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2020

### Media vs. Law: How Human Trafficking is Represented in American Media

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#### Recommended Citation

Daly, Jen and Marks, Eve, "Media vs. Law: How Human Trafficking is Represented in American Media" (2020). *Research Days Posters Spring 2020*. 16.

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## The Media's Perception

The media has an ability to bring issues to light and raise public awareness of an issue. Film and television help shape cultures by breaking down complex issues for the general public to consume. Shows such as *Criminal Minds* and *Law & Order*, alongside movies such as *Taken* (2008) and *Trafficking* (2017) often portray human trafficking in a corrupt way. Media tends to engage in a “rescue narrative” that furthers misconceptions of the scope of the issue as well as failing to address the actual needs of survivors.



## The Rescue Narrative

The rescue narrative reinforces all assumptions that victims are trafficked for the purpose of sex work, and that women are helpless victims that need to be saved from an evil trafficker. Rescue is how every movie ends, but in reality not all cases are solved, and not all attempts end in a positive outcome. In addition, “rescue” is never the end of a trafficked individuals journey. There is often an untold story of reintegration into society and recovery.

# Media vs. Law: How Human Trafficking is Represented in American Media

Jennifer Daly and Eve Marks

## Introduction

- Today there are an estimated 24.9 million individuals trapped in human trafficking
- 150 billion dollar business according to the International Labor Organization
- 16 million were exploited for labor, 4.8 million were sexually exploited, and 4.1 were exploited in state-imposed forced labor.



Sex trafficking **14,749**  
Labor trafficking **5,577**  
Sex and labor trafficking **1,388**  
Not specified **1,364**

\*Misleading graph that highlights the issue of unreliable data in the field of human trafficking

“Polaris”

## Myths

1. Human trafficking only affects sex workers
2. Women are victims and men are perpetrators
3. Victims are pretty white girls
4. Trafficking is not an issue in the United States
5. Every story ends in rescue

## Findings

- The general public's understanding of trafficking comes from the media alone
- Both law and media still focus too heavily on women and girls and sexual slavery
- Neglecting the stories of those trafficked in other industries often allows their experiences to be seen as less important or severe compared to those who were sex trafficked
- Both law and the media need to do a better job at educating the world about what human trafficking really is

## The Law

Misconceptions not only affect popular opinion but also the law. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 states that it will help “combat trafficking in persons, especially into the sex trade, slavery, and involuntary servitude,” yet it was reauthorized as an amendment to the Violence Against Women Act. Although this act recognizes multiple forms of trafficking, it continues to perpetuate the narrative that trafficking is merely a women’s issue. The image of a young girl who is forced into sex work is the image that affects law enforcement efforts, how victims are dealt with, and fails to address all victims equally.



## A Rights-Based Approach to Trafficking

A rights-based approach to human trafficking is what both media and the law should strive to obtain. This approach focuses on the conditions that led to trafficking and the desired outcome of the trafficked individual. It strives to preserve both the moral and legal human rights of the trafficked individual, while also assisting them in recovery.

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