

# Fresno's diversity makes human trafficking difficult to spot, officer says

By Andrea Castillo

Fresno's diversity makes it difficult to identify cases of human trafficking, Fresno police Sgt. Curtis Chastain said Tuesday during a human trafficking conference in Clovis.

Chastain was among the speakers at the [Fresno Economic Opportunities Commission's](#) sixth annual conference on human trafficking at the Clovis Veterans Memorial District. Close to 300 people listened to speakers including survivors, faith-based leaders, law enforcement and victim service providers.

In the past five years, 178 human trafficking victims have been identified in the Central Valley, the youngest age 12 and the oldest 52, according to the EOC.

Chastain said more certainly exist, but are difficult to find because of barriers, including language and culture. For example, he said, new Asian immigrants can be distrustful of the government, making it difficult for police to help even if they think someone might be a victim. And he pointed to Fresno Unified School District, where students speak more than 35 different languages, to illustrate the diversity in the Valley.

Chastain explained the current trends in recruiting young people into sex and labor trade. He said Internet outlets including Facebook, Craigslist and dating sites have made recruitment easy. Recruiters, mostly young men, build relationships with victims, mostly young women, over a period of months.

"Digital media presents a false trust," he said.

Local sex trafficking happens mainly along the Highway 99 corridor, Chastain said, and workers never stay in the same place for long.

Chastain said pimps are getting younger. He mentioned the department's recent conviction of a 17-year-old who exploited a woman under the ploy of a stripping job offer.

The average age of trafficked girls is 13-16, Chastain said, often runaways or those in foster care or group homes. Runaways usually are approached by recruiters within two days.

Chastain said police aim to save the girls, but also "there's a lot of young males out there who didn't have a fatherly figure, no guidance at all." He said police want to rescue them, too.

Elana Landau, a Fresno County deputy district attorney, said it's important to remember victims of human trafficking are more than the stereotype. She has assisted in the cases of single parents and even a Fresno State student.

"It's going to take the whole community" to stop trafficking, she said. "We need to stop being afraid to talk about the subject."

Contact Andrea Castillo: [acastillo@fresnobee.com](mailto:acastillo@fresnobee.com), (559) 441-6279 or [@andreacastillo](https://twitter.com/andreacastillo) on Twitter.