for myself, it's one of those moments when you feel like you have passed legislation that will make an immediate impact and difference for victims of sex trafficking in Georgia."

Dekalb County assistant district attorney Dalia Racine feels the bill is "definitely a good start."

"With Rachel's law, they did allow the sexual servitude [from trafficking] to be included in the sex offender census, so it's a registerable offense," she said. "I think they're recognizing a need to fund services towards victims."

Racine feels that Georgia's state government is one of the most progressive in the U.S. in stopping trafficking, despite having Atlanta "highly ranked as one of the worst."

"It's pretty closely patterned the federal law of trafficking, and I think there's a lot of states that still have yet to tackle the issues," she said. "As a prosecutor, I do appreciate the work that they've done in pushing forward the legislation and making sure we have the proper tools to put exploiters and purchasers

behind bars."

The bill now sits on the governor's desk for signing and awaits November 2016 for a referendum to be able to be fully implemented.

In the meantime, Welch and the other legislators face a mixed public response.

"I've gotten favorable responses on my Facebook page after the passing of the bill, and even before then, I've gotten many many favorable emails," he said. "I've got some negative emails from people who enjoy going to strip clubs and who've called me self-righteous and biased and other names I won't recount."

Other potential problems could also be along the way if Governor Nathan Deal sign the bills.

"I do expect a lawsuit from the adult entertainment industry after the governor signs each measure," he said. "Such a lawsuit will be filed against the state, not me personally. The State Attorney General must defend the law if such a suit is filed."

Despite criticism and possible lawsuits, Welch believes that Deal will sign the bill and be successfully passed from a referendum next November.

COMMUNITY ACTS

As Georgia's lawmakers make their move against human trafficking, Atlanta's citizens

and organizations continue to raise awareness. Some citizens use education as a way to combat the issue.

Marcia Kochel, Decatur resident and librarian at the Galloway School teaches students about Atlanta human trafficking every year.

"We read the book 'Sold.' The kids really get into the book [and] then we tell the kids that it's happening in Atlanta as well," she said. "I believe [students] are totally shocked. It's not part of their normal experience."

Kochel believes that Decatur needs similar classes to Galloway's.

"I think by seventh and eighth grade, it's time for some education on the topic," she said. "Many people think it's not an appropriate topic for children because it's almost exclusively sexual abuse against girls."

McClure is also an active figure in the movement against trafficking. After leaving the sex industry, she accumulated \$60,000 in debt, making her consider whether or not to return.

A wake-up call stopped her.

"I found out I was pregnant," she said. "This was a turning point in my life where I knew I wanted to start an organization."

McClure founded a non-profit organization to help women leave the sex industry, naming it 4Sarah after her first child.

This January, McClure helped organize a

bus tour to show people Atlanta's sex industry firsthand. Dubbed the "unholy bus tour," she shared her story and hot spots for sex trafficking with Georgia legislators, activists and journalists.

"I figured this would be a great opportunity to share my story and to educate people about what they can do to help women and girls trapped in this life," she said.

Other nonprofit organizations in Atlanta also recruit volunteers to combat the problem. Shaw, along with Out of Darkness volunteers, "reach, rescue and restore" trafficked women.

"We go to the streets every night to give women roses and hand-written cards that have out hotline number in them. This outreach is called Princess Night," he said. "To rescue, we operate a 24/7 hotline. To restore, we operate safe homes where women stay for three to four weeks until they can be placed into long-term recovery programs."

In Kochel's opinion, students need to follow the spirit of organizations like Out of Darkness.

"The more you learn of the abuses that go on in our country and the world, the more you want to take action, and that's what we encourage our students to do," she said. ■

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*Only first name given for anonymity