



**SANTA CRUZ COUNTY**  
Civil Grand Jury

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## **Human Trafficking in Santa Cruz County**

### **Voices Unheard, Signs Unseen**

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#### **Summary**

Human trafficking is defined by the U.S. Department of Justice as a crime involving the exploitation of a person for labor, services, or commercial sex. The Grand Jury concluded that human trafficking goes largely unrecognized and unreported in Santa Cruz County. This report will show that there is a lack of training and prevention activities provided to youth, school administrators, teachers, and law enforcement. State and local mandates meant to curtail trafficking are often not enforced. Additionally, there is insufficient coordination among stakeholders to address the issue of human trafficking.

The Grand Jury recommends actions that will increase collaboration among responsible agencies to better recognize and respond to human trafficking, coordinate handling of cases to support prosecutions, and secure additional funding while providing more effective support for prevention and increasing public awareness of the problem.

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## Background

Human trafficking is poorly understood, difficult to define, and therefore, acquiring solid data is scattered and fractured. Though the common perception is that human trafficking happens primarily in other countries, it is indeed a significant problem in the United States. California consistently reports a high volume of human trafficking calls in the US, according to data from the National Human Trafficking Hotline (National Hotline). California also ranks #8 per capita at 28.88 victims per 100,000 residents.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 2023, California had approximately 1,128 reported cases involving 2,045 victims. Roughly 62% of these cases involved sex trafficking.<sup>[2]</sup> It is estimated by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) that 85% of human trafficking cases go unreported. However, the NIJ also states that this 85% rate of underreporting is a minimum.<sup>[3][4]</sup> This translates into potentially 5,000-10,000 cases per year in California. Young girls between the ages of 12-14 years old and boys between the ages of 11 and 13 years of age are especially vulnerable.<sup>[5][6]</sup>

- One local service provider states that it gets 5-7 calls on average per week from victims and estimates that in any given week, there are 200 sex trafficking victims in Santa Cruz County.
- A different local service provider representative states that in the past three years, it has served approximately 20 human trafficking victims who were minors between the ages of 12 to 18. This is a significant number of cases considering that the agency serves victims of multiple types of crimes.
- Public presentations made by a third local service provider generate 8-10 human trafficking cases annually.
- The County Office of Education (COE) administration is aware of two reported cases of sex trafficking among their 800 at-risk students in the 2024-2025 school year and is aware of at least four other suspected cases within the past three to four years.<sup>[7][8]</sup> However, other COE staff working with at-risk students reported being unaware of any cases of student human trafficking.

The California Department of Justice determined that human trafficking, both sex and labor trafficking, is the fastest-growing criminal enterprise globally and is increasing in California. This is because human trafficking is a very lucrative business. Unlike drug sales, the commodity (sex or forced labor) can be sold over and over.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Scope and Methodology

In its investigation of human trafficking in the County, the Grand Jury (**the Jury**) set out to determine the following:

- The prevalence of human trafficking in the County of Santa Cruz.
- The level of education and outreach to youth and other vulnerable populations for the prevention of human trafficking.
- Law enforcement challenges in the prosecution of traffickers.
- Resources available to provide services to victims of human trafficking.

The Jury's investigation consisted of 19 interviews with County and various City law enforcement officers, non-profit agencies focusing on serving human trafficking victims, actual human trafficking survivors, school administrators, County administrators, administrators from a neighboring county, farmworker advocates, and homeless outreach workers.

In addition, the Jury researched State and local laws and ordinances related to the prevention and monitoring of human trafficking and the funding for these activities. The Jury also surveyed a random selection of businesses in each of the County's five supervisorial districts for compliance with signage requirements. Finally, Jurors did extensive research on websites related to human trafficking, attended local public events intended to raise public awareness, and obtained supporting documentation from interviewees as well as filed Public Records Act requests.

## Investigation

### ***What is Human Trafficking?***

The simplified US legal definition of human trafficking is:

The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. Or, for commercial sex acts in which the person induced to perform such acts is under 18 years of age or is forced, defrauded, or coerced.<sup>[10]</sup> The coercion can be subtle or overt, physical or psychological. Exploitation of a minor for commercial sex is human trafficking, regardless of whether any form of force, fraud, or coercion was used.<sup>[11]</sup>

In Santa Cruz County, recruitment, harboring, and coercion are consistently reported in human trafficking cases.

## ***The Scope and Nature of the Problem***

Human trafficking victims are often recruited via manipulation or coercion. They may be promised shelter, drugs, money, or romantic attention. Once lured in, they are commonly subjected to sexual exploitation, forced labor, coerced recruitment of others, violence, and trauma.

Local survivors and frontline workers interviewed report that victims often do not recognize themselves as being trafficked. The result is a population that remains largely hidden and underserved.

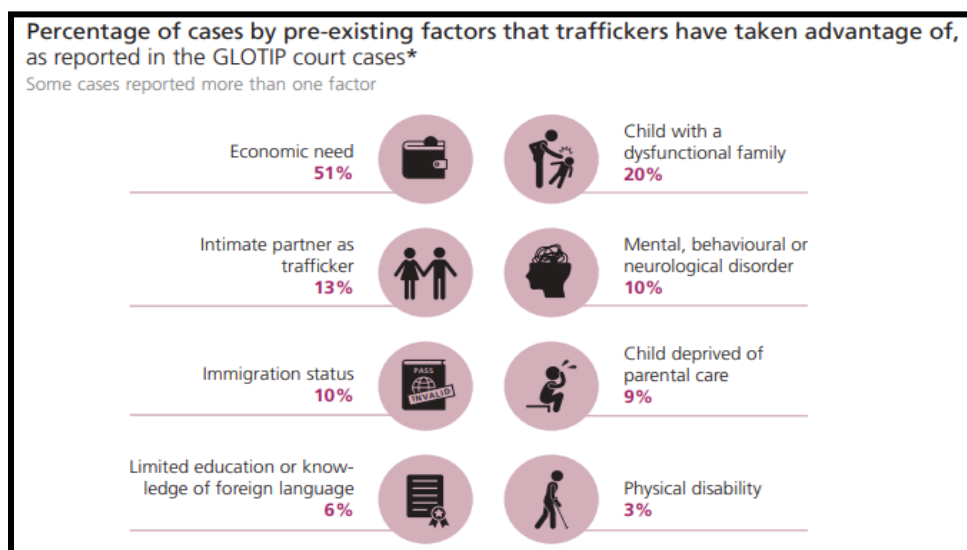
Human trafficking is a growing criminal enterprise nationwide and one of the most underreported crimes in California. Santa Cruz County is not immune. <sup>[12] [13]</sup>

The Super Bowl and World Cup events scheduled for 2026 in Santa Clara County will impact the County of Santa Cruz directly with an influx of tourism and money, both of which increase the likelihood of human trafficking activity. <sup>[14] [15]</sup> Closer to home, the future development of a large year-round event center in the City of Santa Cruz Downtown Expansion Plan will potentially bring a heightened need for public awareness regarding human trafficking in our area. <sup>[16] [17] [18]</sup>

## ***Vulnerable Populations in Santa Cruz County***

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, women and girls make up 71% of all detected trafficking victims worldwide. About 51% of all trafficked victims are adult women, and 20% are girls under the age of 18, typically between the ages of 12 and 14. Men make up 29% of victims, 21% of whom are adult men, and 8% are boys, typically between the ages of 11 and 13. <sup>[19]</sup>

The illustration below shows some of the factors that leave victims vulnerable to traffickers' seductive tactics.



**Figure 1: Pre-existing Factors Traffickers Take Advantage of** <sup>[20]</sup>

**Source:** Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 2020

In interviews with various service providers, law enforcement officers, and County administrators, several categories of vulnerable people who are disproportionately targeted by traffickers emerged.

- Youth in Foster Care: These minors are particularly vulnerable because most have come from dysfunctional homes. Many have suffered familial neglect and/or abuse. Traffickers target these youths, initially offering them the attention and nurturing they crave. They may be offered expensive gifts, drugs, or money. These youths may have been friended and groomed on social media - a medium traffickers are skilled at using to build trust with their contacts. Youths may be led to believe they are in a romantic relationship with their captors, making victims more likely to be compliant.
- School-aged Children: Young children are among the most vulnerable due to their age and dependency on adults for their care. Sexual exploitation of these young children is most commonly perpetrated by a family member or a close, trusted friend of the family. Being victimized by adults who are responsible for their care leaves them with fewer options to speak out. They also lack the resources, know-how, or courage to reach out for help and may have experienced sexual exploitation for so long that it has become normalized.
- Homeless and Runaway Youth: These youths lack shelter, food, and money. Traffickers can immediately fulfill these unmet needs. In exchange, youths are asked to repay their traffickers by submitting to acts of sexual exploitation and/or engaging in criminal activities on behalf of their traffickers. Homeless and runaway youths will often choose to stay in abusive trafficking situations because the dangers are known, and they believe they are better off than they were in the situation from which they came.
- Young Adults Aged 18-25 Experiencing Poverty, Addiction, or Homelessness: As with minors, traffickers are able to offer these adults housing, food, and relative safety from the dangers of living on the streets. Addicts are lured by the prospect of access to the source of drugs they need to feed their addiction or forestall withdrawals.
- Undocumented Agricultural Workers: Undocumented workers, including unaccompanied minors, often come into the US with only the items they carry with them, leaving them vulnerable to offers of assistance meant to lure them into servitude. They likely do not speak English well, and many will have a limited education. Complaining about their abuse can result in being blacklisted by employers. Reporting abuse can also bring them to the attention of law enforcement, with the subsequent risk of being deported, especially in the current political environment.

Another factor not shown above is the use of social media. All youth who are on social media are vulnerable to traffickers. Known as “sexploitation”, youth are increasingly coerced into posting nude photos of themselves on social media only to be later exploited and coerced by traffickers. Social media has created a platform for clever traffickers to lure and recruit youth of all socio-economic backgrounds. This practice continues to increase, and the nature of social media makes it difficult to detect and prevent.

The three composite examples below demonstrate how vulnerable youth can be exploited. All three have elements of recruitment, harboring, and coercion. Details have been provided by local service providers and are taken from actual local trafficking cases.

Sarah is a 15-year-old high school freshman who recently started dating John, a 17-year-old junior. Sarah believes she is in love with John and that their relationship is reciprocal. After two months of dating, John takes Sarah to a get-together with friends. He then asks her to have sex with his friend Mike. Sarah says, “But I don’t want to have sex with your friend. I love you.” John responds by saying, “If you loved me, you would do this for me.” Reluctantly, Sarah agrees to have sex with Mike. John has made an arrangement with Mike to pay John to have sex with Sarah. Sarah has unwittingly become a human trafficking victim. After hooking Sarah in, John goes on to traffic her to other boys and men at parties in exchange for money, drugs, or alcohol. He has nude pictures of Sarah that he posts online to solicit customers.

Kathy is an 18-year-old who is invited to a party hosted by John, a trafficker. At the party, Kathy and her friends are provided alcohol and drugs. John offers Kathy what sounds like a great opportunity to make good money. He claims to be a professional photographer and offers her work as a model. He tells her a time and day to meet. After this meeting, Kathy decides to run away from home and drop out of school. John takes her on a shopping spree for the designer clothes she “needs” for modeling work. In exchange, she hands over her phone and identification. Kathy is now isolated, making it difficult for her to seek help. She is told that she now “owes” him for his gifts, and she must work off the debt. Soon, he is taking her from city to city, where she is forced into sex trafficking.

Mary was six years old when her uncle Bill first took her for an outing that resulted in him sodomizing her. He warned her not to tell her parents, and that he would hurt her little brother if she did. Uncle Bill began to take her to parties at his friend’s house that always resulted in coerced sex acts she did not like, sometimes causing injury, and always involved other men who paid her uncle Bill with money, drugs, or alcohol. Sometimes, Uncle Bill would make videos of what she was forced to do with these men. She was afraid of her uncle’s continued threats and did not want to upset her parents. Over time, she began to regard his sexual demands as normal. Even though Mary did not like what her uncle demanded she do, she focused on the reward of good food and nice clothes she would not have otherwise.

## ***Indicators of Trafficking Activity***

Signs of human trafficking are often masked by the presenting issues that bring victims to the attention of law enforcement or service providers. This means that most cases of human trafficking are unidentified, as many law enforcement officers are not properly trained to recognize cases of trafficking.

While not an exhaustive list, these are some key red flags indicating a potential trafficking situation:<sup>[21] [22]</sup>

Living conditions:

- Living with an employer
- Poor living conditions
- Multiple people in a cramped space

Physical appearance:

- Signs of physical abuse
- Malnourishment or extreme hunger
- Suspicious tattoos or skin branding that is unexplained

Working/school conditions:

- Employer is holding identity documents,
- Unpaid or paid very little
- Under 18 and in prostitution
- Truancy

Suspicious Behavior:

- Inability to speak to the individual alone
- Answers appear to be scripted and rehearsed
- Submissive or fearful behavior

## ***What Resources are Available to Human Trafficking Victims?***

Below is a description of local providers of direct services to victims and their prevention activities. There are currently five such nonprofit service providers in the county. Links are provided for researching additional details on services provided by these organizations.

[Arukah Project](#): Arukah provides direct services to human trafficking victims who contact Arukah through their 24/7 hotline. Arukah supports survivors of sex trafficking and also provides survivor-led trainings to schools.

[Rising Worldwide](#): Rising is a Santa Cruz-based nonprofit dedicated to empowering survivors of human trafficking, gender-based violence, and extreme poverty. Rising provides free survivor-led training, mentorship, access to resources, and emergency financial support.



[Monarch Services](#): Monarch is a County nonprofit that provides emergency shelter to survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and sexual trafficking. Other services include a 24-hour bilingual crisis line, legal advocacy, counseling, and support groups. Monarch also provides training. However, their trainers do not necessarily have any actual lived experience in human trafficking.

[The Coalition to End Human Trafficking in Santa Cruz and Monterey County](#): The Coalition has grown a collaboration of organizations, businesses, and individuals working to end human trafficking in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties through education, advocacy, policy change, services for survivors, and prosecution of offenders.

[Catholic Charities of Monterey Bay](#): Located in Watsonville, the agency serves migrant farm workers. Staff are trained to detect signs of trafficking among migrants and refer cases to appropriate local and state agencies for assistance, as well as providing trauma-focused bilingual care and counseling.

## ***State Laws Regarding Prevention and Support Services to Minors***

There are two State laws mandating enhanced prevention and support services for minor victims of human trafficking. Both of these laws provide for the allocation of funding to County child welfare agencies. This section gives an overview of these laws and their requirements.

Compliance with these laws will be discussed in a later section of this report.

## **SB 855 - Human Services Omnibus Trailer Bill for the 2014-15 Budget**

SB 855 created the Commercially Sexually Exploited Children (**CSEC**) Program and requires the State of California to collect data from counties related to human trafficking cases and services provided. The law mandates a collaborative approach involving child welfare, probation, mental health, public health, and other relevant agencies.<sup>[23]</sup>

The County of Santa Cruz participates in the CSEC Program and receives funding from the California Department of Human Services. These funds are provided to support the identification, protection, and specialized care of children and youth who are victims of, or at risk of, sexual exploitation. Counties are required to report back to the State on the allocation of CSEC funds as part of their County Biennial Call Report.

As the recipient of CSEC funds, Santa Cruz County's Family & Child Services (previously known as Child Protective Services) is required to form a multidisciplinary team and hold regular meetings for case reviews of identified minor victims and at-risk youth. This team is required to have representatives from child welfare, probation, mental health, public health, juvenile courts, the Sheriff's Office, and the County Office of Education.<sup>[24]</sup>

In the past five fiscal years, the County Human Services Department has received annual CSEC allocations ranging from \$136,000 to \$142,000, plus an additional \$6,555 in Federal funding for fiscal year 2024-25. Funds are distributed to local service providers as shown in Figure 2.

<i>Total contract/purchase order amount</i>	<i>Fiscal Year</i>					
<i>Vendor</i>	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	Grand Total	% Total
Monarch	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$61,750	\$256,750	43.84%
Rising Worldwide	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$23,750	\$98,750	16.86%
Diversity Center	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$23,750	\$98,750	16.86%
The Coalition	\$17,000	\$17,000	\$17,000	\$16,150	\$67,150	11.46%
West Coast Children's Clinic	\$300	\$14,000	\$18,000	\$12,000	\$44,300	7.56%
Encompass - Youth Advisory Board	\$10,000	\$10,000		\$0	\$20,000	3.41%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>\$142,300</b>	<b>\$156,000</b>	<b>\$150,000</b>	<b>\$137,400</b>	<b>\$585,700</b>	<b>100.00%</b>
CSEC Allocation	\$139,370	\$140,739	\$135,860	\$141,938	\$557,907	95.25%
Balance not spent/excess expenditures	-\$2,930	-\$15,261	-\$14,140	\$4,538	-\$27,793	-4.75%

**Figure 2: CSEC Fund Disbursement Detail by Fiscal Year**

Source: Department of Human Services, Santa Cruz County <sup>[25]</sup>

## **AB 1227 - Human Trafficking Prevention Education and Training Act (2017)**

AB 1227 is an update to SB 855 and requires California public schools to include education on human trafficking prevention in sexual health education classes for middle and high school students. It mandates that instruction be age-appropriate, medically accurate, and include information on how to recognize and avoid exploitation. The bill also requires school staff to receive training on how to identify and respond to signs of human trafficking. <sup>[26]</sup>

## **State Laws and Local Ordinances Regarding Human Trafficking**

### **Pending Legislation**

AB 379 Survivor Support and Demand Reduction Act: This bill passed the California Assembly with a unanimous vote of 74-0 on May 15, 2025, and at the time of publication of this report is under consideration in the State Senate.

If passed into law, a key provision of this new bill would create a grant program through the California Office of Emergency Services to support district attorneys. This funding could be used to create specialized units for the vertical prosecution of trafficking cases. Vertical prosecution refers to the process of the initial investigation of a case through final disposition, including trial and sentencing. Such a process would streamline prosecutions.

AB 379 will also create a Survivor Support Fund, opening grant opportunities to community-based organizations that provide direct services and outreach to victims of sex trafficking and exploitation.<sup>[27]</sup>

## **Existing State Legislation**

There are three existing critical California laws addressing the issue of sex and labor trafficking. The laws focus on public notice requirements and civil lawsuits against traffickers and those benefiting financially from trafficking. In brief:

SB 1193 - Human Trafficking: Public Notice Requirements: Requires certain businesses (such as bars, massage businesses, and transit stations) to post a notice with information on how victims of human trafficking can seek help, including the National Human Trafficking Hotline. SB 1193 also requires farm labor contractors to post human trafficking signage, according to the State Department of Industrial Relations. SB 1193 was expanded by AB 260, which requires hotels, motels, and bed and breakfasts to post the same human trafficking public notice. It also requires that staff be trained to recognize and report human trafficking.<sup>[28] [29]</sup>

SB 225 - Human Trafficking: Civil Actions: Allows victims of human trafficking to bring civil lawsuits against perpetrators and other responsible parties (such as businesses that benefited from the trafficking), even after criminal proceedings have ended.<sup>[30]</sup>

The Jury learned somewhat late in the investigation that AB 2130 requires all new emergency medical responders licensed on or after July 1, 2024, to also receive training to recognize and respond to victims of human trafficking.<sup>[31] [32]</sup> Well-trained medical responders are better positioned to identify human trafficking victims than are law enforcement officers because of their perceived neutrality and the fact that they deliver medical care, not citations.<sup>[33] [34] [35]</sup> The Jury was unable to verify compliance of local fire and emergency medical responders in the county, but acknowledges the importance of them being properly trained to recognize victims of human trafficking to potentially collaborate with local service providers.

## **Local Ordinances**

In addition to California laws, there are also local ordinances in effect at the County level and in each city within the county. These regulations focus on massage businesses and vary between cities and the County.

The codes for the Cities of Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley, and Watsonville are nearly identical. They each require massage businesses to be registered with the Chief of Police and require practitioners to be certified by the California Massage Therapy

Council (**CAMTC**).<sup>[36]</sup> The Chief of Police is responsible for enforcement and inspections in these jurisdictions. The County of Santa Cruz also requires certification with CAMTC, but in addition, restricts proximity to schools and playgrounds. The City of Capitola does not have any specific ordinances regarding massage businesses.<sup>[37] [38] [39] [40] [41]</sup>

## ***Why Are So Few Human Trafficking Cases Prosecuted?***

In interviews with representatives of the Sheriff's Office, municipal police departments, and the District Attorney's Office, the Jury was told that there are very few cases of human trafficking identified and fewer still that are prosecuted. There are several reasons for the low number of reported cases.

- Perpetrators force victims to commit crimes in their stead to shield themselves from prosecution. Therefore, victims are at risk of being prosecuted for these crimes.<sup>[42] [43]</sup> A common example is where a victim has been tasked with recruiting new victims and can herself be accused of trafficking.<sup>[44]</sup>
- Victims can be reluctant to report being trafficked because, unfortunately, they themselves have been sexually assaulted by police officers, or have heard from other victims of cases of such abuse. This was stated by both a law enforcement administrator and a trafficking survivor who has worked with multiple victims experiencing this abuse.<sup>[45] [46]</sup>
- Victims may come to the attention of police officers for incidents that are *the result* of being trafficked.<sup>[47]</sup> Law enforcement may respond to a case of domestic violence or a report of rape, both incidents that may have occurred because the person is being trafficked. If the victims are unwilling to declare being trafficked, an officer may cite them for prostitution, for example, an offense that will bar them from entry into any housing shelter in the future.<sup>[48]</sup>
- Victims can experience the Stockholm syndrome, where they identify with their captor and see that person as a protector or ,and so will not cooperate with police.

Interviews revealed that even when a victim of trafficking is identified and presented to the police, there are barriers to apprehending and prosecuting the trafficker.

- Victims rarely remain in the jurisdiction of local law enforcement. Most victims are moved frequently by their captors to avoid detection. Law enforcement may begin an investigation when a victim is cooperating but must close the case when the victim refuses to cooperate or leaves the area.<sup>[48]</sup> Investigations require law enforcement time and resources, and these cases may never result in arrest or prosecution. Even in the event of a completed investigation, the prosecution process can take years to complete.<sup>[13]</sup>

- Victims can initially be cooperative with law enforcement, but they frequently return to trafficking. This occurs because shelter and other long-term support services are often not available. Jurors were told that victims who succeed in escaping trafficking have returned to their captors multiple times before finally severing ties.

Law enforcement agrees that human trafficking is a problem and does occur in the County. However, from their point of view, few cases of trafficking come to their attention. Other crimes are more easily identified, investigated, and prosecuted. <sup>[49]</sup> <sup>[50]</sup>

It is of note that in Grand Jury interviews with law enforcement for this investigation, the Jury perceived that officers are sincere in their desire to address the human trafficking problem in our County, but acknowledge that the obstacles outlined here are difficult barriers to overcome. <sup>[51]</sup> <sup>[52]</sup> <sup>[53]</sup> Later in this report, suggestions will be offered to help in the successful prosecution of more cases.

## **Santa Cruz County - A Feeder for San Francisco Bay Area Trafficking**

Despite its relatively small size, the proximity of the County to the San Francisco Bay Area serves as a driver for recruitment and a transit point, connecting traffickers and victims with broader Bay Area networks. As mentioned above, major public events in the Bay Area are natural incentives for human trafficking. <sup>[54]</sup> <sup>[55]</sup>

New venues being built and upcoming large events may also result in increased human trafficking activities. <sup>[15]</sup> Planning for this growth has not been found in local agency documents.

## ***There is Room for Improvement***

In spite of obstacles to preventing, identifying, and prosecuting cases of human trafficking, there are areas where obstacles can be minimized or even overcome. Overcoming obstacles includes improving data collection, improving agency collaboration, enhancing prevention and awareness in school settings, among law enforcement agencies, and within the wider community, and complying with existing laws.

Inconsistent Data: Except for County Family & Child Services reporting requirements, the Jury found no evidence of a countywide effort to collect human trafficking data. Although the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) gathers data on a broad scale regarding the number of human trafficking cases and other crimes reported, the data does not align with statistics reported locally. The FBI data shows zero cases of human trafficking in Santa Cruz County over a ten year period, <sup>[56]</sup> yet a 2018 Santa Cruz County Sheriff Operations Training Bulletin reported 37 children, youth, and young adults were confirmed to have experienced CSEC in the Tri-County Region between January 1, 2015 to December 31, 2016 and 54 children, youth and young adults were

suspected to have experienced CSEC. That report also stated that 690 children, youth, and young adults were identified as at risk of experiencing CSEC in the Tri-County Region (Santa Cruz, San Benito, and Monterey counties) during the same time frame.<sup>[57] [58] [59]</sup>

There are currently four human trafficking cases being prosecuted in Santa Cruz County Superior Court, all related to a single trafficker.<sup>[60]</sup>

The Jury found that while local law enforcement agents interviewed relied on data from the Polaris Project, which sponsors the National Human Trafficking Hotline, there is no collaboration among the agencies responsible for oversight of vulnerable youth to share information. This includes data gathered by the County Sheriff staff from the Internet Crimes Against Children ([ICAC](#)), a national data-gathering agency. These data yield significant numbers of potential cases of exploitation monthly.<sup>[61] [62] [63] [64]</sup> Furthermore, the Tri-County collaboration has dwindled due to a lack of regularly scheduled interaction and informational sharing opportunities. Because human traffickers are very mobile, it is important that there be regularly scheduled information sharing.<sup>[65] [66]</sup>

Neither law enforcement, nor child welfare staff, nor community nonprofit organizations share data on this issue with each other on a regularly scheduled basis.

There is a chasm between the figures shared with the Grand Jury from law enforcement and local nonprofit organizations on incidents of human trafficking cases they have encountered.

- A District Attorney's Office representative reported only two cases over the past four years, neither of which was successfully prosecuted.
- Information from the Watsonville Police Department reported there were no recent cases of human trafficking. However, a follow-up document stated that numerous cases were being reported and investigated each year, including cases of child trafficking.<sup>[67]</sup>
- An administrator from the Santa Cruz Police Department was not able to cite the number of victims encountered since 2023, but guessed it's a single-digit number.
- A representative of the Sheriff's Office believes that there have only been two cases "in the last few months". The representative couldn't be more certain because data on crimes is categorized only by the Penal Code.

On the other hand, the number of potential trafficking cases, stated earlier in this report as provided by local service providers, is much higher.



A starting point to address the problem of human trafficking would be to have solid data on the number of cases collected countywide, as well as other data points on human trafficking activity in Santa Cruz County.

Lack of Local Community, Government, Law Enforcement, and Nonprofit Collaboration:

The Sheriff's Office and the District Attorney's Office collaborate with Arukah Project and Monarch Services in some cases. However, this appears to be the limit of collaboration in our county.

There is currently no countywide team of stakeholders joining forces that is meeting regularly to coordinate and facilitate training, prevention activities, support services, or interdiction efforts.<sup>[68]</sup> Such a group could collaborate to consolidate statistics and other data on human trafficking in Santa Cruz County. Quantifying the number of human trafficking cases, as well as collecting additional data on trafficking, would better enable the group to procure additional funding to address this problem. The CSEC multidisciplinary team and the tri-county steering committee's goals are different.

Multiple sources stated that the formation of law enforcement task forces specifically focused on human trafficking interdiction efforts would allow law enforcement to more directly and effectively address local human trafficking activity. Good data collected and consolidated by a human trafficking coalition could work toward procuring this funding.<sup>[69]</sup>

The District Attorney's Office did apply for grant funding, but was unsuccessful because it had only two cases that it had attempted to prosecute. If AB 379 is enacted into law, which appears likely, funding specifically designated for the District Attorney's Office to support vertical prosecution of human trafficking cases will become available.

The CSEC Program requires that a tri-county steering committee be established and hold quarterly meetings. The initial 35-member committee was chaired by the child welfare directors of the three counties. It included representatives from child welfare, juvenile probation, law enforcement, and other community partners.<sup>[70] [71]</sup> Meetings were disbanded in 2018 once protocols were established and the counties discontinued pooling CSEC funds for collaborative staff training. The child welfare directors from Santa Cruz, Monterey, and San Benito Counties continued to meet monthly, then quarterly, but have not held any meetings since May 2024.

Training for Business, School Staff, and Students: Local nonprofits specializing in human trafficking prevention, as discussed earlier, are available to provide low or no-cost training to students and staff, law enforcement, government staff, businesses, and the general public. Classes are led or supplemented by trafficking survivors. It was reported to Jurors that classes that include survivors are much more impactful, especially on students, than those led by non-survivors. Unfortunately, the Jury has also learned that these services are underutilized.<sup>[72]</sup>

AB 1227 requires trafficking awareness training in grades 7-12. It also requires school staff and counselor training. Despite mandates, some local school administrators and agency representatives interviewed were unaware of training resources or have failed to implement trafficking prevention education.

Multiple County Office of Education staff interviewed could not recall when they last received any training specifically on this topic, but believe it was likely covered briefly in their required online training.<sup>[73] [74]</sup> Staff working with high-risk student cases report that it has been at least five years since they had training that touched on human trafficking.<sup>[75] [76]</sup>

The Coalition to End Human Trafficking reports that it provides human trafficking prevention training by trafficking survivors to students at Juvenile Hall. This training has been very well received by these high-risk students.

Training of Law Enforcement: The Jury interviewed administrators and investigators in the District Attorney's Office, the Sheriff's Office, and Santa Cruz and Watsonville Police Departments regarding the depth and frequency of human trafficking training. The record of such training is spotty and, in some cases, can be improved.

- A representative from the District Attorney's office reports that there is a mandatory training requirement for human trafficking, but believes that it is not in-depth enough to enable officers to identify human trafficking victims.
- The Sheriff's Office is mandated by the State to provide sexual assault investigators with a weeklong training on a human trafficking component.<sup>[77]</sup> Documentation from the Sheriff's Office shows that some staff have attended three different human trafficking related trainings since 2024. It is unknown how widely these trainings were attended.
- An administrator from the Santa Cruz Police Department believes that human trafficking training is provided in the Peace Officer Standards and Training in the police academy, but doesn't believe that it is included in ongoing training.<sup>[78]</sup>
- The Watsonville Police Department received two hours of human trafficking training for detectives in 2019, but has no record of human trafficking training since that time.<sup>[79]</sup>

Some local nonprofits discussed earlier in this report are available to provide low or no-cost training on human trafficking to law enforcement upon request.

Convening of CSEC Meetings: SB 855 requires that recipients of CSEC funds convene regular multidisciplinary team meetings to review human trafficking cases focused on minors.

A document received from County Family & Child Services states that the CSEC multidisciplinary team last met in November 2023.<sup>[68]</sup> When no new cases were reported, monthly meetings were cancelled. However, a public records request revealed that documentation submitted by the County to the State in February 2025 declares that among the duties that the CSEC Coordinator completes are "monthly or emergency multidisciplinary meetings".<sup>[80] [81]</sup>



While these meetings are cancelled because there are no new cases to discuss, in comparison, the Monterey County multidisciplinary team meets monthly and has a caseload of 30-40 minors. When there are no new cases to discuss, their team meets anyway to discuss progress on existing cases.<sup>[82]</sup>

**Signage Compliance:** In spite of SB 1193 and AB 260, two laws requiring signage postings in a prominent place, a sample survey of all businesses across cities and unincorporated areas of Santa Cruz County found that only about 7% of businesses mandated to post signage are in compliance.

SB 1193 states that enforcement is typically handled by police or the Sheriff's Office, and the County's District Attorney representative conveyed that, as regards to signage requirements, their role is prosecution and not enforcement.<sup>[83] [84]</sup>

The Jury was told by representatives of law enforcement that they believe human trafficking signage is important in raising overall public awareness and potentially providing help to victims of trafficking.

	<b>Hotels/ Motels</b>	<b>Health Clinics</b>	<b>Alcohol Retailers</b>	<b>Hair/Nail Salons</b>	<b>Massage Businesses</b>	<b>Metros/ Airports</b>	<b>Total</b>	
	Posted/ Surveyed	Posted/ Surveyed	Posted/ Surveyed	Posted/ Surveyed	Posted/ Surveyed	Posted/ Surveyed	Posted	Surveyed
Santa Cruz	0/25	0/3	1/12	0/6	0/5	0/2	1	53
Scotts Valley	1/2	0/2	0/4	1/2	0/3	1/1	3	14
Watsonville	0/7	0/16	0/3	0/5	0/4	1/2	1	37
Capitola	2/2	1/2	0/2	0/5	0/3	0/0	3	14
Unincorporated*	0/3	0/1	0/13	0/6	1/2	1/1	2	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>3/39</b>	<b>1/24</b>	<b>1/34</b>	<b>1/24</b>	<b>1/17</b>	<b>3/6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>144</b>
Compliance %	7.69%	4.17%	2.94%	4.17%	5.88%	50.00%	6.94%	
* Includes Aptos, San Lorenzo Valley, Live Oak, and Soquel								

**Figure 3: Compliance with Human Trafficking Signage Requirement**

Source: Survey conducted by Santa Cruz County Grand Jury, Spring 2025<sup>[85]</sup>

Under SB 1193, farm labor contractors are also among those businesses required to post signs regarding human trafficking. In the case of farm labor contractors, the Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commission is responsible for enforcing the signage requirement.

In addition, a survey of farm labor contractor sites showed that where the required human trafficking signs were posted, they were not necessarily readily accessible to farm workers. Existing signs in both English and Spanish were faded, in small type, and generally in very poor condition.

The Jury also surveyed rest stops throughout the County and was unable to find any human trafficking signs. Rest stops are also required by SB 1193 to post human trafficking signs.

Human trafficking signs are required to list the telephone number and text message for the National Hotline. Two Jurors called this number multiple times and experienced a 30-minute wait for a callback. They also tried the text number listed on the sign. They were put into a continuous phone tree loop. A victim reaching out to a hotline is unlikely to be available for a callback and may be calling on a public phone. It is important for callers to get immediate help. Two local nonprofit organizations, Arukah Project and Monarch Services, each have a 24-hour hotline. Because these organizations are local and can provide real-time services, they could be added to local signs for a much better chance of receiving timely assistance. These organizations are equipped to provide emotional support as well as help locate immediate shelter and other basic needs.

Law Enforcement Compliance with Local Massage Business Ordinances: Local ordinances, including the County Code Section 5.08 regarding massage businesses, vary among jurisdictions. Consistency and coordination in enforcing and enhancing existing ordinances, or an overall County set of ordinances, could facilitate improved and consistent monitoring of human trafficking laws regarding massage businesses. One Sheriff's Office representative admitted that historically, Santa Cruz County has been more lax than other counties in licensing and inspection of massage businesses.

While most massage businesses are legitimate and do not engage in trafficking, local service providers are aware that some do. While conducting surveys for signage compliance, a few massage businesses visited by the Jury appeared to be suspicious. Regular inspections, enforcement of practitioner certification requirements, and compliance with signage requirements could result in curtailment of such activity.

## **Conclusion**

Human trafficking does occur in Santa Cruz County, but goes largely unrecognized and unreported. Lack of data regarding human trafficking activity, lack of collaboration among stakeholders, insufficient training, and lack of compliance with state and local laws leave us in the dark as to the prevalence of human trafficking. As a result, the issue is not being adequately addressed, and the trafficking problem will continue unabated and possibly increase, unless proactive measures are taken. The Jury is hopeful that recommendations in this report to address the scourge of human trafficking in our community will be seriously considered and adopted.

## Findings

- F1.** There is currently no consolidated data being collected on Santa Cruz County human trafficking cases. This causes an understatement of the problem and makes it difficult for stakeholders to obtain additional funding.
- F2.** The potential passage of AB 379 may provide grants for the District Attorney's Office for the prosecution of traffickers and grants for community-based organizations for direct services and victim outreach. This could provide the resources necessary to ultimately reduce human trafficking and reduce the likelihood of victims returning to trafficking.
- F3.** The tri-county CSEC steering committee for the prevention of human trafficking has not met for a full year as of the publication of this report. Therefore, there is no active body that could potentially monitor trafficking cases across the tri-county area.
- F4.** The County Family & Child Services CSEC-required monthly multidisciplinary team meetings have not been held since November 2023, despite biennial reporting otherwise to the State Department of Social Services. Therefore, known cases of human trafficking have not been properly overseen.
- F5.** Staff and administration of the County Office of Education report they are not adequately trained and do not receive regular training regarding human trafficking as required by AB 1227. This is in spite of the fact that free training is available from local providers that could bring COE into compliance if enforced. This deficiency can lead to a failure in the staff's ability to identify cases of trafficking.
- F6.** Very few businesses in Santa Cruz County are in compliance with SB 1193 signage requirements. This results in the reduction of community awareness of the problem and the likelihood that trafficking victims will be able to reach out for help.
- F7.** Existing human trafficking signs at farm worker contractor sites are not readily accessible to farm workers and are in poor condition. This can result in farm workers being unaware of available resources and an inability to reach out for help.
- F8.** The mix of County and local municipal ordinances regarding the licensing and inspection of massage businesses varies, possibly causing confusion and inconsistent enforcement of existing regulations.
- F9.** Annual inspections are required of massage businesses in jurisdictions with massage business ordinances, but inspections are generally not being conducted. This can result in undetected human trafficking activity.
- F10.** Calls to the National Human Trafficking Hotline on existing signs have unacceptably long wait times and can result in a lost opportunity to assist human trafficking victims.
- F11.** Local nonprofit organizations have 24/7 hotline numbers that are staffed, and calls can be answered immediately or within minutes, greatly increasing the likelihood of contacting victims and providing assistance in real time.

- F12.** There has been a lack of human trafficking presentations to law enforcement. Local law enforcement jurisdictions could request the no-cost training that is available from local human trafficking service providers. This can lead to officers learning to identify human trafficking victims and reduce further victim trauma.
- F13.** Law enforcement task forces focused solely on human trafficking are very effective methods of detecting and preventing human trafficking activities. Such task forces could increase the rate of interdiction and the successful prosecution of human trafficking cases.

## **Recommendations**

- R1.** The Department of Human Services should designate a qualified staff member to take the lead in forming a countywide human trafficking coalition, including the District Attorney and the Sheriff's Office. Members should include stakeholders discussed in this report who are involved in the prevention and interdiction of human trafficking. The focus should include the consolidation of human trafficking data and the procurement of additional funds, potentially to fund law enforcement task forces. This should be completed by December 31, 2025. (F1,F2,F13)
- R2.** The Program Manager of Family & Child Services should coordinate with Monterey and San Benito County peers for the purpose of reconvening the tri-county Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children steering committee. This team would meet regularly to review and track intercounty human trafficking cases and activity in our region and participate in regional prevention activities. This should be completed by December 31, 2025. (F3)
- R3.** The Program Manager of County Family & Child Services should resume and maintain monthly multidisciplinary team meetings, required as a condition of receiving Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children funding, to review ongoing human trafficking cases and discuss other potential cases involving high-risk youth. This should commence by August 31, 2025. (F4)
- R4.** Each law enforcement agency in Santa Cruz County, including the Sheriff's Office, Santa Cruz Police Department, Scotts Valley Police Department, Capitola Police Department, and Watsonville Police Department, should require law enforcement officers to receive an annual human trafficking awareness training, preferably led by human trafficking survivors. This should commence by December 31, 2025. (F12)
- R5.** The County Office of Education should come into compliance with AB 1227, providing human trafficking-related training, led by survivors, to students and staff as required. This should be completed by February 28, 2026. (F5)
- R6.** Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors should adopt an umbrella countywide ordinance requiring human trafficking signage currently mandated by the State to be part of all existing permitting and licensing procedures for affected businesses. This should be completed by June 30, 2026. (F6)

- R7.** Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors should require that county-specific human trafficking awareness and support signs include at least one 24/7 local hotline number, and staff should collaborate with local non-profits providing support to human trafficking victims to develop an effective sign for countywide posting and distribution. This should be completed by June 30, 2026. (F10, F11)
- R8.** The Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commissioner should come into compliance with SB 1193 by ensuring that existing human trafficking signs are refreshed annually. In addition, it should require all farm labor contractors to include the SB 1193 sign in employee handbooks for easy accessibility. A review for compliance should be done on an annual basis. This should commence by September 30, 2025. (F7)
- R9.** Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors should adopt a countywide ordinance regulating the licensing, employee certification, and inspection requirements for massage businesses consistent with California Massage Therapy Council certification and licensing requirements. This should be completed by June 30, 2026. (F8)
- R10.** Local law enforcement agencies, including the Sheriff's Office, Santa Cruz Police Department, Scotts Valley Police Department, Capitola Police Department, and Watsonville Police Department, should enforce massage business licensing, certification, and inspection requirements. This should include compliance with SB 1193 signage requirements. Enforcement of existing ordinances should commence by September 30, 2025. However, if/when the Board of Supervisors agrees to the Jury's recommendation to adopt a countywide ordinance, law enforcement should come into compliance with this new ordinance within 30 days of adoption. (F9)

## Required Responses

<i><b>Respondent</b></i>	<i><b>Findings</b></i>	<i><b>Recommendations</b></i>	<i><b>Respond Within/ Respond By</b></i>
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors	F1, F2, F3, F4, F6, F7, F8, F10, F11, F13	R1, R2, R3, R6, R7, R8, R9	90 Days / September 29, 2025
Santa Cruz County Sheriff	F1, F2, F6, F9, F12, F13	R1, R4, R6, R10	60 Days / August 29, 2025
County Superintendent of Schools	F5	R5	60 Days / August 29, 2025
Santa Cruz County District Attorney	F1, F2, F13	R1	60 Days / August 29, 2025

## Invited Responses

<i><b>Respondent</b></i>	<i><b>Findings</b></i>	<i><b>Recommendations</b></i>	<i><b>Respond Within/ Respond By</b></i>
Program Manager, County Family & Child Services	F1, F2, F3, F4, F13	R1, R2, R3	60 Days / August 29, 2025
Director, Santa Cruz County Human Services Department	F1, F2, F3, F4, F13	R1, R2, R3	60 Days / August 29, 2025
Santa Cruz County Agricultural Commissioner	F7	R8	60 Days / August 29, 2025
Police Chief, City of Santa Cruz	F6, F9, F12	R4, R6, R10	60 Days / August 29, 2025
Police Chief, City of Scotts Valley	F6, F9, F12	R4, R6, R10	60 Days / August 29, 2025
Police Chief, City of Watsonville	F6, F9, F12	R4, R6, R10	60 Days / August 29, 2025
Police Chief, City of Capitola	F6, F9, F12	R4, R6, R10	60 Days / August 29, 2025
Director, Arukah Project	F10, F11	R7	60 Days / August 29, 2025
Chief Executive Officer, Monarch Services	F10, F11	R7	60 Days / August 29, 2025

## Definitions

- **CAMTC:** California Massage Therapy Council
- **COE:** County Office of Education
- **CSEC:** Commercially Sexually Exploited Children
- **NIJ:** National Institute of Justice

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## **Site Visits**

Canvassing of all five County Supervisorial Districts for SB 1193 signage compliance.

Visited public events that included Farmworker Reality Tours and Rising at the Rio.

May 15, 2025 Monterey County Human Trafficking Symposium.