

"WHY? Just why would you let all
this stuff happen to children...?"



Project
Harmony®
Child Advocacy Center

The Challenge of Child Trafficking

People are buying children for sex right here in Omaha, right under our noses. Those arrested are often college-educated, business owners, or so-called upstanding members of their community.

This is not just on the fringes; this is happening in your neighborhood with people you know.

20%
of all
men have
purchased sex

6% have purchased
sex within the last year

Odds are, you know someone who's gone online and purchased sex from a child.



Numbers available at demandabolition.org



Research shows that over 6% of men have purchased sex within the past 12 months, with a significant portion of those transactions involving high-frequency buyers. This research also shows that 20% of men have paid for sex at some point during their lives, the primary driver being “normalized beliefs” about the sex trade. This demonstrates a significant demand in the illegal market. These people are not just marginal figures in dark and smoky back rooms, but often blend in as upstanding and reputable members of our communities in everyday settings, making it a particularly challenging issue to address.



The Victims

The portrait of sex trafficking victims often reveals deep-seated trauma, including a history of sexual abuse. Many have experienced removal from their homes or have lived in foster care, frequently

running away. The complexities of their backgrounds underscore the profound set of challenges they face, not just as survivors, but as regular people forced to navigate through day-to-day life.

70%

of sex trafficking survivors report they have trouble finding a place to stay

69%

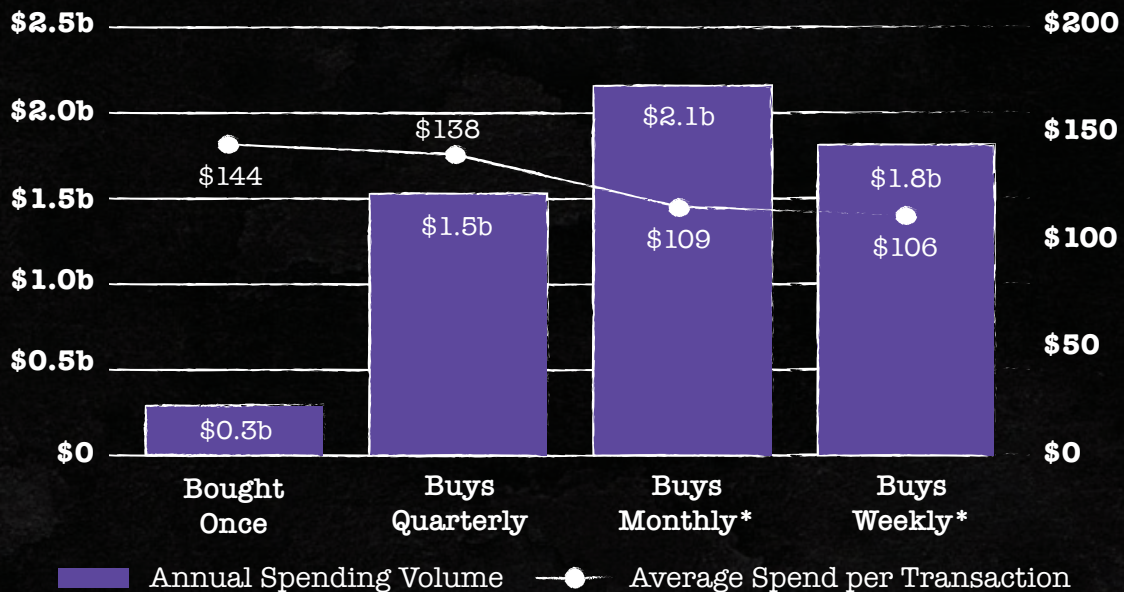
report trouble finding stable employment that pays a living wage

60%

report difficulty dealing with others due to stigmatization and shame

65%

report difficulty accessing trauma-informed medical services



* High-frequency buyers account for \$3.9 billion of the market



These aren't just statistics; they represent real people.

Survivors, often young and vulnerable, emerge with stories that are heartbreaking—stories of manipulation, abuse, and a struggle to reclaim the childhoods that they had stolen from them. The resilience they show is often overshadowed by the stigma and lack of awareness in our communities. This makes their path to recovery a very challenging one. **Project Harmony faces this challenge amidst a significant resource gap.** This gap is not just financial; it's a deficit in understanding, community engagement, and comprehensive support systems. **Our response needs to be as multifaceted as the problem itself,** addressing the supply and demand of sex trafficking, supporting survivors with specialized care, and educating our community to foster a safer environment for our children. Over the next couple of pages, we highlight one of these survivors in her own words. Let her story serve as a reminder of the human impact behind the numbers. A reminder of the urgent need for a concerted effort from each one of us.





“Shayla Mitchell”

Survivor | Age 17 | Omaha, NE

The memories are fuzzy in spots. Her parents were never together. Shayla’s mom was a stripper. She didn’t get to meet her father until she was about three or four. The parents fought over custody, and she only got to see her mom once a month. Shayla’s mom was bipolar and struggled with mental illness.

Shayla lived in a broken down home with her father, a home that her grandfather paid for. Her father tried to give her a good childhood, but things didn’t necessarily turn out that way. Between the ages of 12 and 13, Shayla ended up skipping school and getting into drugs. Her mother committed suicide when she was 12.

The excerpts on the following pages are parts of her story, in her own words.



“I came into the system when I was...like two or three.

My mom had gotten into a fight with one of her boyfriends and stabbed him. And my brother called the cops and explained what was going on. So they came and took us away. The second time was because I had a girlfriend [of mine] over...”



“...we were drinking, smoking. We were on coke, and we ended up getting into a physical and verbal argument...my dad ended up jumping in and she tried strangling me and then we kicked her out and she called the cops. I previously told her about how my dad had sexually abused me when I was younger, and she told the cops that.”



“When I first ran, I was probably 17.

It wasn't too long ago, I think it was at the beginning of August, and it lasted about a month. The reason I decided to run was because...I didn't like what was going on...”

“I didn't like the rules and restrictions, and I just feel like they weren't there for me. They allowed me to go into foster homes, which weren't good for me, which was exposing me to drugs and sexual abuse and **...it was not good.**”





“...I personally remember, I think it was before I ran, my foster mom had kicked me out of the house and told me she didn’t want to live with me anymore. **So I texted this 50 something year-old man** and asked him if I could stay with him for the meantime.”

“So I went to go meet him and he just ended up providing me meth and sexually abusing me

and forcing me to work for him and just take care of his kids and do a lot of things for him, which I think he just wanted it for the paycheck and he just ended it using me as a babysitter and basically just a toy, which was terrible for me.

It will always scar me and I’ll always be a part of my own disappointment to myself. Another home I was in – they didn’t really keep track of my whereabouts. They didn’t really care who I went with. When I would go out with, ‘friends,’ I would just end up locking myself in my room quite literally.”



Above: the ground-level access to the home where “Shayla” was kept. **Upper left and lower right:** the dilapidated interior of the home.



“Nothing exactly stands out other than the two detectives that saved me. They genuinely cared for me.”

-“Shayla Mitchell”



“It was really...cold then. It was just insulation. Also, there was no flooring. I was sleeping in a recliner. I was living off ramen noodles and bologna sandwiches...there was no door to the bathroom. That was a very bad circumstance to live under. I just remember, like, walking up to them with my stuffed animal and kind of just being like, “my cats in there.” And I don’t really remember much other than I...I was scared. What was the next thing that was going to happen in my life where they were taking me?”

“It’s going to make me cry.

[The detectives] mean a lot to me. more than I could probably say a lot of my family means to me. I don’t think anyone has shown me as much support and love. If they wouldn’t have found me, I probably ...would have been dead by now.”

“They’ve done a lot. I guess the challenges I’m facing now are just staying on the right path in life and staying sober and making sure I graduate. Going from hard drugs to sober is a lot, especially with having to deal with all the life stressors. There’s nowhere to really run to except yourself. I guess a few more things I’m dealing with are people being put in jail because of me.”

“They (detectives) just showed me a lot of care

and love and still continue to want the best for me. Both the first day (like when they actually saved me) I was in a broken down basement and...I was really scared. But they showed patience with me. They made sure that I had my cat because I was freaking out. If I didn’t have my cat, they made sure I had everything I wanted and needed. They took me to Project Harmony to make sure everything was okay - they wanted the best for me. They found me in a boarded-up, broken down, mouse-filled basement with no heat.”



Anti-Trafficking Initiative

Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnerships

This enhanced Anti-Trafficking Initiative is built on four foundational principles: **Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnerships.**

This comprehensive approach combines evidence-based anti-trafficking strategies to target the underlying supply and demand perpetuating child sex trafficking while also addressing the immediate needs of survivors. Through these principles, we aim to create a safer, more just community where every child can thrive free from the threat of exploitation.

Prevention & Deterrence: *

Our First Line of Defense

At the heart of our work is the belief that preventing child sex trafficking before it starts is the most efficient and effective solution. We run in-depth training sessions that equip teachers, healthcare professionals, and police with the skills to identify and aid children at risk. Equally important are our efforts to raise awareness and provide training within the community, therefore making everyone a part of the solution.

Protection: *

Supporting the Survivors

Our commitment and support to the survivors go well beyond just immediate relief. We offer a full range of care that helps promote long-term physical and emotional healing. With therapy to heal psychological scars and legal help to bring justice, we're here to support and empower survivors every step of the way towards the future THEY choose.



Prosecution: * **Seeking Justice**

Legal recourse serves as an extremely powerful and effective deterrent. By pushing for stronger prosecution of traffickers and perpetrators, we are not only giving justice to the victims who deserve it but also holding these people accountable for their actions. This sends a clear message. Exploitation of any kind will NOT be tolerated.

Partnerships: * **Collaborating for Change**

Partnerships form the final pillar of our comprehensive strategy. No single agency can completely reduce child trafficking or provide the full scope of support survivors need. With our decades of front-line experience, collaborative model, and longstanding regional partnerships with agencies and organizations that handle specific aspects of child trafficking, we feel uniquely positioned to lead this initiative of change.



Why Project Harmony?

Three Decades Protecting and Supporting Children



Our law enforcement, social services, medical and referral professionals work together to protect children each and every day.

In Omaha, Project Harmony is leading the charge to eliminate child sex trafficking. Our strategy focuses on addressing the fundamental factors of this issue—victim, perpetrator, and location, collectively known as the crime triangle—all of which must be present for a crime to occur. Our holistic strategy (prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnerships), which **emphasizes education, early intervention, and strategic alliances**, aims to preempt the trauma and suffering associated with such crimes, while simultaneously safeguarding and supporting those already impacted.

This initiative will prevent this vicious cycle from repeating:





With a longstanding mission centered around the **protection and support of children**, we've been on the front lines of child abuse for nearly thirty years. **With the unique advantage of having hundreds of people from multiple agencies under one roof**, we are able to act as a unified point of protection, healing, advocacy, and hope for children and their families who have experienced abuse and the trauma associated with it.

Our services span from response to prevention, including **medical evaluations, forensic interviews,**

advocacy, and mental health services, all provided in a child-centered environment. This unique, multidisciplinary approach has garnered national recognition. Our partnerships with **Homeland Security Investigations, the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), the Omaha Police Department's Child Victim Sexual Assault Unit, Domestic Violence Unit, and Missing Persons Unit, Lutheran Family Services, and Child Saving Institute** make us a force to be reckoned with.

We've been on the front lines of child abuse for nearly 30 years.





The Next Step

It Involves All of Us

Eradicating sex trafficking is no doubt an ambitious mission. And we recognize that such a monumental task cannot be achieved alone. It requires the collective will, resources, and **dedication of the entire community.**



From local businesses to individual citizens, everyone has a role to play in supporting this cause.

The path to ending child sex trafficking in Omaha requires collaboration, compassion, and action.

Together, we can make a significant difference, but it starts with the commitment of each one of us to stand up, speak out, and contribute to this vital mission.



Here's where you come in.

We have the power to stop this. Hopefully, you now have a better understanding of the stark realities and complexities of child sex trafficking in our region.

At Project Harmony, we envision a world where child sex trafficking has been eradicated. We believe that this vision is attainable, but it requires the collective will and resources of our community.

Your support can help us bridge the gap between the way things are now and our shared aspiration for a better, brighter future. It's an opportunity to be part of a transformation and to contribute to a legacy of protection, justice, and hope.

From the preventative measures designed to educate and empower to the protective services offering hope for our survivors, each initiative requires a vast network of resources. Every dollar you donate goes towards initiatives like these, offering an alternate path to those yet affected and assistance to survivors.

We understand that financial support is a significant commitment. Your willingness to contribute speaks volumes about your compassion and desire to make a difference. We are deeply grateful for your consideration and support. Remember that your contribution goes beyond just financial support; it's an investment in the safety of our children and communities.

With your support, together we can declare to traffickers and pimps, ***“Not in our house. This ends here.”*** We can eradicate sex trafficking and build a future where every child is safe and protected. Join us in standing up to exploitation and ensuring that no child is left vulnerable.



Gene Klein
Executive Director
Project Harmony



One child, one voice, one vision. Be someone.

11949 Q St, Omaha, NE 68137 | (402) 595-1326

