

A WAY OUT

WHEN MANY OF US THINK ABOUT HUMAN TRAFFICKING, we imagine a kidnapping at the border. But often that's not the case – in fact, it's just as prevalent in our own communities, says John Weil of UNCG's N.C. Network for Safe Communities.

"People have this vision of somebody loaded into the trunk of a car and moved to another state," he says. "In many cases in our communities, sex trafficking may be a process where a pimp builds a romantic relationship – maybe with a high-school kid they find on social media, someone who appears vulnerable.

"Then it's, 'We need money for rent. Can you do this favor just one time?'" he adds. "Once you cross a threshold into victimization, you feel like you don't have anywhere to go – you're trapped and under the control of the trafficker."

Data analysis. Creating and sustaining partnerships between the community and law enforcement. Changing social norms around violence. The N.C. Network for Safe Communities collaborates with local leaders to improve community safety using evidence-based approaches.

Weil and his colleague Dr. Stacy Sechrist have spent the last 10 years partnering with the three U.S. Attorneys' Offices across North Carolina, using data-driven strategies to crack down on gun, drug, gang, and domestic violence. Now, they are focused on a newer trend: gangs entering into human trafficking, enticed by the difficulty law enforcement has in tracking that activity.

"A gang might use drugs and guns to make money, but those are finite resources that can be seized by police," explains Weil. Pimps rely on the ability to control their victims, a different type of resource that's not so easily confiscated and is, worse yet, reusable.

Thanks to Weil's and Sechrist's reputation for working with communities across the state to deter violence, in 2019 they were awarded a Governor's Crime Commission grant to explore this issue in North Carolina. With the funding, they're gathering and analyzing data from seven eastern counties to better understand what sex and labor trafficking looks like in rural communities.

Sechrist says they've found parallels between domestic violence cases and sex trafficking. "Offenders are difficult to prosecute. Often the victim sees herself as the trafficker's girlfriend and may actually want to protect him. It's not like she flags you down and asks for help."

Victims of sex trafficking also experience repeated trauma, which can prevent them from verbalizing or recalling episodes of abuse in sequential order. "For that reason, it's difficult for prosecutors to get information that makes a good case," Sechrist says.

Eventually, Weil and Sechrist plan to guide local law enforcement officials battling this problem through "focused deterrence" strategies, the crux of their expertise.

Developing strong police-community partnerships is vital. When it comes to the community, says Weil, "You need service and resource providers, as well as people who can make personal connections with victims and offenders." Ideally, they provide a moral voice that hits close to home.

"The messenger is as important as the message. We bring in respected people from faith communities, former offenders, and even those touched by violent crime – like the mother of a murdered child – to share their stories." The hope is they will help victims and offenders better hear the message of deterrence and connect.

Working with partners across North Carolina and nationally, Weil and Sechrist have seen focused deterrence strategies work wonders.



"The commitment and unwavering support from the U.S. Attorneys' Offices have been vital to our work," says Weil (top right). Above, he and Sechrist (second left) meet with U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of North Carolina Robert J. Higdon Jr. (left) and his team.

FOCUSED DETERRENCE

Analyze police data to zero in on major offenders.

Communicate with offenders face-to-face. Notify them that future violence will not be tolerated, and offer assistance that improves chances of success in a crime-free life.

Follow through. Aggressively prosecute future violence and deliver resources to those who choose to change.

Engage and educate the community.

"In the last 10 years, we've seen change in communities where kids couldn't walk to church or play outside for fear of getting shot," says Weil. "This work has a redemptive quality. If you can break a cycle of violence, you can create a new pathway. By giving people options, and building trust and legitimacy, you see entire communities change."

By Robin Sutton Anders • Learn more at ncnsc.uncg.edu