

# La Nueva Voz

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## Human trafficking expert calls prostitutes 'victims,' says myths must be eliminated and laws changed

An authority in human trafficking, or modern day slavery, who believes that prostituted women are actually the victims, says chipping away at the problem will require eliminating the myths, challenging the pimping "culture" and changing the laws.

Julian Sher, an award-winning investigative journalist, television writer and director and the author of six books, told the Southwest Conference Against Trafficking at Pomona's Fairplex Conference Center last week that more states are adopting laws in the area of human trafficking.

He was the keynote speaker for the opening session of a three-day



Julian Sher

conference sponsored by the National Women's Coalition against Violence and Exploitation.

Sher, author of "Somebody's

Daughter – the hidden story of America's prostituted children and the battle to save them," told the group of about 200 that the first myth is that human trafficking is a foreign problem.

"Ninety-five percent of girls being trafficked on the street are American girls," he said, and Los Angeles and San Diego are among the nation's highest trafficking areas. "These are our daughters."

He added that the average age of a girl first becoming involved in trafficking is 14. And, while there are no figures for how many children are involved, he said there are some 1.7 million runaways on the

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street.

Another myth is that prostitution is a victimless crime and that, while the movie "Pretty Woman" played a role in changing attitudes, he said the true face of prostitution often is bloodied and bruised.

"Every major serial killer we have known has targeted women on the streets and prostituted women, starting from Jack the Ripper up to today," Sher said, pointing out that 80 percent of prostitutes have been threatened or assaulted, and more than two thirds have been raped. And 46 percent have attempted suicide, he said.

"A study done by the American Journal of Epidemiology said that the mortality rate on prostituted women is 200 times greater . . . than

the average population," he said.

"You'd be safer enlisting in the Army and going to Afghanistan than you would enlisting with a pimp in San Bernardino in terms of your mortality."

"So it is not a victimless crime," Sher said.

The third myth, he said, is it is "their choice."

In fact, he said, 93 percent of the girls in a shelter in Dallas had been sexually abused and half of them had ties to street gangs.

"It's not a choice when you've got to survive," he said. "No girl dreams of growing up and becoming a prostitute."

Sher said there is an "unequal triangle" of the prostitute, the seller and the buyer.

girls.

"It means that the johns overwhelmingly are getting off scot-free," Sher said, adding that in a nine-year period of arrests for solicitation no "johns" or "tricks" were convicted under federal trafficking laws.

Sher said that pimps come in "all colors and sizes," and that in Maryland even a police officer was arrested for pimping.

Part of the problem in the past has been the way law enforcement has addressed the issue, adding that some 20,000 people are on probation in Los Angeles — one of the largest probation populations in the country.

Los Angeles today has changed the way to approach prostitution in which probation officers look for possible signs of prostitution among their probationers.

"They look for victims, not arrests," he said.

And in Oakland, 179 traffickers were convicted between 2006 and 2011. In Dallas, a new "high risk victims unit" has been established in which every police officer now looks for runaways — and the program is being copied around the country.

Dallas now convicts 90 percent of their cases against pimps, he said, in what is one of the highest success rates nationwide.

In Las Vegas, where 1,500 underage girls were arrested, authorities

learned 60 percent were not from Las Vegas, prompting one judge to initiate a "prostituted youth court."

"In fact there's a huge traffic pipeline from California," he said.

Sher said the judge today is trying to set up a supervised shelter and treat the girls as victims.

In the area of changing the laws regarding human trafficking, Sher said "things are definitely getting better but there's a long way to go."

Michelle Bart, president and co-founder of the National Women's Coalition against Violence and Exploitation, said the organization believes that "one child missing is one too many, one person exploited is one too many, and any kind of violence toward another human being is one too many."

She said the purpose of the conference was to "educate, inspire and move you to take action against trafficking and exploitation. No one organization, police force or individual can fight this war. This is an epidemic in our country . . . (and is) modern day slavery."

Participants at the conference included law enforcement, first responders, representatives of the faith-based community, restoration, shelter and aftercare and others.

The National Women's Coalition against Violence and Exploitation is a national volunteer operated nonprofit organization working to inform, educate and prevent violence and exploitation against women and children both nationally and internationally.



Michelle Bart

"The problem is the girls get all the pain and the punishment," he said, citing figures that perhaps one man typically is arrested per six