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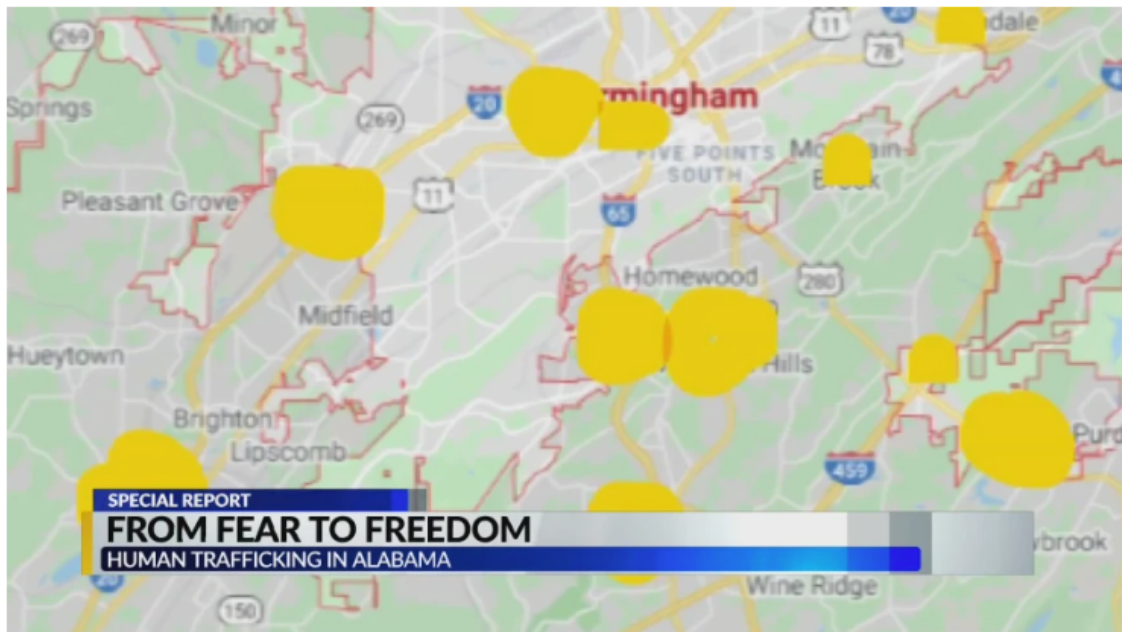
# Human trafficking: Not always who and where you expect

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (WIAT) — Each year in Birmingham, commercial sex is a \$110 million industry, law enforcement officials report. They say it is happening in some of the most unlikely places and is growing at an astonishing rate.



A map of areas where recent rescues have taken place.

The average age of a trafficking victim in the United States is 14 years old, according to [The WellHouse](#), a safe haven for girls and women who have been exploited to human trafficking.

Amy Wager is the [Alabama Director of Trafficking Hope](#). In a given year, she encounters hundreds of potential victims of human trafficking who may have been forced into unpaid sex or labor. Wager said she is devoted to combating sex trafficking among women.

“There is not a stereotype of a victim,” Wager said. “You may see something on the news or on the movie, ‘Taken,’ There are victims who are rescued from sex trafficking who have not had their first birthday and who are over 60 years old.”

Less than 1% of kidnapping cases end in human trafficking, according to the Department of Homeland Security. Instead, traffickers use psychological manipulation to prey on those most susceptible, often those who experienced childhood abuse or are struggling.



WellHouse Chief Executive Officer Carolyn Potter said human traffickers undergo a manipulative process before taking in victims.

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“They don’t just automatically snatch them up and throw them into that world,” Potter said. “They start grooming, and they groom in ways that appeal to young girls.”

Research shows children from traditional homes can fall into trafficking as well. Some cases happen in plain sight on their smartphone living under their parents’ roof.



“They believe they’re talking to a peer and actually, it could be a 30-year-old or 40-year-old person and they intend to do harm,” Potter said.

In Birmingham, police have made many human trafficking rescues in the last year. Detectives have made

arrests in hotels on Oxmoor Road, in Pelham and downtown Birmingham.

“There’s no bounds,” Potter said. “The common denominator is going to be vulnerability, whether that’s an age disability, emotional vulnerability or a financial vulnerability.”