

Children are not for sale—global efforts to address child trafficking.

Excerpts of remarks by Chairman Chris Smith (R-NJ)

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This hearing of the Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations will come to order.

More than twenty years ago, the U.S. Congress approved and the President signed historic bipartisan legislation that I authored—[the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000](#)—a comprehensive whole-of-government initiative to combat sex and labor trafficking in the United States and around the world.

The TVPA created a bold new domestic and international anti-human trafficking strategy and established numerous new programs to protect victims, prosecute traffickers and to the extent possible, prevent human trafficking in the first place—the three Ps.

Though it is hard to believe now, my legislation was met with a wall of skepticism and opposition—dismissed by many as a solution in search of a problem. For most people at that time—including lawmakers—the term trafficking applied almost exclusively to drugs and weapons, not human beings.

Reports of vulnerable persons—especially women and children—being reduced to commodities for sale were often met with surprise, incredulity, or indifference.

The bill was finally signed into law on [October 28, 2000](#), and within a year after enactment no-one was arguing anymore that the Trafficking Victims Protection Act's integrated three P's strategy—prevention, protection for victims and prosecution of the traffickers—was flawed, unworkable, unnecessary, or counterproductive.

Today we will again examine child sex and labor trafficking—a particularly devastating and egregious form of human trafficking that targets the most vulnerable among us.

Tragically, this heinous crime has become more prevalent in recent years.

Child predators it turns out are everywhere—on the prowl, kidnapping, buying or renting children to exploit.

The child predators never waste a crisis and are especially skilled in taking advantage of conflict, poverty, lawlessness, IDPs, refugees and migrants.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, child predators found new and devious ways via the internet and social media to groom and sexually harm children.

On any given day, over 27 million people around the world are enslaved in forced labor or sex trafficking.

It is estimated that nearly a third of all trafficking victims are children, but we believe that the true numbers are likely much higher.

To combat child sex tourism, in 2016 I authored the [International Megan's Law](#) . After eight years of argument and callous disregard of child victims—it passed the House three times with huge bipartisan majorities but was blocked in the Senate—International Megan's Law was finally adopted in the Senate and signed into law.

International Megan's Law seeks to protect children from sex tourism by notifying destination countries when convicted pedophiles plan to travel. The penalty for failure to disclose is up to 10 years in prison. A convicted pedophile's passport contains a notice that the bearer has been convicted of a sex crime against a child.

Megan Kanka—after whom each state's Megan's Law is named, was a 7-year-old I who lived in my old hometown of Hamilton, New Jersey. Megan was sexually assaulted and murdered in 1994 by a convicted pedophile who lived across the street—and nobody knew about his background.

We know that refugees, migrants, and internally displaced children are especially vulnerable to trafficking—and that traffickers take advantage of conflict and chaos to target these young victims.

We are seeing this in Ukraine, where it is estimated that over 90 percent of Ukrainians fleeing Putin's war are women and children and that more than half of Ukraine's children have been displaced by conflict.

Thousands of Ukrainian children have been forcibly removed from their homes and taken to Russia in mass abductions—part of Putin's genocidal plan to erase Ukrainian culture.

Tragically, the problem of child trafficking is rampant in the United States.

Now there are serious well-founded concerns that unaccompanied minors coming across our Southern border may be the new victims.

According to US Customs and Border Protection, at least 345,000 children from other countries have crossed the U.S. southern border unaccompanied since early 2021.

These unaccompanied minors are especially vulnerable to traffickers, and shockingly the Department of Health and Human Services has lost contact with at least 85,000 of these children after placing them with sponsors in the United States.

The U.S. Government has the responsibility to protect these vulnerable children and to thoroughly vet those sponsors.

Without any means of contact, these children—many of whom endured countless risks to reach the U.S. border—could be in immediate and grave danger and at risk of death, child sexual exploitation and abuse, or severe forms of trafficking in persons, including forced labor and sex trafficking.

Earlier this week, joined by 22 cosponsors, I introduced [H.R. 5415—the “Safeguarding Endangered Children, Unaccompanied and at Risk of Exploitation Act of 2023 \(Secure Act\)”](#)—to compel the federal government to report on efforts to locate, establish contact with, conduct wellness checks on, and investigate any suspicion of human trafficking related to the approximately 85,000 unaccompanied alien children released from ORR custody without continued official contact.

It is imperative that the Executive Branch locate and assess the well-being of these minors, and we must reform our border security policies to ensure these unprecedented migration patterns do not continue. I urge my colleagues to cosponsor and support this legislation.

We are joined here today by an outstanding advocate on the issue of human trafficking, and whose life experience provided the foundation for the recently released film *The Sound of Freedom* – Tim Ballard.

On May 14, 2015, Tim Ballard testified at my human rights committee.

He told us how he had served for 12 years as a special agent for the Department of Homeland Security's Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force and the Sex Tourism Jump Team and worked as an undercover operative infiltrating organizations at home and abroad that were abusing and trafficking children.

Tim told us, however, that he often felt “helpless by the fact that the vast majority of the child victims that we would find fell outside the purview of the United States...Unless I could tie a U.S. traveler to the case, I would not be able to rescue the children.”

Working with the Columbians, for example, Tim pulled off one of the largest rescue operations ever—more than 120 victims, children as young as 11—in just one day.

Tim's heroic lifesaving work rescuing children from the extreme cruelty of sex trafficking— almost always at great physical risk to himself and his colleagues—is the stuff of legends.

The film the *Sound of Freedom* tells this true story. The film not only informs and educates—it motivates greater efforts to eradicate this pernicious form of exploitation.

I would also like to extend a special thanks to Ms. Jeanne Celestine Lakin, a courageous survivor-expert who joins us today to share from her very personal perspective what impact these crimes have on children and what more we should do to prevent them. I have always considered it essential to listen to the voices of survivors and, in the process of developing the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, it was survivors who moved the needle and convinced lawmakers that the legislation was necessary. Our anti-trafficking efforts must always take a survivor-informed approach, and I have made sure to prioritize survivor voices when drafting successive TVPA reauthorizations.

Our subcommittee is also deeply grateful that Jennifer Podkul, Vice President of Policy and Advocacy of Kids in Need of Defense will shortly testify and in a moment will introduce her and our other distinguished witnesses.