

## Editorial: Cracking down on sex traffickers

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For too long in this country, law enforcers have treated underage prostitutes as participants in a criminal enterprise instead of what they truly are — victims. The adults who recruit and exploit underage prostitutes are engaging in a form of human slavery, while their customers are committing nothing short of statutory rape.

Two Texas Republicans, Sen. John Cornyn and Rep. Ted Poe of the Houston area, are co-sponsoring a bill that would impose stiff penalties on these adult victimizers of up to life in prison. The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act, which has bipartisan support in both houses, would supplement an existing law that focuses primarily on punishing sex-trafficking organizations abroad.

Poe and Cornyn estimate that one-quarter of U.S. sex-trafficking victims have Texas roots. Poe says our state's proximity to Mexico and high immigrant population give the state a particularly high profile. **In Houston alone, about 300,000 sex trafficking cases are prosecuted each year.** Tighter border controls and reduced profit margins from the drug trade are pushing organized crime groups to turn increasingly to sex trafficking, law enforcers say.

North Texas has an additional problem. Dallas is one of the co-headquarters for backpage.com, a popular advertising website that is cited often in federal prosecutions of sex-trafficking rings. Earlier this month, U.S. Attorney Sarah Saldaña announced the conviction in Fort Worth of two women who used Backpage to advertise the services of a girl, "all in reckless disregard that [she] was under age 18." One of the traffickers received a 121-month federal prison sentence, while the other received 72 months.

Katie Pedigo, of the victim recovery group New Friends New Life, wrote on our Viewpoints page last year that drugs and alcohol are typical ways that traffickers make their young victims compliant and a way in which the victims numb their own pain.

Addiction and the fear of violent retaliation prevent victims from breaking free of the adults controlling them. A vicious cycle develops that can ruin young lives and trap them in a life of crime while only a small percentage of the adult victimizers pay for the damage they inflict.

Cornyn, Poe and other co-sponsors not only want to increase the prison penalties for traffickers and their customers but also to ensure that local police file these crimes into a federal database. The bill also would ease the seizure of traffickers' assets to provide restitution to victims.

A key facet of this bill is punishment for johns — the patrons of sex trafficking and the real economic drivers behind the trade.

This is a proposed law with real teeth, designed to help young people recover after being caught in the trafficking network, while helping ensure their adult victimizers pay a steep price for what constitute truly heinous crimes.