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NATIONAL

Growing Number Of Male Survivors Talk About Being A Sex Trade Victim

MAY 24, 2021 · 7:24 AM ET

HEARD ON MORNING EDITION

By Jenifer McKim

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Male victims of sex trafficking are telling their stories. By speaking out they hope to destroy the myth that boys are not victims of the sex trade.

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

Every year, thousands of boys and young men fall victim to the country's flourishing sex trade. A lot of them are vulnerable to traffickers and sex buyers because of homelessness and poverty. Jenifer McKim of GBH News Center for Investigative Reporting says male victims often go unseen and unhelped. And a warning - this story contains descriptions that are disturbing.

JENIFER MCKIM, BYLINE: Jose Alfaro was 16 years old and homeless when he was lured into the country's illegal sex trade. It wasn't until years later that the now 30-year-old Boston hairstylist realized he wasn't to blame.

JOSE ALFARO: I didn't see myself as a victim. I saw myself as someone who participated in this business with him.

He met a man on the internet who offered him a place to stay and then forced him to provide clients sexual massages, some that became violent. He eventually ran away.

ALFARO: There were many times where I didn't have food to eat. I didn't have anywhere to go. And so I began what people call survival sex. I needed to find a way to survive on my own, and I did what I was taught.

MCKIM: Alfaro's is a common story that is rarely heard – boys and young men captured in the sex trade and victimized in ways the public generally assumes applies mostly to girls and young women. Now, a small but growing fraternity of male survivors across the United States are talking about their experiences. They are adding poignant details to what many researchers say is a vastly underreported problem. A 2016 national study found more than a third of young people involved in the U.S. sex trade were boys and young men, more than previously thought. Black and brown males and gay and LGBTQ young people are at higher risk.

CHRISTOPHER BATES: We need to get rid of this era of silence.

MCKIM: That's Christopher Bates, a 26-year-old from Worcester, Mass. At 16, he started selling nude photos on the internet to men who pestered him for new content. As a gay teen living with a mentally ill mother, he said he was hungry for attention. He eventually ran away and started selling sex full time to pay for food and clothing. Bates says the buyers were generally rich white men.

BATES: They were psychologists. They were attendance counselors. There was a lot of businessmen. There was a lot of married men.

MCKIM: After receiving government assistance to help pay rent, Bates left the life and became a survivor and advocate. He now works for Steven Procopio, a Boston-based social worker who has long struggled to raise awareness about the issue.

STEVEN PROCOPIO: We're led to believe that men are perpetrators and women are victims and not the flip side.

MCKIM: Seven years ago, Procopio helped launch a Boston-based organization that helps exploited males, one of only a few such programs in the nation. He says

male victims of sexual exploitation are often overlooked, their stories stifled by stigma and a world that has trouble seeing them as victims at all.

PROCOPIO: There's just a lot of guilt and self-blame for adult survivors that they have a hard time getting over and then can't have a discussion out of the shame and the guilt.

MCKIM: Victims like Jose Alfaro have been controlled by traffickers, including pimps and gangs. Others are trading their bodies for food and shelter. Under federal law, anyone under the age of 18 involved in the sex trade is considered a trafficking victim. Alfaro realized he had been victimized after hearing that his abuser was charged with trafficking a different teen boy. He flew back to Texas to provide key testimony that resulted in a rare 30-year sentence for his abuser. He finally felt seen.

ALFARO: When you put homeland security and you put a trial, suddenly people are interested, and they want to hear what happened to you.

MCKIM: Alfaro is writing a memoir and thinks back at all the people who could have helped him and looked away.

ALFARO: That wasn't the life that I had planned for myself. And I get so emotional because I had so many dreams. I had so many goals. There were so many things that I wanted to do. Never in a million years did I think that I'd be a prostitute.

MCKIM: Some anti-trafficking advocates say that public understanding of sexual exploitation of boys is about 15 years behind that of girls. Alfaro and Bates hope that by speaking out, another male teen won't have to go it alone. For NPR News, I'm Jenifer McKim.

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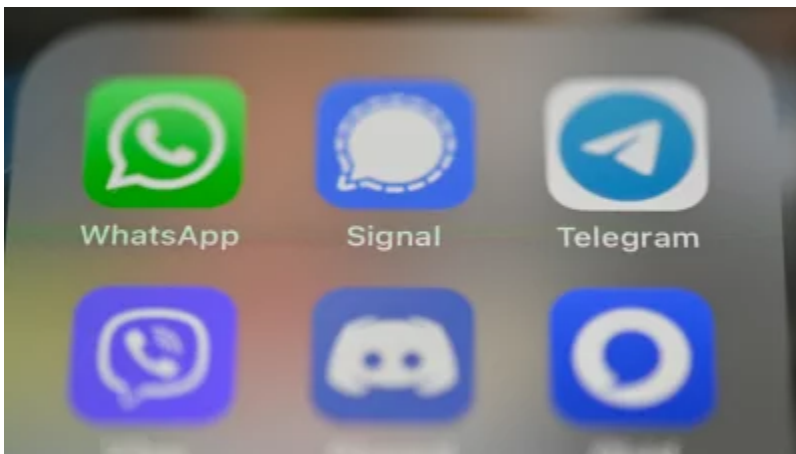
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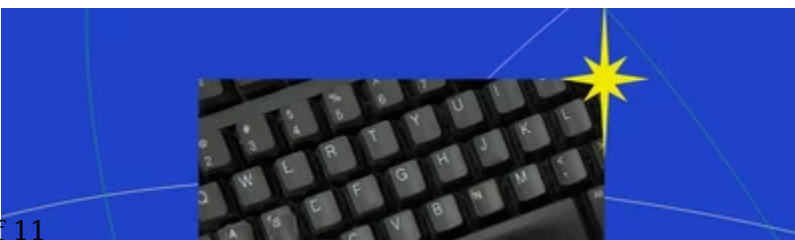
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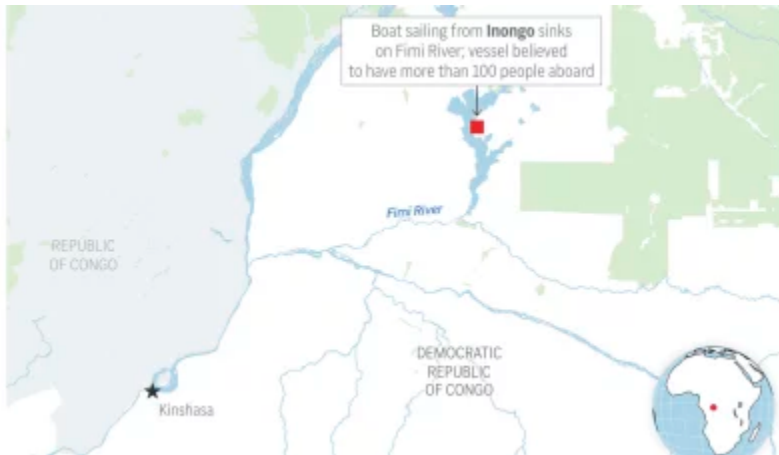




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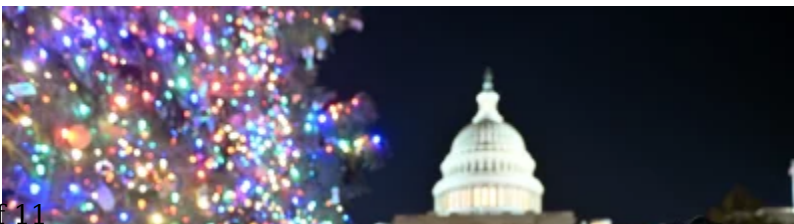
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