



*Individual Liberty Series*

## *LIFT Perspective*

August 10, 2006

### **Human Trafficking and the Sex Trade: The need for tougher penalties**

Human trafficking is a deplorable act contrary to the most basic human rights. Individual liberty fundamentally is a God-given right that no man can deprive another. However men and women are held, bought and sold against their will not only in foreign nations, but in the United States and Texas. Some human trafficking is for the purposes of forced labor; other trafficking is for sexual exploitation, including that of children.

For example, below is a photo of a seemingly normal house in eastern Travis County:



The house, frequented by “undocumented workers”<sup>2</sup>, should serve as an infamous symbol to Texas lawmakers: a recent sting found that Mexican, Central, and South American women were held against their will and forced to perform sexual acts for money. The house is a brothel where illegal immigrants could go to take advantage of

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<sup>1</sup> Photo Credit: Jay Janner, Austin American Statesman

<sup>2</sup> Steven Kreytak, Austin American Statesman, “Immigrant Prostitution Ring Busted”, August 2, 2006; <http://www.statesman.com/news/content/news/stories/local/08/2brothel.html>

other illegal immigrants being held against their will. This example of sex slavery was discovered only eight miles from the State Capitol.

Between 800,000 to 900,000 persons are illegally trafficked across international borders world wide per year, and between 18,000 and 20,000 of those victims are trafficked into the U.S., according to the U.S. Department of State. However the latter figures do not include the trafficking that occurs within the U.S. For example, women held in the Travis County brothel were sometimes transferred to one in Oklahoma City. While they are included in the estimates of how many people are smuggled *into* the United States, their forced trips from Austin to Oklahoma City would not be reflected in the State Department figures.

Sickeningly, the most recent discovery of human smuggling and illegal sex trade in Texas is not the first: in January of 2004, four women were freed from slavery in South Texas by Federal officials. The women were forced to cook and clean during the day and were sold for sexual acts to smugglers and migrants at night. With a major corridor running through Texas from Mexico to Canada (I.H.-35) and with 1,200 miles of international border shared with Mexico, Texas is a central transit point for human trafficking and sex slavery.

To deal with this growing problem, the U.S. Congress passed the *Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000* and, subsequently, the *Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2003*. Additionally, President Bush dedicated nearly \$50 million to the Initiative to Combat Trafficking in Persons, which gave project grants to eight nations in fy2003 to fy2005<sup>3</sup>.

Unfortunately, federal efforts have proven insufficient. State action is required.

Sen. Leticia Van de Putte filed Senate Bill 206 (79-R) intended to increase penalties for human trafficking. Existing Penal Code §20A.02 stipulates that if a person's involuntary detainment is for sexual purposes the penalty is a felony of the first degree only if the person held is under 14 years of age or if the trafficking results in the death of the person. SB 206 would have expanded the penalty by striking those stipulations, making all human trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation a first degree felony.

Increased penalties will serve to keep convicted human traffickers incarcerated for longer periods of time and will provide a deeper sense of justice: the traffickers have profited off of depriving people their due liberty; in kind their liberty should be deprived.

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State Fact Sheet, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, April 12, 2006