Despite heightened publicity about human trafficking, people on the whole are still disturbingly clueless when it comes to understanding exactly what trafficking is, how traffickers operate, who is impacted by trafficking, and what constitutes an effective response. According to the most conservative estimates, 21 million people are currently enslaved across the globe. 33% of these victims are children, 100 to 300,000 of whom are in the United States. And with an annual income of 150 billion dollars (up from 32 billion in 2009), human trafficking is unquestionably the fastest growing criminal industry in the world.

So what accounts for the fact that trafficking in persons has become such a growth industry? The major reason is the internet, because all aspects of trafficking - from recruitment to grooming to marketing and sales - that once took place on the street, have now taken to the web. And technology gives traffickers a much wider reach, a whole smorgasbord of marketing tools, and a shield of anonymity and unaccountability never possible before. Criminal activity that once relied on the sale of drugs or weapons has now shifted to the sale of people. Those for whom money matters more than anything else, have figured out that a gun or drugs can only be sold once, but a person can be sold 20/30/40 times/day.

So Why should we care -- because, no matter where you live, human trafficking is happening in your backyard. Here in NC, we have consistently ranked among the Top 10 states for human trafficking (currently #7).

But we should also care because we’ve contributed to the root causes of human trafficking (by insisting on cheap goods/services, by keeping our blinders on). And we should care because human trafficking is not only a violation of our most fundamental human rights, it’s a violation of the pattern for right relationships...

So what is human trafficking? According to the Official UN definition:

**Human Trafficking occurs when a person is recruited, harbored, transported, obtained, or maintained by means of force, fraud, threats, or coercion, for purposes of involuntary labor, debt bondage, or sexual services.**

That’s a good comprehensive textbook definition. At the risk of oversimplifying, I would say that human trafficking is modern slavery. It’s when someone is forced to work without the freedom to leave. And in the United States, we’re talking mainly about **forced labor and sex trafficking.**

Now, just to clarify, many people confuse human trafficking with human smuggling. They’re not the same thing. Human smuggling involves the attempt to bring someone into a country in violation of immigration or other laws. Human trafficking is the attempt to turn a person into a commodity. It does not require movement or transport across borders. It’s the exploitation that makes it a trafficking situation.

So, let’s look at the two faces of trafficking: (we’ll start with forced labor)
**Forced labor** is when someone is compelled to work by means of force, deception, psychological coercion, or abuse of the legal process. Try to imagine a scenario (in agriculture or domestic work, manufacturing or construction, hotels or restaurants) in which someone is **fraudulently** recruited to work - and then is forced to work under inhumane conditions, with little or no compensation, and isn’t free to walk away. One way traffickers keep people in this kind of servitude is a form of coercion known as **debt bondage** - where someone is tricked or enticed into assuming an initial debt - during the recruitment process - and then later on that’s exploited. *For example:* A person is told about a short-term job that pays a really good wage, but they can’t afford the cost of transportation to the work site or the cost of their uniform. The employer offers to cover the cost and deduct it from the first pay-check. When they get in the van or on the bus, their IDs and cell phones are taken, and they’re transported to a location that can’t be traced, and everything they use goes on their tab (a bar of soap $20, a bottle of water $25) so the debt quickly exceeds the amount they can earn.

Because North Carolina is, by far, the state with the largest number of agricultural guest workers, we are a prime spot for potential labor trafficking. Guest workers are people who are brought into the country with H-2A visas. They are not illegal immigrants. They are here lawfully and their presence is sanctioned by our government, but our current guest worker programs gives little or no protection to prevent them from becoming modern day slaves. But this type of trafficking doesn’t just happen to foreign nationals, It happens to US citizens.

When someone’s labor is exploited like this, the fact that they agreed to work for the employer in the first place is legally irrelevent. Both legally, and in fact, the employer is a trafficker, and the “employee” is a trafficking victim. Female victims of forced or bonded labor are often sexually exploited as well.

And that serves as a segue to **Sex Trafficking**...

**Sex trafficking** is the forcing or entrapping of people into the commercial sex trade, which includes prostitution, stripping, forced marriages, and all forms of pornography. When an adult engages in any of these activities because they’ve been forced or threatened or coerced, that person is a victim of sex trafficking. Even if an adult initially consents to participate in prostitution, but then is kept in the sex trade by any kind of coercion, he or she is legally considered a trafficking victim. In other words, legally speaking, a person’s initial consent doesn’t let the trafficker off the hook. And considering that (according to Polaris) 90% of all prostitution is sex trafficking, the case could be made that consent is always a gray area.

It’s much less gray when it comes to the trafficking of children. According to UNICEF, over 2 million minors are subjected to prostitution in the global sex market. The average age a child is trafficked into the commercial sex trade is 10-13 for boys and 12-14 for girls. Up until 6 yrs. ago, minors who were caught selling sex were funneled through the justice system as criminals. In 2011 the ABA began urging that minors caught in the commercial sex trade should not be prosecuted as criminals, and since then, most states have passed some type of “Safe Harbor” legislation. NC’s Safe Harbor Law says: **Anytime a person younger than 18 is involved in a commercial sex act, that person - by law - is a victim of trafficking, and proving force, fraud, or coercion is not necessary.**
There are no exceptions to this rule. Nothing can justify the sexual exploitation of minors. And whether the consequences are physical or psychological trauma, long-term behavioral issues, drug addiction, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, or death, because it’s happening on such a large scale, the impacts on our society as a whole are devastating.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimates that between 100 and 300,000 children are trafficked yearly on our soil. Using the lowest estimates, roughly 240 purchases of a minor for commercial sex occur each day in NC.

These are the broad brushstrokes of what we mean when we talk about “human trafficking” - and it can range from one person coercing another to a large organized crime ring.

How are people lured into what’s called, in trafficking circles, “the life”? Traffickers are pros when it comes to picking out the best targets. People who are struggling economically, those who are trying to escape a bad domestic situation, youth in foster care or social services, anyone on the wrong side of the justice system, or those who simply don’t fit in. But don’t let that fool you into thinking that only people who are down and out, or kids who play hooky from school, are at risk. They may be the easy targets, but traffickers are adroit when it comes to sizing up, luring, and recruiting their victims. They’re unbelievably patient when it comes to seasoning and grooming them. And they are completely mercenary when it comes to taking control of their lives and “turning them out”.

As hard as it is to hear the stories of children who were sold to traffickers by their own mother or by another family member, the disturbing fact is that there are more and more stories of a different kind, like the story of Brianna in the film you just watched. And with the internet and sites like Backpage.com, traffickers now have so many tools at their disposal it makes you dizzy. The National Report on Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking reports an 800% increase in the number of minors that were prostituted with the aid of technology over the last 2 years. Online classifieds give traffickers a degree of anonymity and accessibility never possible before, and the frightening thing is... most children and youth feel completely “at home” in cyber-space.

So, once a person has been trafficked, what’s to stop them from leaving?
As we’ve learned, victims are usually stripped of their personal identification and means of communication. Foreign nationals may not speak English or even know where they are. Traffickers also know that - to gain control over their victims - they have to maintain a climate of fear at all times. They can do this by brutalizing victims in front of each other, or by threatening to harm someone the victim cares about. A Las Vegas dancer who was trafficked to Japan was kept in check for 5 years because traffickers knew where her 3 year old daughter was, and they reminded her what would happen if she failed to be compliant. A 10 year old girl was entrapped by pornographers because they told her they would kill her whole family if she refused to cooperate. The bottom line is: trafficked people know they have a lot to lose by upsetting their captors.
Traffickers can also gain cooperation from their victims by getting them hooked on drugs. Once victims become addicts, they’re completely stuck. Traffickers also commonly drug their victims, take pictures of them performing sex, and then use those pictures as blackmail. All of these things can help explain why human trafficking victims may not try to escape - even when the coast is clear.

I know this is a difficult subject to talk about and it’s even more difficult to tackle because of the sheer enormity and the complexity of the problem. So now I want to share some of the things that are being done to address this issue and what you can do to join the fight against human trafficking.

The framework that’s used to combat human trafficking around the world is a paradigm known as The 3Ps: PREVENTION, PROTECTION, & PROSECUTION. We would suggest adding a 4th P: PARTNERSHIP. Because effective partnerships among all the entities engaged in the fight against human trafficking is the key to achieving progress.

In 2000 the United Nations first defined Human Trafficking and introduced an anti-trafficking protocol that’s become the template for governments around the world, including ours. That same year, the State Department created the Trafficking in Persons Office (TIP for short). The TIP office has been working since then to get anti-trafficking laws on the books in all 50 states and to make sure that sentences and penalties are strict enough to deter traffickers and to reflect the heinous nature of these crimes. TIP has also led the way in getting laws enacted laws that protect victims from being criminalized and provide non-punitive long-term services for victims.

Two of the national leaders in the fight to end human trafficking are The Polaris Project and Shared Hope International. Polaris runs both the National Human Trafficking Resource Center and the National Human Trafficking Hotline - 888-373-7888. Along with Shared Hope, they’re the leaders in collecting data and providing training for everyone from law enforcement, to the FBI, to service providers, to volunteers like us. They are also the organizers of the annual “National Day of Johns”, which is the associated with the biggest destination spot for human trafficking on the entire planet, the Super Bowl.

Here in North Carolina some of the leading anti-trafficking organizations are the NC Human Trafficking Commission, North Carolina Stop Human Trafficking (NCSHT), and the North Carolina Coalition Against Human Trafficking (NCCAHT), which is responsible for the eleven Rapid Response Teams across the state that stand ready to respond to any alert about an active trafficking situation.

The Human Trafficking Roundtable of the New Hope Presbytery has collaborated with several local organizations, including:

- PATH-NC (Partners Against Trafficking Humans in NC)
- Project FIGHT (the human trafficking arm of the Salvation Army)
- Shared Hope International www.sharedhope.org
We are also working to foster relationships with two safe houses for trafficking survivors, and both of them are firsts.

~ **Hope House** (located in the vicinity of Charlotte) was the first safe house in the country exclusively for victims of child sex trafficking. Operated by On Eagles Wings Ministries, Hope House not only provides shelter, educational, and vocational opportunities for victims, they seek to prevent girls from falling victim to sex trafficking, offer assistance to those still trapped, and restore those that have survived by offering hope, empowerment, and a brighter future. We focus on prevention, outreach, aftercare, and empowerment for middle and high school age youth. 
Hope House:  www.oneagleswingsministries.org

~ **Anchor House** (located in the vicinity of Greenville NC) is the first safe house in the country for boys under 18 who are coming out of trafficking. Anchor House, a program of Restore One, is committed to providing residential care that is trauma sensitive, holistic and Christ-centered specifically to domestic minor sex trafficked and commercial sexually exploited males to overcome difficulties and live free, fruitful and fulfilled lives. 
Anchor House:  www.restoreonelife.org/the-anchor-house-1

If you suspect that someone is a victim of Human Trafficking, call the 24-hour hotline and report your suspicions: 888-373-7888.