

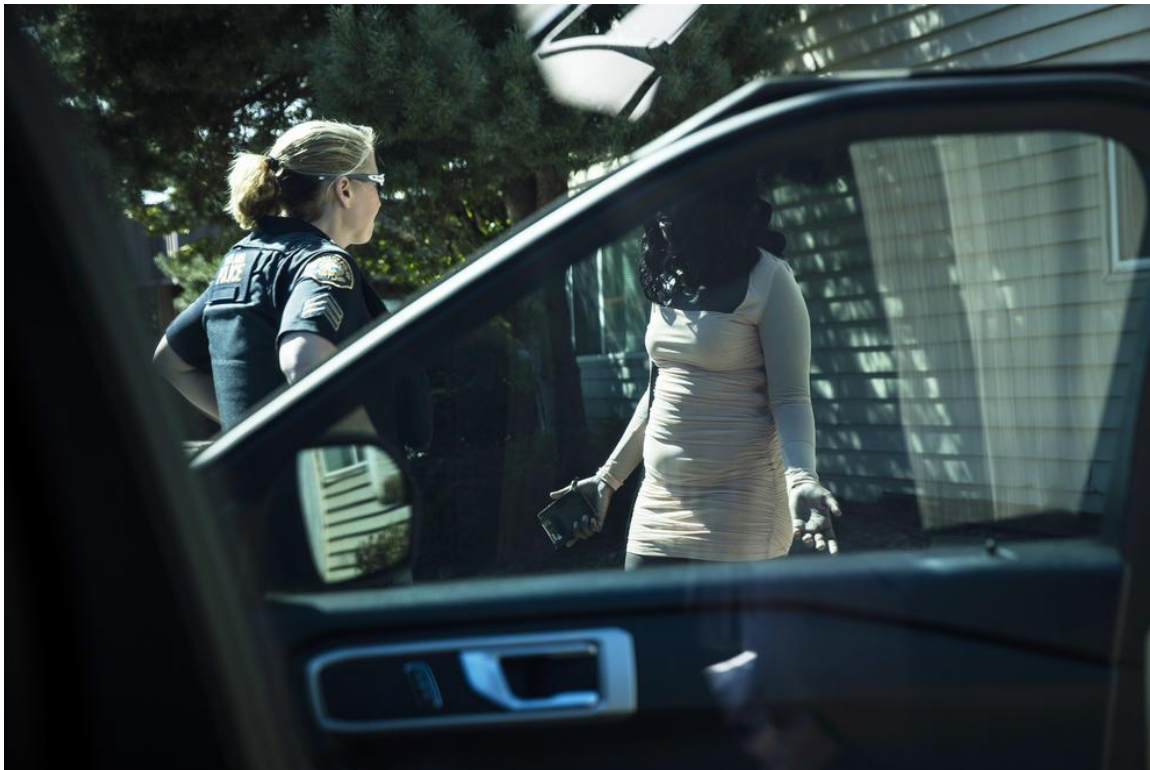
# Why convictions lag compared to sex trafficking reports in the PNW

While Washington has some of the toughest trafficking laws in the nation, law enforcement in Seattle and Portland struggle to put policy into practice.

by [Kelsey Turner](#)

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*Police Sgt. Kristi Butcher, supervisor of the Portland Police Bureau's Human Trafficking Unit, gathers information from an adult who she suspects is a victim of sex trafficking during a directed patrol mission in July. Butcher says many adult trafficking victims were first trafficked as minors. (Moriah Ratner/InvestigateWest)*

*This article was originally published by [Investigate West](#).*

Prosecutor Ben Gauen recognized all the signs. He knew that the teenager who'd been screaming for help in the middle of a spring day on Aurora Avenue North — the

“epicenter of sex trafficking in Seattle,” according to Gauen — was a victim of sex trafficking.

Witnesses, still “physically shaking” from what they saw that day in June, told police that a man had punched the teenager in the face and shoved her inside an SUV, court records say. When police found her in the SUV, with mascara running down her face and bruises on her skin, she insisted she wanted no help.

It wasn’t the first time law enforcement found the woman in danger. Court records show King County sheriff’s deputies removed her from the area, known to local sex workers as “the Track,” four separate times when she was a minor.

Prosecutors knew that her attacker, Christopher Jamison, had a history of rape and domestic violence charges. Social media posts by Jamison and the woman indicated he identifies as a “pimp” and profited from her prostitution, according to court documents.

In a court filing days after the incident, Gauen made the argument that Jamison should be held in jail on \$100,000 bail — not just because of the alleged assault, but because it was clear to prosecutors that it was about sex trafficking.

“Given the known history of the defendant and the victim, investigative leads, and the context of this assault, it is more probable than not that this assault stemmed from a sex trafficking relationship,” Gauen wrote in the court filing.

But Jamison was not charged with trafficking. The teenager hadn’t come forward as a trafficking victim, making it difficult for prosecutors to prove that trafficking had occurred.

Instead, he was charged with unlawful imprisonment, a felony, and fourth-degree assault, a gross misdemeanor, using a bystander’s video of the incident as key evidence. He pleaded guilty to the assault charge in October and was released without supervision a few days later. (Jamison declined to comment for this story through his attorney. InvestigateWest was unable to reach the victim.)

Gauen, a King County senior deputy prosecuting attorney, has seen situations like this before.

“Sex trafficking victims are groomed, gaslighted, manipulated, and threatened not to report their victimization,” he wrote in the request for bail.

Prosecutors like Gauen, along with law enforcement, service providers and survivors, say they are increasingly desperate to hold traffickers accountable and protect victims from further abuse. Kids are openly trafficked online and on city streets in Portland and Seattle, they say, and some end up selling sex into adulthood.



*Detective Tim Larsen and Sgt. Kristi Butcher, members of the Portland Police Bureau’s Human Trafficking Unit, gather information from an adult who they suspect is a victim of sex trafficking during a directed patrol mission in July. (Moriah Ratner/InvestigateWest)*

Located along the Interstate 5 corridor, a major highway running from Mexico to Canada that links many West Coast cities, Washington and Oregon are recognized as hubs within a national and global [sex trafficking circuit](#). State legislators across the region have tried to crack down on trafficking in recent years, and Washington has some of the toughest laws against sex trafficking in the country.

Despite these efforts, the percentage of nationwide human trafficking cases that occur in Washington and Oregon has risen since 2017, according to the [National Human Trafficking Hotline](#), a 24/7 phone line that maintains one of the nation's most extensive human trafficking data sets. In contrast, neighboring California — which holds the largest share of trafficking cases of any state — has seen improvements in this area. While 15.5% of trafficking cases identified by the hotline in 2017 occurred in California, that number fell to 12.9% in 2021.

Meanwhile, sex trafficking of minors in King County has become more visible within the past three years following a dip at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, said Debra Boyer, a cultural anthropologist who has conducted studies on commercial sexual exploitation of youth in Washington. “All you have to do is go up Aurora Avenue a few times, and you will see that the level of activity has really increased,” Boyer said.

Yet trafficking convictions in Washington and Oregon have remained low. From 2014 to 2022, the number of people convicted of sex trafficking crimes across both states fell 21%, dropping from 66 people to 52, InvestigateWest found in an analysis of state and federal court data.

“We’re getting reports frequently, weekly, that there are children out there walking ‘the Blade,’” said Portland Police Bureau Sgt. Kristi Butcher, using a term for an area in northeast Portland with high rates of sex trafficking, similar to Seattle’s Track. “We need to get serious about our conversations of what this really is, and start listening to survivors and coming up with real solutions. Because the way that it’s working right now — it’s not working.”

Police and prosecutors say getting justice for trafficking victims is challenging because many victims aren’t willing or able to participate in investigations. But survivors say law enforcement and policymakers can make more investments that would allow police to be proactive in investigating traffickers while providing increased funding for social services, like housing and specialized treatment for trafficking victims, to enable survivors to safely participate in the prosecution of their traffickers if they choose to do so.

Mercy Dizon, a survivor of child sex trafficking in Washington's Kitsap County in the early 2000s, said that although she has seen movement in how law enforcement addresses trafficking, she wouldn't necessarily call it progress.

"I think it is progressive for law enforcement to make policy changes. But is there a reduction in trafficking in our communities? No," Dizon said. "I think it's gotten worse."

### **A double-edged sword**

Law enforcement's approach to sex trafficking wasn't always so hands-off.

Historically, police departments across the nation — including [in Washington](#) and Oregon — [used arrests for prostitution](#) and other related crimes as a mechanism to temporarily remove adults and children from the sex trade and compel them to cooperate with trafficking investigations.

Within the past two decades, police departments throughout the region have shifted to approaching kids involved in prostitution as victims, not criminals, striving to connect them with services instead of throwing them in jail. The victim-centered approach aligns with what advocates call the ["Equality Model,"](#) in which those selling sex are not criminally charged while traffickers and buyers continue to be criminalized.

Though the model is [heavily criticized](#) by survivors who argue that protecting sex workers' safety requires full decriminalization of both buying and selling of consensual sex, advocates on both sides of the debate agree that children cannot consent to sex work.

In 2000, Congress passed the [Trafficking Victims Protection Act](#), the first comprehensive federal law to address human trafficking. The act added new criminal provisions that strengthened the ability of federal prosecutors to pursue cases against traffickers.

Since then, all states have adopted policies to prosecute trafficking cases and protect survivors within state courts as well. Washington became the first state to enact a law making human trafficking a crime in 2003. Oregon followed suit in 2007.

Yet many states are struggling to put these laws into practice. A [2021 study](#) sponsored by the National Institute of Justice, an agency of the U.S. Department of Justice, found that while a majority of investigations into sex trafficking cases led to prosecution (77%), only a third of those cases were prosecuted under human trafficking laws. The remaining cases were prosecuted under other charges, like sexual or physical violence, drug possession or drug trafficking.

JR Ujifusa, a senior deputy district attorney in Multnomah County, Oregon, says the victim-centered approach is a “double-edged sword” — although fewer victims are going to jail, traffickers are also using this to their advantage, as police officers have few alternative places to send victims. Many young victims deny they are being trafficked at all, making it difficult for police to convince them to seek help and to report information about their traffickers, a crucial piece of many criminal investigations.

Though law enforcement, prosecutors and survivors agree that the solution is not to criminalize victims, many recognize that — if the end goal is to reduce trafficking — the current system is not working.

In Oregon, the number of victims identified through the National Human Trafficking Hotline more than doubled between 2015 and 2021, rising from 64 to 160.

Washington saw a 74% increase in identified victims during the same time period, from 194 to 337, far outpacing a nationwide increase of 39%.

“The number of women on the Track has grown. The number of underage children [on the Track] has grown,” said Dizon, who does outreach on Aurora Avenue. “That’s been a well-known track for decades. We as a community can do something more about it.”

While service providers note that getting accurate data on commercially sexually exploited children is likely impossible due to the illicit and underreported nature of the crime, research shows that more victims are being identified in the Seattle area. A [2019 study](#) conducted by Boyer, the youth trafficking researcher, identified 473 commercially sexually exploited children in King County, nearly twice the number of victims that Boyer identified in 2008.

Despite the rise in reported victims, police departments in King County have recently reduced the number of detectives dedicated to human trafficking cases. Gauen works alongside two Seattle Police Department detectives focused on trafficking cases, down from eight detectives in previous years, he said.

“We are having major issues with law enforcement staffing and resources,” Gauen said. “Those two detectives work their tails off, and that’s not fair. It’s not fair to victims, it’s not fair to the community.”

The impact on King County’s efforts to combat child trafficking is apparent. In 2014, the vast majority of the county’s “commercial sexual abuse of a minor” cases charged in court were referred by the Seattle Police Department — 39 of them, according to the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office. In 2021, Seattle police referred only one charged case. That number dropped to zero in 2022.

In both Seattle and Portland, law enforcement and prosecutors have prioritized targeting sex buyers rather than charging sellers with prostitution. Nearly 75% of the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office’s trafficking caseload from 2017 to 2022 targeted people buying sex from children, according to data compiled by the office. Many of these cases were pursued by detectives acting as minors selling sex.

Although Dizon, who recently worked as a victim advocate in the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office, agrees that demand must be addressed, she worries that focusing most resources on crimes with decoy victims leaves real victims without a pathway to justice.

“We have 13-year-olds in G-strings right up on Aurora, and their cases will never be heard,” she said.

Maurice Washington, a detective with the Seattle Police Department’s Human Trafficking Unit, acknowledges that people are openly trafficked on Aurora Avenue, but he says these cases are difficult to investigate unless victims cooperate with law enforcement. The Seattle City Council [unanimously voted](#) in 2020 to remove prostitution loitering laws from the city code, [limiting](#) Seattle police officers’ ability to question people on the Track who they suspect could be trafficking victims.

“You can see the girl. You can see a pimp, maybe 10 or 15 feet away from them. And there’s very little that you can do about it,” Washington said.

Detectives in Washington say their ability to hold kids in protective custody is key to removing victims — at least temporarily — from trafficking situations. When police see children who are likely being trafficked, they can hold them for up to a few hours in a police station, where officers can interview them and contact guardians or caseworkers to pick them up.

“If we weren’t allowed to do protective custody, I cannot imagine any way of effectively addressing it,” said Alex Slusser, a detective with the Bellevue Police Department.

But while this is helpful for detectives aiming to gain more information about traffickers, Slusser noted that it’s not uncommon for kids to return to their traffickers after being released.

Survivors say a scarcity of youth shelters and long-term treatment centers in the region deters victims from reporting their traffickers, since they know that if they leave the sex trade, they might not have anywhere safe to go. In Washington, nearly three years after the state promised to create two treatment centers for child trafficking victims, [neither center is operating](#).

Traffickers, meanwhile, feel like they can profit from their victims’ exploitation with few legal consequences, police and survivors say.

“They understand that the law has basically given them a tool,” said Washington, the Seattle detective. “It was an invitation: ‘Bring your girls here, and for the most part, you can make a lot of money.’”

### **‘More and more victims’**

As the supervisor of the Portland Police Bureau’s seven-person Human Trafficking Unit, Butcher knows the names of the girls who walk the Blade.



An approximately one-mile stretch along Portland's Northeast 82nd Avenue and Sandy Boulevard, it's a place where kids and young adults stand by the roadside through chilling winter sleet and beating summer sun in short dresses and high heels. Some walk in pairs, others alone, as they look for men to pay them for sex.

It's no secret to the Portland police that some who walk the Blade are children, some as young as 14. But night after night, kids remain on Portland's streets. They climb into cars with older men who pay hundreds of dollars for a "date," money that the youth will likely never see, funneled instead to their traffickers, Butcher says.

One problem for police like Butcher trying to arrest traffickers comes down to a lack of resources dedicated to trafficking investigations and prevention. The Portland Police Bureau allotted \$1.4 million to combating human trafficking this fiscal year, a number that has remained fairly consistent since 2021, according to the bureau. This represents just 0.6% of the bureau's total budget this fiscal year.

"These crimes are happening from midnight to 6 a.m. when most of the police bureau is responding to homicides or gun shootings. They don't have the time to roll the Blade looking for these kids," Butcher said.

While Multnomah and King counties have teams dedicated to human trafficking cases, many counties throughout Washington and Oregon do not. As prosecutors and detectives choose where to focus their limited resources, service providers worry that more complex cases without victims coming forward are falling by the wayside.

"People aren't getting arrested for it or being categorized as traffickers," said Mady Sandoval, co-executive director of the [Foundation for Youth Resiliency and Engagement](#), a nonprofit organization bordering the Colville Indian Reservation in north central Washington.

Though trafficking can happen to anyone, certain populations are more heavily impacted. Poverty is a leading cause of trafficking worldwide, and girls of color and gender-diverse youth are especially vulnerable, studies show. Butcher comes across trafficking victims with a myriad of underlying vulnerabilities — homelessness, unstable family lives, involvement in the foster care system, substance-use issues.

Butcher and her team conduct outreach on the Blade about twice a month. They circle the area in unmarked police cars for hours, accompanied by victim advocates and an FBI agent. It feels like a game of cat-and-mouse, where Butcher is the cat, trying to connect with young people who dodge her efforts. When she manages to catch someone, she offers resources, but the person is often not interested.

Last year the Human Trafficking Unit attempted to remove a teenager from a trafficking situation, Butcher said. With assistance from the FBI, the unit found the girl in a Portland hotel room in the middle of the night with several adult men.

The unit contacted the Oregon Department of Human Services' on-call staff member to pick her up and bring her to a safe place to stay, Butcher said. But before Butcher even left the scene, she got a call: The girl had run out of the department's car at a stoplight only a few blocks from the hotel. All the time and effort put into recovering her was gone in just 10 minutes.

"It's super-deflating," Butcher said. "I'm all for not criminally penalizing these young women, but we need to have some leverage to kind of force them into treatment."



*After interrupting a “car date,” members of the Portland Police Bureau’s Human Trafficking Unit prepare to pat down a suspected sex buyer in Northeast Portland in July. (Moriah Ratner/InvestigateWest)*

While Washington detectives often rely on protective custody to temporarily remove kids from traffickers, this practice is still considered too punitive among some advocates and law enforcement officials. Oregon police typically don’t use it for that reason, aiming to send youth victims directly to shelters and service providers instead. But this presents its own challenges, said Amanda Swanson, trafficking intervention coordinator with the Oregon Department of Justice. There are few places available throughout the state to send kids for help.

“We are identifying more and more victims, and there are not enough resources,” Swanson said.

The Oregon Legislature has [not allocated](#) any funds toward specialized services for child trafficking survivors in the past three years, according to an analysis by [Shared Hope International](#), a nonprofit organization that advocates for policy changes to eradicate child sex trafficking.

Though the Washington Legislature [allocated \\$5.07 million](#) to services for trafficked children in fiscal years 2022 and 2023, it didn't dedicate any of that funding in the upcoming fiscal year, Shared Hope's analysis found.

Meanwhile, Minnesota — a state that outperforms others in its anti-trafficking response, according to Shared Hope — [dedicated over \\$15 million](#) to supporting child and youth sex trafficking survivors in fiscal years 2022 and 2023.

Funding services, however, is only the first step to protecting kids, said Boyer, the trafficking researcher. The next challenge is to ensure law enforcement has the legal authority and space available to hold kids long enough to connect them to those services. "Even if we had more services, we still have that issue," she said.

Officers like Butcher know one way to get trafficked kids into treatment programs without arresting them for prostitution: arresting them for other crimes, like robbery or assault. This doesn't mean they sit in jail, Butcher specified. Instead, they may get assigned a probation officer, and if they don't meet the conditions of probation, some treatment programs can be court-ordered.

"It's kind of like a way to have a little bit of pull over the youth in order to steer them away from 'the life,'" Butcher said, using a term for the subculture of prostitution.

Many anti-trafficking advocates, however, criticize that practice, saying it undermines the purpose of the victim-centered approach.

"You're still being criminalized for being in the sex trade," Dizon said. "They just aren't booking it under that charge."

Even when law enforcement successfully separates victims from their traffickers, there is no guarantee that children will stay away from their abusers. Butcher is working with one teenage girl whom the unit previously removed from the streets of Portland and sent to a safe location outside the city. The girl, who struggles with substance abuse, went back to the sex trade and overdosed several times within a few weeks of returning to Portland, Butcher said.

“She is one step away from dying, and we still can’t do anything other than take her to the hospital,” she said. “At what point do we take their right to choose away from them in order to keep them safe?”

### **Victims bear the burden**

The 14-year-old girl didn’t want to be in the courtroom that day. If she could, she said, she would erase everything that happened to her that rainy January night a year before — the night that a man raped and tried to traffic her in Seattle.

But the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office had subpoenaed her to be there. They flew her in from Chicago and sat her down to be questioned by a defense attorney.

“You testified earlier that you’re pretty clever. Are you clever enough to figure out how to craft a story to get yourself out of trouble?” the defense attorney asked her, according to audio of the trial.

“No,” she replied. “I’m clever enough to get out of a situation that I could be dead in.”

The man accused of trafficking her, Aeurlious Drayton, had found her standing alone outside a Jack in the Box in Fircrest, a suburb of Tacoma, on a winter night in 2022, court records say.

Drayton, a stranger, offered her a ride to Seattle. After raping her inside his car, he dropped her off near Aurora Avenue North under instructions to sell sex, according to the charges filed against Drayton. Instead, she went to a nearby apartment complex and explained her situation to a security guard, who reported it to Seattle police officers. With a description of Drayton’s car, officers were able to find and arrest him.

For the girl, Drayton’s arrest was just the beginning of an arduous year talking to detectives and prosecutors as they tried to put her trafficker behind bars.

InvestigateWest’s efforts to reach the girl and her caretakers were unsuccessful.

Victim testimony is often crucial to building cases against traffickers. But many victims don't come forward, whether due to the psychological and emotional manipulation of their traffickers, fear of retaliation, distrust of police or a host of other reasons.

In trial, attorneys question alleged victims about the details of their trafficking situations — a potentially re-traumatizing experience that deters some survivors from participating in the prosecution of their traffickers. A jury convicted Drayton of trafficking and raping her when she was just 13, but the girl had to first withstand a cross-examination questioning her credibility.

“Since this incident happened, you've gotten a tremendous amount of attention. Attention that you weren't getting previously,” the defense attorney said to the girl at Drayton's trial.

“Are you f...” she started, trailing off.

“Is that right?” he pressed.

She paused before answering. “Yeah.”



*Police Sgt. Kristi Butcher, supervisor of the Portland Police Bureau's Human Trafficking Unit, uses a police radio system to check in with fellow unit members during a directed patrol mission in Portland, Ore., in July. A directed patrol mission aims to combat human trafficking activity and is carried out by a team of police officers, an FBI agent and victim advocates. (Moriah Ratner/InvestigateWest)*

To avoid leaning too heavily on the testimonies of children, prosecutors like Gauen in King County and Ujifusa in Multnomah County try to compile as much alternative evidence as possible, including text messages between the victim and alleged trafficker, business records from hotels or social media companies, surveillance videos, and statements from other witnesses, like hotel employees or bystanders.

"We try very hard to make cases in which we plan that if the victim is not present, we can still move forward. But there are many, many challenges with that, and facts have to line up very specifically in order to do that," Ujifusa said.

In some cases where trafficking is difficult to prove, attorneys prosecute people for related crimes like child pornography or sexual assault. But some anti-trafficking advocates worry this approach leads to criminal justice data that understates the amount of trafficking that is truly occurring.

“The King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office has done a superlative job over the years focusing on commercial sexual abuse of minors,” Boyer said. Still, she added, “the numbers are pretty low for what they can actually prosecute.”

Even though service providers identify hundreds of victims throughout the region every year, fewer than half of Oregon and Washington counties in the past decade have convicted individuals of sex trafficking crimes, according to InvestigateWest’s analysis of data from the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission and the Washington State Administrative Office of the Courts.

“As hard as it is for victims to come forward, it’s even harder nowadays to find a district attorney who will prosecute,” said Swanson with the Oregon Department of Justice.

## **Seeking justice**

Sixteen years after leaving her trafficker, Mercy Dizon is still waiting for justice.

Dizon remembers meeting her trafficker online when she was 14. A transgender Filipina woman, she grew up in a conservative military family in Washington, which gave her few outlets to express herself when she began questioning her gender identity at a young age.

The man groomed her for six months, offering her drugs that launched her into a chemical dependency and reduced her autonomy, she said.

“I assumed that I was in love because nobody would answer my questions around what it meant to be LGBTQ2IA. But he did. And he framed it as love,” she recalled.

Soon he began setting up “dates” for Dizon, who identified as an androgynous boy at the time, to have sex with other men. She left him after three years, then entered the sex trade as an adult. “I didn’t know I was a trafficking survivor until I was 24. I didn’t know I was in the sex trade until I was 19,” she said.

Without even understanding she was a victim, prosecuting her trafficker never seemed like an option. Now 33, Dizon still doesn’t know what became of him. It’s possible she



never will. Because the alleged crime happened more than 10 years ago and Dizon is over 30 years old, [state law](#) dictates that her trafficker can no longer be prosecuted for the harm he caused her.

Nevertheless, she wants to find out whether her trafficker is still abusing kids. But the likelihood of law enforcement investigating him is low, she said.

“In King County, we have amazing detectives,” she said. “But for them to do an investigation on a human trafficking case is labor-intensive.” Consequently, the cases that detectives and prosecutors tend to pursue are more clear-cut and don’t involve transgender individuals, despite [studies showing](#) that transgender people are involved in sex work at higher rates than non-transgender people, Dizon said.

The King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office didn’t represent any trafficking victims who identified as transgender or nonbinary from 2020 through 2022, according to the office’s data. Gauen said this does not mean there are no transgender victims in King County, but rather that these victims are not being referred to the office.

If law enforcement needs victims’ cooperation to put traffickers behind bars, Dizon argues that more trauma-informed victim services could help. She calls for more shelters where survivors can feel safe during the prosecution process, including shelters for transgender survivors and survivors with children.

“If you want increased prosecutions, then we need to have a place for moms to flee with their kids,” she said.

Gauen agrees that more direct services for child victims are crucial to prosecuting traffickers and protecting kids. “Unless you’re addressing those underlying needs, and can partner with a victim to provide an opportunity for exit out of ‘the life,’ the chances of a successful prosecution dwindle,” he said.

As survivors heal from their exploitation, justice isn’t always a straightforward concept. While some seek justice in the form of convicting their traffickers, others lack faith that the law can keep them safe, and instead simply want to move on with their lives.

“From the eyes of our young people, they don’t see justice including the law enforcement system,” said Sandoval, the service provider in north central Washington. “I think they can’t even envision what justice means because we’re just so far from it here.”

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