



## Featured Articles

# Human Trafficking and ORC: The Dark Truth behind Retail Crime Networks

May 25, 2022



Organized retail crime (ORC) has been top-of-mind for all loss prevention professionals in recent years due to its financial impact. The FBI estimates that ORC crimes cost the US approximately \$30 billion each year, with a large percentage of that money funding other, darker criminal activities.





Kevin Metcalf

"When you're looking at organized retail crime, you're looking at drug networks, you're looking at cartels, and all of this stuff is mixed together," said Kevin Metcalf, founder of the [National Child Protection Task Force](#). "It's not just one clean crime."

After starting a career in law enforcement working counterterrorism, Metcalf went through law school and started working as a prosecutor specializing in electronic evidence. He then began traveling around the country, teaching others how to approach cases in the same innovative way. "Everywhere I would teach, I would say, 'Hey, let me know if you need any help,'" Metcalf said. "And that started getting me involved in a tremendous variety of cases—terrorism, domestic terrorism, property crimes, homicides, all sorts of things, including retail."

- Digital Partner -

A few years ago, he took on a case that changed the course of his life. Metcalf helped in the recovery of a few teenagers who were groomed and taken by online sexual predators, and soon he was being asked to speak at national and international conferences. That's where he met Kevin Branzetti, and they formed the National Child Protection Task Force—a small but mighty nonprofit made up of people from a variety of backgrounds, including law enforcement, the military, and loss prevention, dedicated to catching and prosecuting human traffickers.

But what does this have to do with ORC? A lot, it turns out.

## ORC's Link to Human Trafficking

Shoplifting can be a sort of gateway for at-risk individuals. After being caught shoplifting, some are befriended by traffickers and then manipulated into prostitution.



In addition to prostitution, human traffickers may also force their victims to shoplift for them or purchase gift cards. These gift cards can then be used to fuel trafficking operations thanks to their anonymity and lack of a paper trail. They could be leveraged as a direct means of payment between a victim and a John in sex work, or they could be used to launder large sums of money associated with trafficking. "Really, the sky is the limit, especially since many gift cards can also be sold on third-party resale sites so the sellers can walk away with cash," Metcalf explained.

According to the Department of Homeland Security, the average price of a sex ad is \$60, and 1.04 million sex ads currently utilize retail gift cards as forms of payment—that's \$60 million in potential laundered gift card expenditures.

And even when the victims aren't the ones doing the shoplifting, the profit from that crime can be used to fuel human trafficking.

"Historically, private sector companies have not paid much attention to human trafficking and exploitation," Metcalf said. "But as more and more businesses shift into digital channels, offering more unique ways of delivering services and facilitating payments for those services, theft and fraud are not the only criminal activities that can affect them."

## What Can Be Done?

While this is all disturbing to hear, the good news is that loss prevention professionals can be a big piece of the puzzle when it comes to stopping these criminals.

"We imagine a world where children wake up to experience childhood, feel safe wherever they are, and end each day looking forward to tomorrow—that's what everything we do filters through," Metcalf said. "We can do a hell of a lot better than what we've been doing, but it's going to take all of us working together, and retail is a vital area that is really untapped."

- Digital Partner -



---

The first step to helping in the fight against human trafficking is understanding the victims, and how they ended up in these vulnerable positions.

Some are kidnapped, but many are runaways that no one is really looking for. “[When a missing child is a runaway] it moves that child from a very high-level investigative priority to the lowest level of investigative priority, if there’s any investigation done at all,” Metcalf said. “They’re a runaway, they’ll come back when they get tired, or when they want to—that’s the overarching thought. However, kids are running away from something generally—running away from sexual abuse, physical abuse, alcohol, substance abuse—they’re running away from something thinking that they can do better.”

Often, they run right into the hands of criminals who manipulate them with drugs.

“That’s how they control their victims—get them hooked on drugs, get some sort of control over them,” Metcalf explained. “Then they’ll use them for shoplifting or credit card fraud schemes.

“Human trafficking is a crime that involves using another person to benefit off their labor, their services, their sex. And you’re using forced fraud or coercion if the victim is a minor and incapable of consent.”

According to Metcalf, there are an estimated 24.9 million human trafficking victims in the US. Around 70 percent of those victims are female, and about one-third of them are children. Minorities, immigrants, and the LGBTQ community are prime targets for traffickers.

“Traffickers look for vulnerabilities,” Metcalf said. “That’s what they prey on—eating disorders, the LGBTQ community, anybody with vulnerability—that’s where they’re going; that’s who they’re manipulating.”

Most of the time these victims don’t at all consider themselves victims and will willingly do whatever their abusers tell them to. “It’s so hard to even get people to admit that they are minors that are missing out of the foster care system,” Metcalf said. “These are the ‘throwaway kids’ that are being sent into retail establishments. They’re being run into criminal enterprises. They’re being trained on how to shoplift, how to get these gift cards, how to work them. And the people running this are sitting back and staying safe,



because somebody else is going to take the fall for it."

And parents can be bad guys, too. Metcalf described how he often sees parents manipulating their own kids into shoplifting to avoid facing any sort of punishment themselves.

"We want to get ahead of this," Metcalf asserted. "How can we recognize this before those kids are so addicted and so broken that they have no childhood left? How do we get there? And we also need [the LP community] to speak up and add to the voice."

## What to Look for

Signs of trafficking to look for include fear, anxiety, tension, submission, nervousness, physical abuse, restraint, confinement, malnourishment, poor hygiene, sleep deprivation, unusual behavior, traveling with a partner that seems older without a cohesive social dynamic, inappropriate clothing, identical tattoos that could be brands, multiple phones, large amounts of cash or prepaid credit cards, and motel keys.

There are plenty of victims that may not fit these typical descriptors, though.

"Ultimately, big box retail LP staff need to be taught indicators of all human trafficking, not just the 16-year-old girl who is being followed around by a big scary guy who she can't look at, and not just individuals who don't speak English and won't make eye contact with LP staff," Metcalf explained. "There are so many other things to look for, and many of these red flags are overlooked because these victims aren't what retailers see as criminals. So there needs to be a mindset adjustment for better identification."

In addition to knowing how to spot a potential trafficking victim, LP professionals also need to understand what the next steps are, and how to help the victim. "Staff are trained on how to contact law enforcement for a shoplifter, how to do investigations, how to write reports, all of which are criminal subject-focused," Metcalf said. "There's no training on what to do if suddenly your shoplifting interview turns into a human trafficking case."

Ultimately the goal is to offer the victim a way out of their situation, so the gut response for most is to call law enforcement. That isn't necessarily an inappropriate response, said Metcalf, but there are a couple factors that need to be taken into account in these types of situations.



First, the victim may not believe they are being trafficked and may not want help. In these cases, Metcalf recommends calling law enforcement, though it's a fine line to walk and ultimately must be decided by the retailer. Sometimes it can take many years before a victim is able or willing to recognize they are being exploited—or they might know they are in a bad situation but feel they have no real way out, so they choose to stay with their abuser.

Second, often trafficking comes with a great deal of violence. The victim's trafficker may be in the store watching from a few feet away or may be waiting for them in the parking lot. Responding inappropriately may put the victim, staff, or customers in the store at risk. So whatever decision is made needs to be done so with that in mind, Metcalf explained.

The best thing that store-level LP staff can do is offer assistance and resources without forcing anything on the victim. "Telling that shoplifter before anything else is done that they are in a safe place may help that individual be more honest during an interview," Metcalf said. "Asking questions that go above and beyond a typical shoplifting interview, such as 'Are you doing this on your own volition?' or 'If you don't come home with this merchandise what will happen?' And then offering local resources that they can leverage immediately, not a national phone number, holds a much greater likelihood of that victim taking you up on your offer to help."

Eventually, Metcalf sees facial recognition technology in stores as an effective way to catch traffickers. He wants to run a pilot program but recognizes that it has to be done in a way that protects the privacy of innocent bystanders.

Store purchase history, too, can be used to identify traffickers and recover children.

"Retail has really stepped up and helped, and the private technology companies have also stepped up to help us make incredible differences," Metcalf said. "We are doing a lot with collecting all this intelligence and actually putting it out in training. We include the retail sector, we include investigations, and we include security in this."

"The greatest way for LP professionals to help in our efforts is bringing the conversation into your company and the industry as a whole," he explained. "There are things you can do—whether you sell laptops, clothing, or groceries—there are intersections between exploitation and your business."



He added, "So start having those conversations with your leaders about bringing in external trainers, discussing protocols for what should be done in the event a shoplifter turns out to be a victim. Strengthen your partnerships with your local law enforcement and ask about what they're seeing in your area outside of theft and fraud. At this point, the only movement available is forward, and simply starting the conversations and ensuring they continue is the best thing you can do for victims and your business."

---

This story is a part of *LPM*'s Special ORC Issue. Download the full issue for free [here](#).

