



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on October 15, 2024

## Investigation: Open-border Policies Fueling Sex-trafficking Surge

A chilling investigation has unveiled how sex trafficking is rapidly expanding across the United States, largely fueled by migrants crossing the southern border. Under current U.S. immigration policies, traffickers are exploiting vulnerable migrant women and children at an unprecedented rate. They lure them with promises of work and then force them into prostitution, as revealed by [The Free Press](#).



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The investigation centers around Lisa (not her real name), a former telecom engineer who now dedicates her life to tracking sex-trafficking rings. Lisa runs [Shepherd's Watch](#), a nonprofit group that works with law enforcement to identify traffickers and rescue victims.

“Law enforcement is understaffed and stretched too thin,” she explained to *The Free Press*. “That’s where we come in.”

Lisa’s small team of investigators provides crucial intelligence to police departments across Texas and beyond.

### A Booming Trade in Migrant Girls

The investigation reveals a connection between the rise in sex trafficking and the Biden administration’s border policies. Since the start of the administration, an estimated eight million migrants have crossed the southern border. Many of them are unaccompanied women and minors. Once in the United States, these migrants often become targets of sex traffickers.

Lisa has witnessed this shift firsthand. She explained that before 2021, the majority of the trafficking victims she tracked were American citizens. That changed within mere months of the administration’s immigration policies coming into effect. Says the woman,

“Nearly all of my sex-trafficking rings now are migrant girls. The ads [on social media] exploded within the first three months of the border being open. We started noticing new sites and ads in Spanish. That was very few before. Then sites dedicated to Latino girls popped up everywhere.” Since the border opened, Lisa added, over 90 percent of the ads are for migrant girls.

Her team tracks tens of thousands of ads on platforms such as TikTok, OnlyFans, and Facebook weekly, including 14,000 in Dallas alone.



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According to Lisa, the traffickers move the victims around the country, from city to city, to evade law enforcement and maximize profit. These girls are typically sold for \$130 to \$160 per half-hour session. “If I wanted to, I could order a girl within 15 minutes,” Lisa said, underscoring the horrific ease of the process.

### **A Systematic Failure at the Border**

The report draws attention to the failings of the U.S. immigration system, specifically how gangs exploit the overwhelmed Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to traffic migrant children. Once minors cross the border, authorities place them in temporary holding facilities until they connect them with a sponsor. Ideally, that would be a family member in the United States. However, when no family sponsor is available, traffickers often step in.

As revealed by whistleblowers, including federal employee Tara Rodas, traffickers posing as sponsors manage to slip through the vetting process with alarming regularity. In testimony presented to a [roundtable](#) co-hosted by Senators Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), Bill Cassidy (R-La.), and Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) in July, Rodas described how children were released into the custody of known gang members.

“Human traffickers are exploiting the HHS Unaccompanied Children,” Rodas said. She recounted cases where authorities handed migrant children over to sponsors with criminal records, including some affiliated with notorious gangs such as MS-13.

### **Statistics**

The numbers confirm the scale of the problem. According to the report,

During the four years of the Trump administration, the government issued an average of 625 [child eligibility] letters per year to migrant minors who had managed to break free from their traffickers.

But in 2021, the first year of the Biden administration, that number jumped to 1,143. In 2022, it jumped again, to 2,226. Last year, the number stood at 2,148, but that was only through September; the fourth quarter hadn’t yet been counted. To put it another way, forced labor and prostitution among underage migrants *more than tripled* under President Biden, reaching record highs.

Child eligibility letters are issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). These letters are provided to migrant minors who have escaped from traffickers and qualify for assistance as victims of human trafficking. The letter grants them access to various support services. That includes food, medical benefits, and other forms of aid. The report stresses that the cited figures represent only the few minors who managed to escape. Thousands more remain trapped by traffickers.

### **Gang-controlled Trafficking Rings**

Gangs such as the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua, Mexican cartels, and Cuban and Salvadorian rings are primarily responsible for this influx of sex trafficking. They recruit migrant women, exploiting their desperate circumstances. According to the report,

Their modus operandi is luring migrant women and girls across the southern border, promising them good jobs once they get to America, and then forcing them into prostitution once they’re here, ostensibly to pay off the debt they incurred to get into the U.S.



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The traffickers then move these women around the country, keeping them in constant fear and isolation. As Lisa described during a field investigation in Dallas, traffickers operate from seedy motels, manipulating victims through violence, threats, and coercion.

### **The Horrors of Trafficking**

Sex trafficking victims often endure extreme physical and psychological abuse. The report highlighted the work of [Bob's House of Hope](#) in Denton, Texas, the country's only shelter for male sex-trafficking victims. The shelter's director, Landon Dickeson, described the brutal conditions many of the boys endured at the hands of traffickers.

Some teens were so brutally tortured "they can barely function," said the man. Some had brain damage from being systematically drugged, while others were tortured with methods that included having their fingernails pulled out.

Bob Williams, the shelter's CEO, added that trafficked minors, both male and female, often fall through the cracks of the system. "There's not one shelter in the country for 12- to 17-year-olds," he said. As a result, children do not receive proper care, and become more vulnerable to re-trafficking.

### **Efforts to Combat Trafficking**

Despite these horrifying realities, there have been some successful law-enforcement efforts to combat sex trafficking. Local police departments, sometimes working with federal agencies, have managed to arrest traffickers and rescue victims. Recent high-profile busts include the dismantling of a Venezuelan trafficking ring in Indianapolis and the rescue of seven young girls from a Texas trafficking house near El Paso.

However, as noted by Sheriff Grady Judd of Polk County, Florida, the key to reducing trafficking is prioritizing enforcement. His department's efforts have resulted in hundreds of arrests and the rescue of several migrant trafficking victims.

As trafficking continues to grow, the urgent need for resources, public awareness, and systemic reform cannot be overstated. The ORR and other agencies face growing scrutiny. They are failing to properly vet sponsors, which has allowed vulnerable children to fall into the hands of traffickers.

Beyond government action, community engagement is crucial in combating this crisis. The report highlights a grim reality:

That gangs are sex trafficking women and girls who cross the border — and that the Office of Refugee Resettlement is making it so easy for them — is an open secret to everyone who is part of the system.

With the federal government often turning a blind eye to the horrors of sex trafficking, it falls upon individuals such as Lisa, local law enforcement, and community members to step in and break up the criminal rings. Community awareness and collaboration with law enforcement are essential to stopping traffickers and protecting the vulnerable, say the investigators.



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