Combating Trafficking in Persons Program Management Office

Case Studies for the Still Map – Sex Trafficking

1. *U.S. v. Cadena; Florida; South Carolina, North Carolina - 1998*

1998 - A family ring of brothers and other relatives lured young Mexican girls, some as young as twelve years old, from Veracruz, Mexico, to the United States using false promises of legitimate jobs in hotels and restaurants. After illegally smuggling women and girls into the United States, the Cadena ring imposed a smuggling debt of $10,000 and used brutal physical force and violence, sexual assaults, and threats of death and bodily harm to the victims and their families to compel the victims to engage in prostitution 12 hours a day, six days a week with as many as 50 men per day. The men purchased a "ticket" which was a condom for $25.00. The victims were charged for food, clothing, shelter, sundries, and other expenses, so they were actually falling deeper into debt, not working the debt off. Many tried to escape, but they were hunted down and subjected to brutal beatings and rapes upon capture. When rescued the victims had broken bones that had not healed properly from the beatings, pelvic inflammatory disease and scar tissue from untreated STDs and forced abortions, addictions to drugs and alcohol, post-traumatic stress disorder, and many other physical and mental health issues.

Border breach: Waded across the Rio Grande, then walked, picked up by groups of vans and driven to Florida, South Carolina, and North Carolina.

2. *State v. Victor Munel Rax; Salt Lake City, Utah. 2006 - 2014*

A father noticed his son acting oddly. He suspected sexual exploitation by an adult male and contacted the Utah Attorney General's Office. The young teen agreed to wear a wire to allow surveillance and led them to Victor Manuel Rax, a powerful ringleader and shot-caller in an MS-13 ring. He was raping young boys, selling them, and forcing them to be mules for his drug trafficking network. Federal efforts to prosecute him had failed because no victims had come forward due to threats and intimidation to the victims and their families, all of whom were foreign nationals. Rax had been arrested and deported seven times and had been able to return to the U.S. and reestablish himself because of the powerful criminal network he had built here. The Utah AG gained the trust of 30 young boys who were victims of Rax, who led him to 250 additional boys who were also victims. The youngest was 7 years old, several were 9 years old when he was first abused. The abuse dated back to 200.6 During preparation for the trial the trafficker hanged himself. The trial went forward so the victims could testify as to what happened to them, including how he recruited his victims (giving them money, candy, and taking them to the local video arcades) and how he forced them to do his bidding (taking them to a back alley with a family dog, shooting the dog and telling them that that would be their parents and siblings if they ever said anything). This case was one of the largest human trafficking cases in the U.S.

Border breach: Smuggled families into the U.S. Southern border by foot, car, and truck.

3. *U.S. v. Maria Leticia Patricio et al., Waycross, Georgia, 2015 - 2021*

Traffickers used the H-2A work visa program to smuggle foreign nationals from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras into a dozen states in the U.S. with the promise of good jobs in agriculture. The victims paid the traffickers 20,000 pesos (about $950), to obtain the jobs. After crossing the border, they were taken to corn, onion, and blueberry farms and forced to harvest vegetables and fruits. In one case, workers were told they would be paid $12.00 an hour; instead, they ended up digging onions with their bare hands, paid 20 cents for each bucket harvested. The traffickers required the workers to pay additional fees for transportation, food, and housing so they were accumulating debt instead of paying it down. Their identification documents were withheld, and they were forced "to perform physically demanding work for little or no pay, housing them in crowded, unsanitary, and degrading living conditions, and threatening them with deportation and violence" including rape, kidnapping and threats to victims' family members if they did not obey. In many cases victims were sold or traded to other traffickers. At least two victims died during the process. When the case came to court, the traffickers intimidated victims to try to force them to lie to a federal grand jury. The trafficking ring reaped more than $200 million from the illegal scheme, laundering the funds through cash purchases of land, homes, vehicles, and businesses including, a restaurant and nightclub; through cash purchases of cashier's checks; and in casinos.

Border breach: Use of H-2A work visas to traffic victims across border.

4. *U.S. V. Gerardo Salazar et al., San Diego, California, 2000 – 2006*

Hundreds of young women and girls as young as 12 years old were trafficked from small towns like Tenancingo, a high plateau town west of Mexico City, to open air brothels in the strawberry field north of San Diego. Enroute, in Tijuana the girls were taken to a shop and outfitted with short dresses and high heeled shoes. Then they were forced up to a room above a bar where, according to court documents, they were raped by dozens of men to induct them into the "business." In the U.S., they were sold for $2500 each and taken to an area north of San Diego known as The Reeds, where North River Road runs beside the San Luis Rey River. There, the traffickers set up dozens of plastic trash bags on the ground and cut small tentlike caves, which they called "hooches," in the reeds. Men lined up and moved in and out of the reeds. The price for ten minutes was $25. The traffickers set egg timers to ten minutes. Day in day out, the men streamed in. The girls "worked" whether they were well or sick. They did it until evening, when they backpacked everything out. It was a giant criminal operation. On any day as many as 300 men purchased sex from girls lying on their back on plastic sheets. They were open for business 7 days a week, making about $50,000 a week per girl, totaling $2 - 3 million per year.

Border breaches: by car and foot, at illegal crossings, over a period of five years

5. ***U.S. v. Rincon; U.S. v. Osorio; New Jersey, New York, Florida***

A family- run trafficking ring recruited young Mexican females, smuggled them across the border into Brownsville Texas and then drove them to the East Coast. The young women and girls were lured into the U.S. with the promise of good jobs. Traffickers used apartments and condominiums as their headquarters out of which women serviced as many as 40 clients a day for 12 hours at a time. The ring employed drivers, enforcers, and guards to bring victims to clients as opposed to in-call service, where a client visits a massage parlor or motel to pay for sexual services. The drivers were paid $200 a day to facilitate this bring "out-call service" They used a code card, called a "Mexican Tamales" card, which they handed out to tell purchasers how to purchase sex. The traffickers charged $50 for 15 minutes of sex, except for weekends, when the price was set at $70 or more for 15 minutes. The victims were physically and mentally abused to force them into prostitution by beating, raping, threatening and intimidating them. They were also forced to pay the traffickers for transportation, hotel rooms, food and sundries, so they were accumulating debt during the time they were held. The traffickers netted hundreds of thousands of dollars every month in the operation. Twenty-two traffickers were arrested, charged, and convicted for their involvement in the human trafficking ring that victimized hundreds of young women and girls from Mexico. More than 1,500 "clients" were also identified.

Border breach: Smuggled across the border at Brownsville, Texas, then driven to East Coast states.

6. ***US. V. Zambrano Chinas et al; Tren de Aragua, multistate trafficking ring. Virginia, Montana, Wyoming, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Wisconsin, Arizona, Colorado. 2020 - present***

In April, 2025, the East Baton Rouge Sheriff's Department received a 911 call from a Spanish-speaking woman saying she was being held against her will at a residence and "forced to have sexual intercourse with unknown males for money." The woman later told investigators that she was forced to have sex with strangers "to pay off a $30,000 USD debt to a trafficker for bringing her to the United States." Officials arrested two Venezuelan nationals and later arrested another Venezuelan, identified in the complaint as a leader of the sex trafficking operation being conducted in the U.S. by the Tren de Aragua. The suspects were operating 'stash houses' used for human trafficking in Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, New Jersey, and Florida. Tren de Aragua, a transnational criminal gang that originated in a Venezuela prison is responsible for a multistate human trafficking ring forcing thousands of immigrant women into prostitution, dozens of cases of drug trafficking, violent attacks on law enforcement officials and citizens, as well as vandalism of property. According to an internal communication from the Department of Homeland Security, the gang has established a presence in at least 16 states. Designated a domestic terrorist organization, they are known for murder, drug trafficking, and extortion as well as human trafficking. In just three years, there are more than 70 cases in which Tren de Aragua is mentioned in law enforcement documents or prosecutors' complaints. Customs and Border Patrol in Texas has identified 58 gang members between the fiscal year 2023 and last May.

Border breach: on foot across the border; intercepted by Border Patrol but then released; flown by the traffickers from El Paso Texas to Louisiana and other states.

7. *U.S. v. Paredes-Espinoza et al, Hartford, Connecticut, 2014 - 2024*

A trafficking ring headed by Maria Del Carmen Sanchez Potrero, her co-conspirators in Connecticut, and associates in Mexico helped victims cross the Southern border into the U.S. in exchange for a fee of between $15,000 and $20,000 that each would need to pay once they were in the U.S. In most cases, the victims were required to turn over a property deed as collateral before leaving Mexico. They were then smuggled across the border and transported to the traffickers' residences often at a substantial risk of bodily injury or death. After the victims arrived in Connecticut, they were told that they would have to pay $30,000, with interest, and that they would have to pay Sanchez and her co-conspirators for rent, food, gas and utilities. Sanchez, Paredes, and their co-conspirators created false documents for the victims, including Permanent Residence cards and Social Security cards, and helped the victims find "employment" in the Hartford area. The victims never saw any of the money they worked for; it went to the traffickers. In addition to the jobs the traffickers found for them, the victims were required to do housework and yardwork for the traffickers, all without compensation and without having their debt reduced. Over 20 victims have been discovered. Multiple victims were minors, and at least two were smuggled into the U.S. unaccompanied by a relative or legal guardian.

Border breaches: by car and foot, at illegal crossings, over a period of ten years

8. *U.S. v. Rita Martinez et al, Texas, 2001 - 2006*

The owner of Rita's Sports Bar located at 7700 W. Mile 7 Road in Mission, trafficked underage victims to engage in commercial sex work with bar patrons. "Using her cantina as a front, Rita Martinez forced a young migrant girl into sexual acts with Rita's male patrons," From 2001 to fall 2006, the girls lived in Martinez's home and worked at her bar. This is where Martinez would arrange for her male patrons to have sex with the teen. According to prosecutors, the females were forced to perform sex work in the trailers behind the bar or in clients' vehicles. The patrons paid Martinez who kept the money and supposedly applied it to the cost of the victim's fee for their transportation from Mexico into the U.S. However, the traffickers saddled the victims with impossibly high debts, threatened to report them to immigration or the police, and warned them about the harm that might come to their families in Mexico. They insulted and humiliated the women and girls, physically assaulted them, including slapping, hitting, and dragging them by their hair, if they disobeyed. Martinez would also allow her son to sexually assault women and girls who were newly arrived at his mother's home, telling them that he had a right to try them. His duties at the bar included shuttling the women and girls from his mother's home or to nearby hotels where they would perform sex work. At least two dozen girls and women were identified in the indictment.

Border breaches: by car and foot, at illegal crossings, over a period of five years

9. *U.S. v. Granados-Corona, et al, New York, New York, 2000 – 2016*

The traffickers ran a sex trafficking organization that exploited and trafficked adult and minor women in Mexico and in the United States from at least 2000 to 2016. The ring used false promises, physical and sexual violence, and threats to force and coerce at least a dozen adult and minor women to engage in commercial sex for the organization's profit in both Mexico and the United States. In most cases, the traffickers used romantic promises to induce the victim to leave her family and live with him. In other cases, a trafficker raped the victim, making it difficult for her to return to her family due to the associated stigma of the raped. Then victims were kept locked in an apartment, without food, with beatings and other

physical or sexual violence against them. They were told they owed money and had to work in prostitution to repay the debt. In Mexico, the traffickers broke the girls in by counting the number of condoms they used, sometimes as many as 30 per day. All the money went to the traffickers. After a victim worked in Mexico traffickers smuggled the victims into the U.S. Multiple victims were smuggled into the United States together. Once in the United States, the members of the STO generally maintain their victims at one of several shared apartments in New York City. Victims living in the same apartment are frequently forbidden to communicate with one another. Once in the United States, traffickers continue to use physical and sexual violence, threats of the same, lies, and coercion to force the victims to work in prostitution.

Border breaches: by car and foot, at illegal crossings, over a period of fifteen years

10. U.S. v. Rendon Reyes et al, New York, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, 2004- 2015

The Rendon-Reyes Trafficking Organization, consisting of at least eight members, engaged sex trafficking, alien harboring, alien smuggling, money laundering and obstruction of justice for over a decade. Ring members recruited young women and girls from Mexico on false promises, smuggled them into the United States, prostituted them in New York, Connecticut, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, and other location. At least a dozen women were trafficked including several minors. Between December 2004 and November 2015, the Organization, based in Tenancingo, Tlaxcala, Mexico, smuggled numerous young women and girls from Mexico and Central America into the United States, and forced them to engage in prostitution for the Organization's profit, generating hundreds of thousands of dollars that were then laundered back to Mexico. Details of force and coercion included kidnapping, rape, sexual assault, beatings, withholding of food, forced abortion, brutal beatings including throwing victims down the stairs, stomping on them, dragging them by the hair, and other physical assault as well as threats and intimidation of victims and their families and friends.

Border breaches: by car and foot, at illegal crossings, over a period of ten years

11. MS -13, 24 cases in Alexandria, Fairfax, and other areas in Eastern District of Virginia

Over two dozen cases of sex trafficking were brought against hundreds of MS 13 gang members for sex trafficking minors and young adult women ages 13 – 17 years old because they were more compliant and customers preferred them younger. The traffickers used force, fraud, and coercion to compel the girls into prostitution including beating 14-year-olds with baseball bats, machetes, and lead pipes. using alcohol and drugs to make the victims compliant. In one case, a gang member whose gang name was 'Murder,' told girls that he owned them and that he would hurt their loved ones if they didn't comply. Victims were required to have sex with eight to 10 paying customers per day, sometimes seven days per week. Some of the customers were sex addicts and repeat customers who paid daily for the sex. At night, after the paying customers were finished, Amaya would invite his fellow MS-13 members to have sex with the girls. Sometimes, to punish victims, the gang would "run a train" on a victim, which meant that multiple gang members would have sex with the victim in rapid succession. Amaya and other gang members also raped the victims both for their enjoyment and to "groom" them for the sex trafficking scheme. The sex acts took place at motels, hotels, houses, apartments, and cars in Washington, D.C. and

the Northern Virginia area. The gangs frequented hotels in Falls Church, Virginia, and many of the customers were solicited from convenience stores in the Culmore and Chirilagua neighborhoods. Men paid between $30 and $120 for about 20 minutes of sex, paying more for "unusual acts" with the victims. The proceeds of the prostitution were used to purchase narcotics, alcoholic beverages, and to support MS-13 in the United States and El Salvador. From 2011 to 2012 alone, 44 defendants were prosecuted in 25 cases in the Eastern District of Virginia for human trafficking and trafficking-related conduct involving at least 32 victims.

12. U.S. v. Medelles-Arguello, Houston, Texas, 2012 - 2015

This landmark sex trafficking case is one of the most significant in scope and magnitude to be tried to a verdict of guilty on all counts. Fifteen traffickers were tried with dozens of victims testifying at trial that they were recruited in their home countries, only to be forced into prostitution against their will in the United States. Some victims were as young as 14 when the traffickers recruited them from Mexico, using fraud and false pretenses to lure them into the traffickers' control. Testimony revealed that pimps recruited the young girls by convincing them they were in love, making threats to their families as well as threatening the girls themselves using beatings to keep them in line and forcing them to comply with demands at gunpoint and locked in a room. Evidence at trial indicated that the ringleader made more than $1.6 million in a 19-month period. n addition, 15 real properties and other assets valued at about $2.5 million were seized. The jury heard that the ring had operated with impunity, harboring illegal aliens, many who were forced into prostitution for more than 13 years.

Border breaches: by car and foot, over a period of at least three years

13. U.S. v. Mendez-Hernandez, Savannah, Georgia, Florida, North Carlina, and South Carolina; 2006-2014

The leader of a sex trafficking ring, nicknamed "El Flaco" and 23 other ring members, was sentenced to life in prison for his role in a sex-trafficking conspiracy that exploited dozens of women. The investigation into this conspiracy, dubbed Operation Dark Night, has resulted in the conviction of 23 defendants and the rescue of 12 victims. Thel sex trafficking enterprise enticed women from Mexico, Nicaragua, and elsewhere to the United States with false promises of the American Dream. Once inside the United States, the women were threatened and forced to commit acts of prostitution at numerous locations in Savannah and throughout the southeast. Women were forced to engage in sexual activity with as many as 50 people a day. To make sure the women complied, members of the organization threatened the women, used violence against them, and held children hostage in Mexico. Members of the organization would also trade their victims to other members who operated in other states, such as Florida and North and South Carolina.

Border breaches: by car and foot, over a period of almost ten years

14. U.S. v. Edegardo Rodriguez, et al, 2010 – 2014

Between July 2014 and August 2015, the defendants engaged in a conspiracy to transport, harbor and market female aliens for prostitution in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana and thereafter wired the prostitution proceeds outside the United States. In addition to the conspiracy, the defendants are also charged with 13 counts of enticing individuals to travel in interstate commerce to engage in prostitution; four counts of money laundering; seven counts of transporting individuals in interstate commerce to engage in prostitution; six counts of harboring an alien for the purpose of prostitution; and illegal entry by a deported alien.

Border breaches: by car and foot, over a period of almost five years

15. U.S. v. Feliciano Francisco, Tennessee, Kentucky, Florida, and Mississippi, 2006 - 2011

Jacobo Feliciano-Francisco, aka "Uriel Castillo-Ochoa" or "Kiko led a ring that created a network of brothels and prostitution delivery services in Tennessee and Kentucky using undocumented aliens from Spanish-speaking countries. A witness in witness protection testified against 13 members of the ring who were convicted in Tennessee and Kentucky of various federal sex-trafficking and prostitution criminal charges. Defendants kidnapped victims and transported them to various states forcing them to work as prostitutes. This ring exploited undocumented immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries, forcing them into prostitution to pay off their smuggling debts.

Border breaches: by car and foot, over a period of over five years