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## Modern-day slavery: The repulsive reality of human trafficking

**Jerry Haar and Krystal Rodriguez** Guest Columnists

Imagine a scenario like this: Claudia is a 15-year-old from Southern Mexico who fled her village where her alcoholic father and bipolar mother beat her on a regular basis. She gathered what little money she had saved to take a bus to Mexico City. The day she arrived she was approached by a handsome young man who befriended her and gave her a place to stay. But he got her hooked on drugs and passed her on to his boss, a well-established pimp. She is a victim of human trafficking.

Though Claudia is imaginary, such stories are only too real for many.

Tragically, however, despite the global effort to end forced labor and domestic servitude of men, women and children, the International Labor Organization estimates 21 million people worldwide continue to be enslaved in forced labor and human trafficking. This form of modern slavery exploits victims across a broad spectrum of occupational categories and is considered to be one of today's leading criminal enterprises. In fact, sex trafficking is one of the most profitable businesses in the world, with a net profit margin of more than 70 percent and an estimated annual profit of \$150 billion in forced labor.

Globalization has fueled the supply of human trafficking as it makes victims easy to procure, transport and exploit. Victims are mainly recruited via travel and employment agencies and nightclubs, in which accomplices provide false advertisement for employment and fame or coerce victims through force.

Demand is very high because there are little to no risks preventing traffickers from selling and/or purchasing victims.

The countries that are more vulnerable to human trafficking are ones that have experienced political upheaval, armed conflict, economic crisis or a natural disaster. Over the past few decades, Central America has experienced numerous crises, transforming it into a major trafficking hub. Nations with growing tourism such as Mexico, Costa Rica, and Panama are the principal receiving countries of trafficked women in the region, while the poorer countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua supply the majority of trafficked women.

A recent Congressional Research Service analysis studied trafficking in people in El Salvador. That nation's 12-year civil war caused an influx of violence, poverty, corruption and migration flows. This resulted in a low gross domestic product growth of 2.5 percent in 2015, a 6.2 percent unemployment rate, and a roughly 32 percent poverty rate in 2014, forcing people to seek economic opportunities and safety elsewhere.

According to the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report, El Salvador does not fully meet the minimum standards to combat human trafficking. Officials are, however, making significant efforts to do so, including a new national action plan to guide its anti-trafficking efforts through the 2016-2019 period and a \$24,700 allocation to its interagency anti-trafficking council. In 2015, the government identified 49 sex-trafficking victims, a decrease from the 87 identified in 2014, and investigated 43 sex-trafficking cases, with 19 convictions receiving fewer than eight years. In addition, the government provided anti-trafficking training to 2,473 government employees and cooperated in investigations with neighboring countries.

In the United States between 2007 and 2016, there have been 31,659 human-trafficking cases with sex trafficking accounting for 75 percent. In Florida, there

were 1,623 human-trafficking calls, of which 550 were fully reported. Of the 550 reported in 2016, roughly 73 percent were sex-trafficking victims.

Globally, countries are collaborating to eradicate this issue, and the U.S. is in the forefront. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act, launched in 2000, defines a trafficking victim as a person induced to perform labor or a commercial sex act through force, fraud or coercion, and the U.S. Department of State monitors anti-trafficking efforts across the world and publishes an annual Trafficking in Persons report.

There are also numerous U.S. foreign policies enacted to combat human trafficking, including foreign-country reporting, foreign-product blacklisting to ensure products imported to the U.S. are not of forced or child labor, and restrictions on foreign assistance and related projects. In 2016, the U.S. government provided more than \$11 million to support anti-Trafficking in Persons projects in Latin America.

Human trafficking is a transnational crime — one that requires neighboring countries to work together to combat this scourge. Cooperation among police, the courts and citizens at large is the only way to one day vanquish the repulsive reality of human trafficking.

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