

## Child sex trafficking: Imperfect data doesn't diminish the crime in our midst

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**Guest Columnist** 

## By Sam Adams

The Oregonian recently published an irresponsible and misleading article, ("Story of 'Pornland' is a myth," Jan. 11), an article that minimizes the gravity of Portland's human trafficking problem and unfortunately emboldens pimps and johns.



Michael Lloyd/The Oregonian

Mayor Sam Adams

Portland didn't choose the label "Pornland," but to suggest that human trafficking here is a myth is a dangerous deception. The data we do have suggests it's a significant problem: Portland police see an average of two cases of child sex trafficking each week, according to the estimate of a veteran officer on the Portland Police Bureau's sex crimes unit.

But human sex-trafficking crimes are hard to track, as noted by Portland Police Bureau Sgt. Mike Geiger during last November's press conference on the topic. The data are hard to validate because the victims, mostly young girls, fear for their lives if they do approach authorities or call for help. That imperfect data

doesn't justify inaction. If anything, it justifies a redoubling of our efforts, making it easier and safer for victims to get help and law enforcement to take down criminals.

Domestic violence provides a useful analogy. Authorities and newspapers once discounted the true scope of domestic violence in our society. Victims rarely spoke out or called for help. They feared retribution. They feared for their lives. Now the term is understood. Hotlines and shelters care for victims. Police know what to look for.

With human trafficking, we're getting better at fighting the crime. We've found that human trafficking, much like domestic violence, is hard to study. Girls in the industry often view a pimp as their boyfriend. Police find out about cases from reports about runaways, curfew violations, drug busts and calls from concerned friends. What starts out as a shoplifting arrest may, with diligent and patient investigation, end up a human trafficking investigation.

The crime was also once more visible. Biking down 82nd Avenue, you could see a thriving sex trade business, with girls walking the city streets and escort businesses marketing them. The Police Bureau launched a saturated enforcement effort. As a result, the prostitution industry is largely underground and online. Sadly, many girls are being trafficked up and down the West Coast, from Vancouver, B.C., to Portland to Las Vegas to California.

Lawmakers such as Sen. Ron Wyden, Multnomah County Commissioner Diane McKeel and my City Hall colleague Commissioner Dan Saltzman; organizations such as Janus Youth Services; and police officers and outreach workers across the city have helped us recognize we need to do even more. Police officers have gotten better at recognizing the signs and following the clues. We've teamed up with the Sexual Assault Resource Center, Multnomah County Human Services and the Innocence Lost federal task force.

We're trying to stop johns and pimps. Instead of casting doubt on the severity of a truly heinous crime, The Oregonian has the opportunity to be part of the solution. Help victims, not pimps.

Sam Adams is mayor of Portland.

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