

United States Senate  
Committee on the Judiciary

Subcommittee on Crime and  
Counterterrorism

**“Lost and Exploited: Confronting Child Trafficking and the Failure to Protect  
America’s Most Vulnerable”**

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Testimony of:

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Chairman Hawley, Ranking Member Durbin, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the honor of testifying before you today on this critical issue. My name is Yasmin Vafa. I am the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Rights4Girls, a national organization dedicated to ending the trafficking and sexual exploitation of vulnerable young women and girls across the United States.

At Rights4Girls, we work alongside survivors to strengthen state and federal laws, advance research, train judges and systems professionals, and conduct public awareness campaigns to dismantle the conditions that enable exploitation. Our mission is unwavering: to ensure that every girl can live out her full potential, free from violence.

This hearing touches on a crisis that is both urgent and deeply personal to the survivors and service providers we work with every day. As the nation reels with shock over the horrors revealed through the Epstein case, those of us on the front lines of this fight know this reality all too well. That shock reflects less the rarity of these crimes than how effectively our society has insulated itself from confronting the sheer scale of sexual exploitation hiding in plain sight— in our communities, our institutions, and even our justice systems.

I am here today to speak plainly about what is happening to America's girls, and to urge this Committee to act decisively.

### **The Scale of the Crisis**

Violence against children in America is not an aberration— it is a painful, systemic reality. In recent years, rates of sexual violence against teen girls in particular have increased sharply. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>1</sup>:

- 1 in 5 girls experienced sexual violence in 2021—up 20% since 2017;
- More than 1 in 10 girls had been raped—up 27% since 2019;
- 3 in 5 teen girls reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless—double the rate for boys and the highest level recorded in a decade; and
- Approximately 1 in 3 teen girls seriously considered attempting suicide—up nearly 60% from a decade ago.

These statistics are devastating. Gendered violence causes profound physical, emotional, and psychological trauma. It inhibits girls from realizing their full potential, robs families of their futures, and fractures communities. One of the most egregious forms of violence facing girls and young people today is sex trafficking.

Today, throughout urban, rural, and tribal regions of our nation, young girls are being bought and sold. Many are runaways from troubled homes or foster care placements where they were abused or discarded. Some are lured and exploited for profit. Others are preyed upon by sex buyers who target their vulnerability. Research consistently shows that the majority of youth in the sex trade

are girls and children of color.<sup>2</sup> They are girls like Dara, who was trafficked out of foster care at the age of 11 throughout California until the age of 19. Over nearly a decade, multiple systems interacted with her— child welfare, education, law enforcement —yet she was repeatedly treated as delinquent rather than as a child in need of protection. Or Robyn, who was sold out of her home by her mother in exchange for drugs. Men from her neighborhood came and went while adults looked away. The harm she endured was not hidden; it was normalized. Or Jason, who never had a trafficker in the traditional sense, but was preyed upon by dozens of adult men who exploited his vulnerability in exchange for sex acts while he was a minor. He was a child navigating trauma and instability, and adult men took advantage of that reality.

These are not isolated stories. They are emblematic of systemic failures.

By stark contrast, the majority of those who purchase sex in the U.S. are white, middle- to upper-class men:

- In King County, Washington, **44%** of all child sex trafficking victims are **Black**, though Black people only represent 7% of the population.<sup>3</sup>
- In King County, Washington, **73%** of sex buyers are **white men**, though white people only represent 66% of the state’s population.<sup>4</sup>
- In Ohio, 96% of trafficking victims identified were female and **39% were of color**, when people of color represent only 20% of Ohio’s population.<sup>5</sup>
- In Ohio, **85%** of sex buyers identified by law enforcement to be connected to sex trafficking investigations were **white men**.<sup>6</sup>

Last year our organization released a report entitled, ***Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation***. The report analyzed hundreds of posts and conversations from sex buyers from online hobby boards— essentially Yelp pages for prostitution— and revealed a culture of dehumanization, indifference, and entitlement that traffickers rely on.<sup>7</sup>

One survivor from Los Angeles told us she spent **six months at age 16** telling every one of her adult buyers she was being trafficked against her will and that she needed help. **Not one buyer helped her**. Every man prioritized his own protection or the money he had already paid.

This is the norm— not the exception.

One sex buyer in our report from Kansas City discussed his excitement at responding to an ad where a young woman said she was 24 only to learn **she is in fact barely 18 years old**. He goes on to describe her, “**Oh my God I’ve hit the jackpot 5’3” maybe 5’ 4” maybe 115 lbs. Straight brown hair. Thin, braces, pretty.**” After describing their sex acts in appalling detail, he ends his post with, “**I don’t think she’d been doing this long enough to know to check the room for cameras.**”<sup>8</sup>

Another sex buyer from Milwaukee candidly shares, “**Find them, f\*\*\* them, forget them. This is the gold standard for men's spiritual health.**”<sup>9</sup>

This mindset is the invisible engine that drives the sex trafficking market.

## **A Broken System: The Abuse to Prison Pipeline**

Rather than being recognized and treated as crime victims deserving of services and support, exploited girls are routinely criminalized. At Rights4Girls, we call this the abuse to prison pipeline<sup>10</sup>—a troubling trajectory in which child victims are denied their status as victims, refused recognition as children, and instead pushed into the justice system for what amounts to their own exploitation. This happens even in states with so-called Safe Harbor laws.<sup>11</sup>

Each year, hundreds of American children are arrested for prostitution<sup>12</sup>—despite the fact that no child can legally consent to sex. Not only do these arrests leave survivors vulnerable to further victimization and trauma in the youth justice system, the arrest and criminalization of child sex trafficking victims on prostitution charges is fundamentally and legally wrong. Under the federal *Trafficking Victims Protection Act*, any child under the age of 18 engaged in a commercial sex act is considered a victim of a “severe form of trafficking in persons.”<sup>13</sup> Criminalizing these children as if they were offenders not only undermines their legally protected status, it also fuels their abuse by driving our focus away from their exploiters and masking structural and systemic failures to provide community safety and accountability. Still other child trafficking survivors are funneled into the adult system for offenses related to their exploitation, such as acts of self-defense against their exploiters or crimes they were coerced into committing by their traffickers. The failure to screen children who come into contact with the justice system to identify whether they have been trafficked—a common failure in many jurisdictions—undermines federal guidance set forth in the 2018 reauthorization of the *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act*.<sup>14</sup> As a result, child trafficking victims continue to go unidentified and without vital services or support.

At the same time, their buyers—the adult men who drive the demand—face little to no accountability.

A 2014 report by Shared Hope International examined 134 cases of men purchasing sexual acts from minors. The findings were sobering: 26% served no time at all, and 69% of all sentences were suspended.<sup>15</sup> That resistance to accountability persists today. During the 2024 California legislative session, lawmakers debated for months whether purchasing sexual acts from minors ages 16 and 17 should be a felony or a misdemeanor, despite federal law clearly classifying all such conduct as child sex trafficking, a felony.<sup>16</sup> This session, a similar bill has been introduced in New York State to close a legal loophole that permits adult men to purchase sex acts from youth ages 15 to 17 without felony accountability.<sup>17</sup>

This is a moral and legal failure of the highest order. It is past time for federal action to match the severity of the problem.

## **Policy Recommendations**

Rights4Girls urges this Committee to adopt the following targeted, survivor-centered policy reforms, including the often ignored federal mandate of demand reduction, which is a critical means of trafficking prevention.

### **1. Promote Demand-Focused Prosecutions**

Across the country, District Attorneys routinely fail to prioritize the prosecution of sex-buying cases—even in states with felony laws on the books criminalizing the patronizing of sex. This enforcement gap is driven by two primary barriers: resource scarcity, including insufficient staffing and funding to handle post-sting cases at scale; and institutional culture that assigns low priority to these cases relative to other felonies.

Policy is only as strong as its implementation. We recommend the following solutions:

- **Establish Human Trafficking and Demand Reduction Prosecutor Grants:** Offer federal grants to District Attorney offices specifically to hire full-time, dedicated prosecutors and investigators whose sole mandate is to handle sex-buyer cases, including those arising from law enforcement stings and online operations. Funding must be contingent on maintaining a dedicated caseload threshold—for example, a minimum of 10 felony arrests brought to indictment or plea per year per funded position.
- **Require Mandatory Data Reporting for Federal Funds:** Require all state and county DA offices receiving federal violence-reduction funds to submit standardized data on sex-buyer arrests, prosecution rates, and sentencing outcomes to the Department of Justice or a state oversight body. This creates a public accountability scorecard. Poor performance exposes DA offices to scrutiny from state regulators, anti-trafficking organizations, and the electorate.
- **Fund DA Training and Peer Accountability Programs:** Mandate recurring, high-level training for elected District Attorneys and their executive staff on the economic and societal costs of demand for commercial sex and its connection to organized crime and child trafficking. Training should be facilitated by respected prosecutors from high-conviction jurisdictions, framing demand reduction as a matter of professional excellence and modern crime-fighting—not merely an optional specialty.

### **2. Tie Buyer Accountability Programs to Federal Criminal Justice Funding**

We urge Congress to amend or expand Office of Justice Programs (OJP) discretionary grants to:

- Allow federal funds to support post-arrest sex buyer accountability programs, as detailed in our recent *Buyers Unmasked* report;
- Prioritize jurisdictions that target demand rather than criminalizing people in the sex trade—whether adults or minors; and

- Create a dedicated set-aside for survivor-led buyer education programs, funded by fines levied on convicted sex buyers.

This approach builds on existing federal practice: the Department of Justice already conditions grants on compliance with certain policing and victim-centered standards. Buyer Accountability Programs are not only effective at reducing recidivism—they also demonstrate measurable success in shifting attitudes that drive demand. States do not need to change their solicitation statutes immediately. Funding incentives can nudge behavior now, while legislative reform catches up.

### **3. Embed Buyer Accountability into the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)**

We urge Congress to amend the Trafficking Victims Protection Act to:

- Explicitly recognize sex buying as a primary driver of sex trafficking in TVPA findings;
- Authorize dedicated funding for demand-reduction strategies, including post-arrest buyer accountability programs; and
- Encourage federal and state courts to mandate post-arrest buyer accountability programs as diversion or sentencing options.

Several states, including Washington already allow or require participation in such programs. Many more are moving in this direction with five states recently making sex-buying a felony. Congress has a growing state-level proof point—and a moral imperative—to act at the federal level.

### **4. Reauthorize and Strengthen the JJDP to Protect & Identify Child Survivors**

The 2018 *Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act* reauthorization amended state plan requirements to include screening for human trafficking upon intake.<sup>18</sup> However, despite this mandate being on the books, meaningful transparency and accountability regarding its implementation remain lacking. To that end, we recommend:

- Request a GAO report specifically examining whether states receiving Title II formula grants have actually implemented the trafficking screening, identification, documentation, and diversion requirements added in 2018. The 2018 reform already authorized GAO oversight of OJJDP—this is a natural and overdue extension. GAO should examine: which states have implemented screening protocols; what tools they are using; what happens when a youth is identified as a victim; and whether diversion services are actually available.
- Require standardized data collection and public reporting. There is currently no national data on how many children are identified as trafficking victims at juvenile justice intake. Congress should require OJJDP to collect, disaggregate by race and gender, and publicly publish this data annually as part of existing compliance reporting. We simply cannot fix what we do not measure.
- Make screening tools and training a federal responsibility. Many jurisdictions want to comply but lack validated, trauma-informed screening instruments appropriate for youth. As a former Member of the National Advisory Committee for the Sex Trafficking of Children and Youth under HHS and a former Advisory Committee Member for the National

Girls Initiative under OJJDP, we know that these agencies are aware of multiple validated tools currently in successful use across the country. OJJDP should be directed to formally endorse and disseminate a standardized trafficking screening instrument—and to fund training for intake staff on how to administer it without re-traumatizing child survivors. Several validated tools already exist (including the CSE-IT Tool)<sup>19</sup>; the problem is that adoption remains voluntary and uneven.

## **5. Reauthorize the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act**

Congress must reauthorize the *Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act* without delay. Housing instability is one of the strongest predictors of trafficking vulnerability, and the programs funded under RHYA provide a critical safety net for children at the highest risk of exploitation. The shelters, outreach programs, and transitional services RHYA funds are often the only intervention standing between a young person and a trafficker. Allowing these programs to lapse is not a neutral act—it is a choice to leave the most vulnerable young people without protection.

### **Call to Action**

The exploitation of America’s children is not a fringe issue. It is happening in every state, in every type of community, at a scale that should alarm every one of us.

For too long, this nation has responded to child sexual exploitation by punishing its victims while allowing its perpetrators—the adult men who create and sustain the market—to escape accountability. We have punished the children we should be protecting. We have looked away from the men whose choices make trafficking profitable. And we have underfunded the tools and the systems professionals who are ready to fight back.

The survivors Rights4Girls works alongside have endured unimaginable and lifelong physical and psychological harms. They have rebuilt their lives. They have become advocates, researchers, and incredible leaders. They deserve a federal response equal to their courage.

The reforms we have outlined today are concrete, achievable, and grounded in evidence. They do not require reinventing the wheel, they merely require the political will to use the tools already at our disposal, and to invest in the ones that are working.

We urge this Committee to:

- Establish and fund demand-focused prosecution grants at the federal level;
- Condition federal criminal justice funding on buyer accountability standards;
- Amend the TVPA to explicitly target demand as a root cause of sex trafficking;
- Reauthorize the JJDP and RHYA with improved language to guarantee implementation; and

- Ensure that every girl in America who has been exploited is treated as what she is—a crime victim deserving protection, not a perpetrator deserving punishment.

The children being bought and sold in this country cannot wait. I thank the Subcommittee for its attention to this urgent matter and stand ready to answer your questions.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary & Trends Report, 2013-2023, available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/yrbs/dstr/>

<sup>2</sup> Rights4Girls, Racial Disparities Fact Sheet, (2024), [https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Racial-Disparities-Fact-Sheet\\_Jan-2024-updated.pdf](https://rights4girls.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Racial-Disparities-Fact-Sheet_Jan-2024-updated.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> “Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children” (2022), King County (WA) Prosecuting Attorney’s Office Commercial Sexual Exploitation Cases, <https://www.kingcountycsec.org/data>.

<sup>4</sup> Id.

<sup>5</sup> “Human Trafficking Annual Report 2021” (March 2022), Ohio Office of the Attorney General, <https://www.ohioattorneygeneral.gov/Files/Reports/Human-Trafficking-Commission-Annual-Reports/2021-Human-Trafficking-Annual-Report>, p. 8

<sup>6</sup> Id. at p. 9

<sup>7</sup> Yasmin Vafa & Nora Hennick, *Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation* (2025).

<sup>8</sup> Id. at 14

<sup>9</sup> Id. at 14

<sup>10</sup> Malika Saada Saar, Rebecca Epstein, Lindsay Rosenthal, & Yasmin Vafa, *The Sexual Abuse to Prison Pipeline: The Girls’ Story* (2015).

<sup>11</sup> Yasmin Vafa & Rebecca Epstein, *Criminalized Survivors: Today’s Abuse to Prison Pipeline for Girls* (2023), p. 21

<sup>12</sup> Id. at p. 8

<sup>13</sup> 22 U.S.C. § 7102 (11)(a).

<sup>14</sup> *Juvenile Justice Reform Act of 2018*, Pub. L. No. 115-385, 132 Stat. 5123 (2018)

<sup>15</sup> *Demanding Justice Report*, Shared Hope International, (2014).

<sup>16</sup> Yasmin Vafa & Nora Hennick, *Buyers Unmasked: Exposing the Men Who Buy Sex & Solutions to End Exploitation* (2025), p. 4

<sup>17</sup> *The Victims Protection and Child Sex Buyer Accountability Act*, <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/S8609/amendment/A>

<sup>18</sup> Id.

<sup>19</sup> West Coast Children’s Clinic, CSE-IT Validated Screening Tool, available at: <https://www.westcoastcc.org/cse-it/>