Human Trafficking News Digest: March 31, 2017
Compiled by the Center for Public Policy Studies

NPR

In U.S. Restaurants, Bars and Food Trucks, 'Modern Slavery' Persists (March 29): They come from places like Vietnam, China, Mexico and Guatemala, lured by promises of better-paying jobs and legal immigration. Instead, they're smuggled into the U.S., forced to work around the clock as bussers, wait staff and cooks, and housed in cramped living quarters. For this, they must pay exorbitant fees that become an insurmountable debt, even as their pay is often withheld, stolen or unfairly docked. In restaurants, bars and food trucks across America, many workers are entrapped in a form of modern slavery. That's according to a new report by Polaris, an organization that fights human trafficking and helps survivors. In the report the group offers a detailed portrait of human trafficking as it occurs in the U.S., breaking it down into 25 distinct business models, from nail salons to hotel work and domestic service. "Because human trafficking is so diverse ... you can't fight it all at once and there are no single, silver bullet solutions. You have to ... fight it type by type," Bradley Myles, CEO of Polaris, told reporters on a press call. He called the report the largest data set on human trafficking in the U.S. ever compiled and publicly analyzed. The Polaris team analyzed 32,208 reports of human trafficking, and 10,085 reports of labor exploitation processed through its hotlines for victims between 2007 and 2016. The goal: to identify profiles of traffickers and their victims — and the methods they use to recruit and control them — across industries, in order to better thwart them. Three of the 25 categories the group tracked involve the food industry: restaurants, bars and agriculture. Of the more than 1,700 restaurant industry cases, the vast majority of victims involved immigrants, recruited from Mexico, Central America and East and Southeast Asia. Nearly one in five was a minor. They included cooks, wait staff and bussers at restaurants, food trucks, buffets and taquerias. Because the report was based solely on calls and text messages to Polaris' hotlines, Myles notes there are limits to what it can tell us. "Potentially, restaurant trafficking may be much higher than we're learning about, but we're just not getting enough of those hotline calls to be able to describe that," he said.

Houston Public Media

New Study Reveals Human Trafficking Indicators (March 27): A new study has been released that could help Houston police officers better identify human trafficking in the city. The research analyzed almost 1,500 prostitution cases from 2014 to find key factors that aligned with human trafficking. Rebecca Pfeffer, assistant professor of criminal justice at the University of Houston-Downtown, partnered up with the Houston Police Department to help officers spot human trafficking cases versus prostitution. "They've been trained for so long to look at something that they've identified and called prostitution for so long that they can't see the victimization behind some of those cases," says Pfeffer. The most common indicators of human trafficking were victims under the age of 18, people who used coercion tactics, and depriving victims of alternatives.

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Harvard Political Review

Trafficking in Persons Report: 15 Years Later (March 16): For 15 years the U.S. State Department has issued a Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report analyzing the state of global slavery and ranking countries' compliance with international humanitarian law. Unfortunately, the report lacks an in-depth analysis of the root causes of slavery. The lack of research, both quantitative and qualitative, has been pointed out by experts who believe the report's reach is not extensive enough to eliminate modern slavery. The U.S. State Department has pushed back against criticisms of the report's findings, but even amongst supporters of the Trafficking in Persons Report, one sentiment is shared: there is not enough data. Without a true understanding of the nature of modern slavery, the problem will be impossible to successfully fight. Modern slavery is difficult to dismantle because researchers have been unable to isolate and collect data on its causes. Modern slavery exploits the most vulnerable victims, regardless of what factors make them vulnerable. Professor Eric Edmonds, an expert on trafficking and an economics professor at Dartmouth, has studied these vulnerable populations in hopes of identifying root causes of modern slavery. In an interview with the HPR, Edmonds discussed his work combining data on rescued child slaves with data on the communities these children come from. He stated that "family dissolution and paternal disability stood out as strong markers of vulnerability to trafficking. A lot more work could be done in this area, but data is scarce."

US News & World Report

US to Launch Competition for Projects to End Modern Slavery (March 15): The United States will launch a competition in the coming weeks to find projects that will reduce modern slavery, which by one estimate affects nearly 46 million people around the world, U.S. Ambassador Nikki Haley announced Wednesday. She told a U.N. Security Council meeting focusing on the scourge that the initiative will seek to raise $1.5 billion, partly from the U.S. government but mostly from foreign governments and the private sector, to help countries break trafficking rings and support survivors. Haley said groups that receive funding "must target a 50 percent reduction" in the people they seek to help escape slavery. The U.S. "Program to End Modern Slavery" proposed by Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee, the Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and signed into law by then-President Barack Obama in December, demonstrates the U.S. commitment to stand up to modern slavery, she said.

New York Times

Backpage's Sex Ads Are Gone. Child Trafficking? Hardly. (March 11): In the midst of a Senate investigation, a federal grand jury inquiry in Arizona, two federal lawsuits and criminal charges in California accusing Backpage's operators of pimping children, the website abruptly bowed to pressure in January and replaced its sex ads with the word "Censored" in red. Even so, ads have moved to Backpage's dating section. "New in town," read a

recent one, using words that have become code for selling sex. "Looking for someone to hang out with." Other recent dating ads listed one female as "100% young" and suggested that "oh daddy can i be your candy." In the fight against child sex trafficking, shutting down an epicenter like Backpage was a major victory, but one against a relentless foe that quickly unfurled new tentacles. The demise of Backpage's adult ads undermined the trade, but it also illustrated how difficult it is to stamp out the practice of selling children for sex. The crime is rarely punished with the full force of the law — charges like rape or statutory rape — officials say; in many places it leads to just a citation, instead of an arrest. Eric Quan, a sergeant in the human-trafficking unit with the San Jose Police Department, said there had been a conspicuous rise in street prostitution in San Jose. "When Backpage was running adult ads, we used to get tips, but that has dropped off," Sergeant Quan said. "It makes it a lot more complicated for us to figure out what's going on." Advocates said that while the elimination of the listings was a step forward, by itself it was more an inconvenience than a crippling blow. It is unclear how many minors are forced into prostitution each year, but the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children said reports of online child sex trafficking had increased by more than 800 percent from 2010 to 2015. The organization said this was "directly correlated to the increased use of the internet to sell children for sex."

US News & World Report

West Virginia Lawmakers Vote to Punish Human Trafficking (March 8): West Virginia lawmakers have approved legislation to impose prison sentences and fines for human trafficking, including forced labor, debt bondage and prostitution. Under bills approved by House and Senate, every victim constitutes a separate offense. The measure calls for disgorging profits, restitution and immunity from prosecution for minors who are trafficking victims. It authorizes wiretap investigations and expunging prostitution convictions. In other voting, West Virginia's Senate has passed legislation to prohibit an employer from using payroll withholdings to support candidates or for other political activities without a worker's written annual consent. The bill, approved 21-12, would prohibit unions from using agency shop fees paid by non-members for political purposes without their annual written consent. The Senate has also voted to limit damage claims for errors in medical monitoring.

Public Radio International

How Tech Companies Are Trying to Combat Human Trafficking (March 6): Sex trafficking and human slavery are certainly nothing new, but the internet has created a lawless space for predators to buy and sell people. Today, more than 150,000 escort ads are posted in the US every day, many of them for children. The human trafficking industry enslaves an estimated 27 million people worldwide. Now, an organization is turning to the very features of the internet that make trafficking so widespread to combat it. Thorn partners with technology companies like Google, Pinterest, Facebook and others to help identify and rescue children, and possibly catch predators. Traditionally, law enforcement efforts to combat trafficking have been insufficient, given the fluid nature, ano-nymity and enormous reach of the internet. Thorn's approach is interesting because it creates tech tools specif-

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ically geared to helping the authorities. In 2011, law enforcement officials in the US turned 22 million images and videos of child abuse over to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to identify the victims, according to the center's US Sentencing Commission testimony cited by Nicholas Kristof in The New York Times. In the US alone, 9 million computer IP addresses were tracked sharing child pornography files. The sheer volume of victims and perpetrators is overwhelming for law enforcement. Thorn is using machine learning, in which computers learn what advertisements represent a child, and create an algorithm to predict what other ads are more likely to be associated with a child. That, they hope, can reduce the thousands of images of children in circulation.

NPR

Forty Percent of Homeless Kentuckian Youth Report Being Sex-Trafficked (March 2): A study released this week by the University of Louisville finds that 40 percent of homeless youth in Louisville and southern Indiana have been victims of sex trafficking. Researchers studied homeless youth, ages 12 to 25, for a two-week period last October to understand the scope of sex trafficking in the Kentuckiana region. Respondents said they were victimized mostly in exchange for money or lodging. Professor Jennifer Middleton teaches social work at U-of-L and helped oversee the research. She told WKU Public Radio that the number of sex trafficking victims was higher than expected. Youth who reported being sex-trafficked were more likely to be drug-addicted, diagnosed with mental health issues, and participate in self-harming, including suicide attempts.Kentucky Attorney General Andy Beshear says the study confirms a trend that investigators in his Cyber Crimes Unit are seeing-the use of technology in abuse.

Sacramento Bee

Bill Would Open Confidential Address Program to Human Trafficking Victims (March 2): A month after authorities arrested nearly 500 in a human-trafficking sting operation, California officials are moving to make victims of such crimes eligible for the state's confidential address program. Senate Bill 597, by Sen. Connie Leyva and sponsored by Secretary of State Alex Padilla, would expand access to the existing Safe at Home program administered by his office that's currently open to victims and survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking. Padilla said Safe at Home gives victims a free post office box and mail forwarding services so they can start new lives in peace and safety. "It can be not just helpful, but critical for victims of sex trafficking or human trafficking to escape their circumstances and move on to a better life," he said. Leyva, a Democrat from Chino, has previously carried human-trafficking related measures, and said she was approached by Padilla to take another step toward wrangling what is considered the world's fastest-growing criminal enterprise.