

Talking Through the Numbers – Episode 4

Sex trafficking and exploitation in Minnesota: What it is and what's working to help victims

Through interviews with researchers, community leaders, and service providers, Wilder Research Executive Director Paul Mattessich examines pressing issues facing our communities today to offer insight beyond the numbers.

This episode of Talking Through the Numbers is available online at <https://www.wilder.org/featured-media/major-minnesota-trends>

Transcript

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Paul Mattessich: Welcome. Welcome to Talking Through the Numbers, a podcast produced by Wilder Research. Our goal is to provide insight on significant issues. We want to combine sound information with expert knowledge to enrich our understanding of things that affect our communities and our world.

I am Paul Mattessich, executive director of Wilder Research. Today's topic is sex trafficking and exploitation. Thanks to our guests we have two experts with us today. The first is Laura Sutherland. Laura is the Safe Harbor regional navigator for southeastern Minnesota, holding that position since it was created in 2014.

She has trained over 10,000 service providers on sex trafficking, exploitation, and Safe Harbor. In addition, she has provided prevention education to thousands of middle and high school students on these topics. She chairs the Olmsted County human trafficking task force. Previously, she served as an assistant attorney general for the Wisconsin Department of Justice.

Our second guest and expert, Laura Schauben. She has been with Wilder Research for 14 years. She co-leads the evaluation of Safe Harbor, Minnesota's statewide initiative to address commercial sexual exploitation. She also has lived experience as a survivor of child sex trafficking. Her areas of interest include evaluation of programs seeking to prevent or address violence, mental health, and behavioral health concerns as well as programs promoting economic development and equity.

Thank you and welcome. Today's topic is sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. Laura and Laura, could you briefly explain what we mean by sex trafficking and sexual exploitation? For purposes of our discussion today how would you define that?

Laura Schauben: Well, the terms are often used interchangeably but they're different. Sexual exploitation is the exchange of sex for money or something of value such as housing. Sex trafficking is when that money or something of value goes to a third-party. They both fall under the umbrella of commercial sexual exploitation.

Laura Sutherland: I think an example that we see a lot in our work with our clients in terms of sexual exploitation is just what Laura was mentioning, that sex for a safe place to stay on any given night. As we all know, unfortunately, we have far too much homelessness here in Minnesota and sometimes that warm bed and place to stay is pretty important.

Paul Mattessich: Now Minnesota has Safe Harbor, which is an initiative program. What is that doing related to this?

Laura Sutherland: Safe Harbor is Minnesota's statewide umbrella program for addressing both exploitation and trafficking in our state. We're very fortunate our legislature has appropriated millions of dollars for services for victims and survivors ranging from housing to legal services.

Laura Schauben: It also included the decriminalization of being sex trafficked for youth. It used to be that if somebody was prostituting a youth they would be in trouble under the law for exploiting a minor but then the minor would also be in trouble under the law for "prostitution." What the law did was say youth are youth and that that's not a criminal act, that's an act of victimization.

Paul Mattessich: Sure. Now you used the word prostitution. How does that fit into our topic today? Is it the same? Different? Overlap?

Laura Sutherland: I think that's a great question. I think for a lot of folks when they hear that word prostitute they think of someone who is perhaps willingly engaging in this. Sometimes maybe a working girl. But what we know is that that is very, very rare. That for most folks it absolutely is a matter of exploitation or trafficking. So here in Minnesota we've really shifted that paradigm, that we're not using that prostitution language anymore, because we know better.

Paul Mattessich: Sure. Okay. Speaking of what we know, what do we know about sex trafficking and exploitation? Or not know about how big a problem this is in Minnesota.

Laura Schauben: We don't know very much at all about its prevalence, about how many people it's happened to, for a number of reasons. Because it's an act that's intentionally hidden on the part of the trafficker and because for the victims they are often groomed in a way that they believe that the person who is hurting them is in love with them or that it's their fault or in some way that they're the cause of the problem.

And for other cases, like we heard in the research, in one region where it was just considered "normal" for youth to exchange sex for transportation. There's some sort of norm around it that prevents the youth from knowing that it's a problem. It's hard to count because it's hidden for a number of different reasons.

Paul Mattessich: It's hard for everybody in a sense to identify and therefore it's hard to count and get any good sound data on the prevalence you're saying. Sure. Laura Sutherland?

Laura Sutherland: That said, thanks to Wilder and Safe Harbor we are starting to collect some data on that. For the region that I work in, southeastern Minnesota, since Safe Harbor has been implemented we have worked with over 300 victims of exploitation or trafficking. Certainly statewide I think that's well over a thousand victims?

Laura Schauben: Yes. As of March 2017, it was 1,500 victims. We do have a count of the number of people served and we do know that it happens across the state and to people of all races and of all genders and of all incomes. Yeah. We know that piece of it.

Paul Mattessich: Laura Sutherland, you're representing southeast ... You mentioned southeastern Minnesota. How much of the state is that? How many counties? How many people?

Laura Sutherland: 12 counties.

Paul Mattessich: 12 counties?

Laura Sutherland: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That would include Rochester...

Paul Mattessich: Includes Rochester.

Laura Sutherland: Olmsted County but any others as well.

Paul Mattessich: Okay. 12 of the 87 counties. Okay. You both started to talk a little bit about numbers, trends. How would you characterize the major trends and the major issues that you're seeing?

Laura Sutherland: Well, one of the trends that is very hopeful to us and that we're excited about is that we are seeing more and more service providers actually begin to assess whether a person is at-risk for either exploitation or trafficking. Those service providers range from law enforcement to social workers to probation officers to health care professionals.

Paul Mattessich: Okay. The various systems are getting involved and the staff in those systems are starting to understand this better and to try to...

Laura Sutherland: Definitely. Definitely. We've seen a huge shift since Safe Harbor was implemented in 2014 to now. One specific example of that I can offer is St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester has actually implemented a formal algorithm to assess each person that comes into the emergency room for whether they might be at risk for this. That has absolutely led to increased identification of victims and, importantly, connecting them with the services that they need for once they leave the hospital.

Paul Mattessich: That's impressive. Did they develop that on their own or did they get it from somewhere else?

Laura Sutherland: That was an effort internal at Mayo, but we're very pleased that they reached out to us at Safe Harbor too for our input in that.

Paul Mattessich: Laura Schauben, are there implications that you've seen as a result of the trends or the kinds of things that Laura Sutherland is talking about?

Laura Schauben: Yeah. Through the evaluation we've seen an increase in people's awareness around commercial sexual exploitation. We've heard qualitatively about incidents where hotels or schools have been trained and then more youth or young adults have been identified. We've seen both an increase in training and then awareness and then identification, which is really ideally how it's been setup.

Paul Mattessich: Yeah. Just to clarify, Laura Sutherland was mentioning that the formal system was becoming aware. When you say people's awareness are you talking about the general public or the members of the service providers or both? Who do you mean?

Laura Schauben: I think both. I mean, definitely service providers but we've seen it...

Paul Mattessich: But awareness is going up among all of them?

Laura Schauben: ...In the general public as well. I had written a blog. Just as a personal example, I had written a blog a year or so ago about Safe Harbor and at the end of it I came out as a survivor. Several people from my daughter's school then went to the school ... In my case, it was a teacher who proved very helpful to me. Went to the school and got training for the school and then they also went to the St. Paul Public School District and are working with the Safe Harbor navigator for Ramsey County to get training for the school as well. You get to see these really lovely connections of awareness leading to people really wanting to do something and then something being done.

Paul Mattessich: Okay. It sounds like there's some positive momentum moving towards solutions. What is working in efforts to address sex trafficking and sexual exploitation? What could you point to as effective?

Laura Sutherland: Well, I think there's a number of things that are working. We're very grateful of course for our law enforcement partners that are so critical to address this issue. We have many law enforcement agencies across the state who are proactive in doing undercover operations to identify both the buyers, purchasers, as well as the traffickers.

We also have a vigorous law enforcement response at the state level by the Bureau of Criminal Apprehension to provide additional resources to local law enforcement agencies on this. That's an important element of our overall response to trafficking and exploitation, one of the important elements.

Paul Mattessich: Laura Schauben, anything you would add to that?

Laura Schauben: I would just go back to the piece about decriminalization and changing the framework to think about people who are being sexually exploited or trafficked as victims. I think that has been a large change and a really important one.

Then I would add also again to that idea of collaboration, that really important relationships are being built and trust is being built. Part of it is getting the systems to work together so you can have a seamless continuum of services and part of what we saw in the beginning was that some services were hesitant to refer to other services because they felt very protective of their youth and young adults. Those collaborations are both improving services but also improving referrals.

Paul Mattessich: Building trust it sounds like is important both for the formal system as well as for the general public. Do we know anything about what helps to build trust?

Laura Sutherland: I think one thing that we have seen is very impactful is when we can work directly with survivors to help message out the importance of these issues of exploitation and trafficking. It has taken a while frankly in Safe Harbor to get to the point where we are working with survivors who are far enough along in their own path that they want to be speaking publicly and training providers.

We're starting to see that now more and more. I think that honestly that does kind of create trust because it takes so much courage and vulnerability of a survivor to be willing to share their story. When a professional hears that not just from a state bureaucrat but from someone who has actually experienced it it's like, "Oh my goodness. I never thought of that."

Paul Mattessich: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Laura Sutherland: Then especially if that survivor is willing to state where there were some missed opportunities along the way. Perhaps with probation or law enforcement or hospital staff. That opens everyone's eyes. I think we're all working with the same understanding that we're all well-intentioned in this and wanting to move our state forward. The more we can be working together with survivors as well as our providers and the community I think trust just naturally builds over time.

Paul Mattessich: Sure. Do you do a lot of debriefing with survivors to figure out where in the chain or the pipeline things could have been improved?

Laura Sutherland: Yes. In our trainings that we do with survivors that is a whole part of their presentation to identify some of those places. All of this I don't think is intuitive. Unless we have people point out to us where the gaps are and where things could have been done differently and unless we have the humility to recognize that we're not going to move forward. Again, when everybody feels safer to share because of the decriminalization in part we're just going to do a much better job I think as a state overall.

Laura Schauben: I think the other advantage of including survivors is that they then provide role models. There's a real shortage of role models for people who have been victimized by commercial sexual exploitation. In part, because there's so much shame around it. Not deserved shame but it's just how it feels. That's another great piece of that is you end up with public role models.

Laura Sutherland: I just want to echo that for a moment. We had an example of a survivor that we've been working with in Olmsted County who shared in the media and to our county board of commissioners and we had a bump up in calls from victim survivors after that saying, "Oh my goodness. I never knew there was help. I can't believe she had the courage to do that. I now want to step forward too and even ask for help." What Laura is saying about the role model issue is so true. We've really seen that play out.

Paul Mattessich: Maybe something the other regions of Minnesota should know about and try?

Laura Sutherland: Oh, I believe they are trying.

Paul Mattessich: They are?

Laura Sutherland: Yeah.

Paul Mattessich: Okay.

Laura Sutherland: Yeah. Yeah.

Paul Mattessich: Well, let me ...

Laura Schauben: Just one more thing about the trust piece. The other place the trust piece plays out, which actually Laura Sutherland can speak to better is that we learned early on in Safe Harbor that youth and young adults don't come out as sex trafficked or commercially sexually exploited right away. The processes had to allow for that.

We couldn't have a system where people, like you said, you immediately qualify or you immediately don't because it takes some time for the youth or young adult to feel comfortable talking about it. So building trust with those youth and young adults is some of the things that I think Safe Harbor service providers and navigators and housing providers do brilliantly.

Paul Mattessich: Oh, okay. Good. We're going to maybe get into even some other things you can tell us about the research in a few minutes. What I wanted to ask at this point as we're talking about the solutions is maybe if each of you could pick one thing. We know there's a lot more work to do but if you had to pick some action what is the most important action to take or the most important thing that needs to be done? Laura Sutherland, do you have a suggestion?

Laura Sutherland: Sure. Though, it's so hard to focus on just one.

Paul Mattessich: I know.

Laura Sutherland: I have to be practical and say that we need to keep fully funding this. Right now through Safe Harbor all of the regional navigators have very large territories. Some of them are 17 or more counties. It just makes it really hard to do the work that we need for victims and training of professionals in the community. I'm so grateful that Minnesota has started this process of addressing this issue but we need to keep it up full throttle. That would be one practical suggestion that I would say.

Paul Mattessich: Okay. Laura Schauben, I know you want to inject something too but you've used the word regional navigators once or twice during the conversation. Could you just tell us what is a regional navigator? How do they actually make contact with the survivors?

Laura Sutherland: Sure. Under Safe Harbor we're charged with helping to implement the Safe Harbor program throughout the state. We have a variety of responsibilities. One is we're really meant to serve as the first point of contact for victims to help coordinate services for them throughout our region to provide trainings to providers as well as to the community to do prevention work in the schools.

That is part of our role in addition to working on task force in local communities to help develop a collaborative multidisciplinary response to trafficking and exploitation.

Paul Mattessich: Laura Schauben, what's the one action you would recommend?

Laura Schauben: Well, I'm going to take this from a research perspective because I couldn't narrow it down otherwise.

Paul Mattessich: That's why you're here, though.

Laura Schauben: Yes. It's fitting. From a research perspective, I really think we need that well-funded study to look at the prevalence and needs of ... The prevalence of commercial sexual exploitation and the needs of people who are experiencing it because we want to make sure that the money that's being appropriated is used in the way that best fits the needs of the youth and young adults who are meant to benefit from it. I think we're taking really great educated guesses but knowing more about who is being impacted and what would benefit them would be really helpful.

Paul Mattessich: Okay. Sure. Well, while we're on the topic of research, Laura Schauben, what else have we learned from your research that hasn't been mentioned and might be valuable for people to know who have an interest in this topic?

Laura Schauben: I would say that we have great services that have been developed under Safe Harbor and that we need more of them. Specifically there's been in our evaluation a lot of discussion of the need for more emergency housing and long-term housing as well as more services in rural areas where these are, again, gigantic regions and services can be very spread apart.

Then finally for services that are 24/7 because youth and young adults are often in crisis in the middle of the night, which is not typically when services are available.

Paul Mattessich: Sure. You studied the whole state?

Laura Schauben: Yes.

Paul Mattessich: Did you find any differences among different types of populations or different regions of the state? Urban? Rural? Greater Minnesota? Twin Cities area? Different racial groups? Any kind of differences in the work that you did?

Laura Schauben: Not quantitatively but qualitatively ... Like in terms of what people have talked to us about in interviews and focus groups, we've heard a lot about the need for more culturally specific services.

Paul Mattessich: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Laura Schauben: I think each region is doing its best but often in regions it relies on one or two people and if those people leave a mental health center or a sheriff's office then again there's a shortage. Just flyers and materials that are in different languages. We've definitely heard that there's more need in rural areas for services. That's what I can think of off the top of my head.

Paul Mattessich: Okay.

Laura Sutherland: One thing I'd just like to add to that is that we really do need to keep ensuring that adult survivors are not being lost along the way. Safe Harbor is a program designed for those individuals who are aged 24 or younger. There is quite a movement in our state right now to address the needs of adult survivors and victims. Certainly in our region we are regularly receiving referrals for adults and so we absolutely want to be able to take their needs into account as well.

Paul Mattessich: Okay.

Laura Schauben: Yeah. Only 17 and under is decriminalized. While Safe Harbor can serve people 18 to 24 it's still a criminal action that they are being trafficked or exploited.

Paul Mattessich: There's a lot of information out there about sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. What are the resources or sources of information that people should trust when they want to know about this issue?

Laura Schauben: I would say the Safe Harbor navigators are always a good place to start because their role is to really know their region and what's available.

Paul Mattessich: How would somebody find a navigator?

Laura Sutherland: I would echo Laura. I'll make a shameless plug for Safe Harbor. Anyone can go online and just Google Safe Harbor Minnesota and they'll pull up right away a map that lists not only the Safe Harbor navigators but also all of the support services and housing listed through the state.

I think the state of Minnesota has done a great job in providing education for all of our Safe Harbor agencies so that hopefully all of the work that we do really reflects a victim-centered, trauma-informed, culturally-sensitive approach that that is brought to our written materials, our trainings, and of course hopefully in our interaction with victims and survivors.

Paul Mattessich: Sure.

Laura Schauben: Then I would say in terms of research that you're looking for research that doesn't sensationalize the problem so you don't want research that's telling really explicit stories of people being hurt or talks about vans and chains. Typically that's not actually how it happens and that can actually just increase the problem by promoting those kind of images.

Paul Mattessich: Taking that angle. Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Laura Schauben: Yeah.

Paul Mattessich: Okay.

Laura Schauben: I mean, sex trafficking and sexual exploitation has received a lot of attention but there's actually been people who have been working on it in research and services for a long time. I would tend to go to the more established people for my information, balanced maybe with a peppering of some new thoughts and innovation, but there are people who are just coming in and out because it's a big topic now and you really want people who have studied it for a while. Then lastly just information that cites its sources.

Paul Mattessich: Okay. In the last moment that we have, again, maybe a question for each of you, if you consider the typical person, a resident of any community in Minnesota or in the United States, if they said that they would like to do something about this issue what is it that you would suggest to them? Laura Schauben or Laura Sutherland or Laura Schauben you have your suggestion?

Laura Schauben: Yeah. I would say learn the warning signs of sexual exploitation and what to do if you think there's a problem and who to refer to. I mean, both because we've seen that work in Safe Harbor and because it personally saved my life that somebody noticed the warning signs and at least was there to help me find safety and build my confidence, if not get me out of the situation. To me, that's the most important thing that any individual can do.

Paul Mattessich: Mm-hmm (affirmative) Laura Sutherland?

Laura Sutherland: I would suggest that for folks who have an interest in this to ask for a Safe Harbor training for their community. It could be their community, it could be their school, it could be their place of employment. While we've come so far I think in public awareness of this we know we have a lot more work to do. That's part of the point of Safe Harbor is to get out information that hopefully is research-based and, again, victim-centered. Open the door and bring us into your communities.

Paul Mattessich: Okay. Well, thank you. Thanks to both of you. Our guests today, Laura Sutherland, the Safe Harbor regional navigator for southeastern Minnesota, and Laura Schauben from Wilder Research.

Please visit our website [www dot Wilder Research dot org](http://www.wilderresearch.org) for more information on the topic. If you have suggestions for a future podcast please let us know. I am Paul Mattessich from Wilder Research and I look forward to Talking Through The Numbers with you on other topics.

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