

# Human Trafficking at the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally

AUG 16, 2023 | NATIVE HOPE

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South Dakota is most recognized for its open ranges, miles of lush farmland, and as the home of 1.2 million acres of the Black Hills National Forest. These same serene rolling hills and towering pines awaken with sounds of rumbling as they host the largest annual tourist attraction in the state every summer.

## WHAT IS THE STURGIS RALLY?

Celebrating its 83rd year, the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally attracts hundreds of thousands of motorcyclists from across the country to gather for the week-long rally, which runs officially from August 4-13. While most of these motorcyclists tour the natural beauty of the Black Hills, enjoy outdoor concerts, and spend their tourist dollars at vendor tents, local bars, and restaurants—there is also a disturbing reality taking place. Hidden in the shadows from the music and crowds, are DCI agents and other law enforcement officials standing vigil and conducting undercover sex sting operations.

Regrettably, the Sturgis rally has become a main event that drives human trafficking within the state of South Dakota. However, it's not the only time the state sees human trafficking.

"Although most hunters and bikers in the area are well-behaved, there is a dark side to both those activities...  
Wherever you have a large gathering of men, you have a strong opportunity for prostitution and sex trafficking."  
Former U. S. Attorney Brendan Johnson

The two major interstates that run through the state, I-90 and I-29, are "part of the 'Midwest Pipeline,' the superhighways used to deliver trafficking victims to cities across the country," according to this [fact sheet](#).

The reality is that whenever there is an event that attracts a large number of men, there is a market for some form of sex trafficking. And, while sex trafficking exists around the nation, there's something distinctive about South Dakota. The peaceful, homegrown mentality that exists here has made it an excellent "cover" for sex trafficking.



## THE DARK SIDE OF THE STURGIS MOTORCYCLE RALLY

This is not an isolated issue; rather, it is a growing epidemic. The Division of Criminal Investigation has been conducting undercover sex stings in South Dakota for several years, even allowing KELOLAND News to be a part of the [undercover operations](#) in Sturgis.

Although there has been an agreement in place with the Attorney General's office preventing them from showing the public all the operations' details, the Attorney General feels strongly that bringing public awareness to the forefront of this horrific issue will make a difference in the fight against human trafficking.

"When you have large events like this, there's a criminal element, and we've experienced in the past some child predators out and about in the community. We've taken it upon ourselves in law enforcement to do certain operations really to protect children." – *South Dakota Attorney General Mary Jackley*

## STURGIS MOTORCYCLE RALLY STATISTICS

In the past few years alone:

- There were 30 federal sex trafficking cases in South Dakota between 2009-2014.
- 9 arrests were associated with the 2013 Sturgis rally.
- 5 indictments came from the 2014 Sturgis rally.
- 8 arrests were made during the [2016 Sturgis rally](#).
- 9 arrests were made during the [2017 Sturgis rally](#).
- 6 arrests were made during the [2018 Sturgis rally](#).
- 11 arrests were made during the [2019 Sturgis rally](#).
- 8 arrests were made during the [2020 Sturgis rally](#).
- 9 arrests were made during the [2021 Sturgis rally](#).
- 6 arrests were made during the [2022 Sturgis rally](#).
- 5 arrests were made during the [2023 Sturgis rally](#).
- Victims ranged from 12 to 15 years of age.
- Dozens of girls and women have been discovered as victims of sex trafficking in South Dakota.

## PROTECTING NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN AND CHILDREN FROM SEX TRAFFICKING

South Dakota is also home to 9 Native American reservations and designated tribal land areas...more than any other state. Native women and children are at higher risk for trafficking than any other racial group. **According to the U.S. Attorney's Office, more than 40% of those trafficked in the state have been Native women. What's even more startling is that only 8% of South Dakota's residents are Native.**

While it can happen to anyone, Native American women and children are at a higher risk. Traffickers recognize and take advantage of people who are vulnerable. According to the [Polaris Project](#), "Generational trauma, historic oppression, discrimination, and other societal factors and inequities create community-wide vulnerabilities."

These women and children will often spend a lifetime trying to heal from this horrific abuse. Native Hope spoke with a sex trafficking victim who was able to find her way out. She acknowledged the devastating effects of her past by saying, "I wonder just how aware the people who commit these crimes are of the damage made."

## HOW TO RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS OF SEX TRAFFICKING

- Avoids eye contact and seems fearful
- Not allowed or able to speak for himself/herself
- Anxious, especially around law enforcement
- Can't say where he/she is staying
- Has numerous inconsistencies in his/her story
- Shows signs of mental or physical abuse

**If you see something, say something.**

**If you or someone you know is being trafficked:**

- CALL 911 so local law enforcement can respond ASAP
- CALL the SD Statewide Sex Trafficking Sexual Assault Victim Hotline at 1 (888) 352-8511
- CALL the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 1 (888) 373-7888
- OR TEXT "HELP" or "INFO" to 233733

## HELP END SEX TRAFFICKING AT THE STURGIS RALLY

Native Hope is determined to end the sex trafficking of Native Americans. But we can't do it without you, together, we can be a powerful force in raising awareness and bringing an end to this dark industry.

This year, Native Hope has rallied together with the [West River Human Trafficking Task Force](#) and partnered with [The SOAP Project](#).

You too, can make a difference in the lives of these young women and children. **Let's Rally Together to prevent sex trafficking!**

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## COMMENTS

**Karen**

8/2/2016, 11:44:53 AM

Human trafficking can be diminished through efforts like yours, awesome!

✚ Reply to *Karen*

**Paula Hemlock**

8/3/2016, 6:58:12 AM

STOP THE CYCLE OF ABUSE NOW!!!

✚ Reply to *Paula Hemlock*

**Jehnean Washington**

8/4/2016, 3:41:14 PM

My husband and I are creating a project to help fund organizations like this. Human trafficking must be stopped and the victims need more help to rebuild their lives. We want to make a huge impact and help in this fight.

✚ Reply to *Jehnean Washington*

**Susan Knight**

8/5/2016, 2:05:45 PM

Thank you for what you are doing !

✚ Reply to *Susan Knight*

**Michael Marchese**

11/14/2016, 11:00:44 AM

It is sad for any person to be used by predators for sex. Children should be able to be just that, children enjoying their young years with hopes and dreams! Not living in fear of being abused. The culture of abuse needs to be stopped! Education in this is paramount throughout america!

✚ Reply to *Michael Marchese*

**Ganishka Silverfox**

10/5/2021, 2:04:21 PM

unfortunately this is all so true I am a non status Indian and went to the foster care system where sexual abuse was rapped I was raised in this system. I am know 76 and look back at what happened people tell me to forget it. But it has to stay alive I Native Children myself some had been in the system since birth the there story were no different. Please keep what happened in boarding alive so others learn I will keep what happened in our residential alive and hope to sent these children home. As well in the Foster Care one man was abusing me I asked him way he said I was a half breed and not worthy so he could abuse me. Keep what happened in Canada and United States alive as looking what is happening to children in the Foster Care. Thanks Soulwaker

**Edward McNatt**

7/14/2017, 4:42:20 PM

As a victim myself, I stand with any and all organizations dedicated to stopping this crime. I especially support any that are trying to help Native Americans,whereas, I am part Native American myself.

✚ Reply to *Edward McNatt*

**Regina Durant**

7/23/2017, 4:12:47 PM

Praying for this abuse and crime to stop. Our youth and children deserve our love And respect

✚ Reply to *Regina Durant*

**Renee Koenitzer**

8/4/2017, 8:15:13 AM

I'm sorry I can't donate at this time, but will share this on Facebook, where I saw the link to this originally. I didn't know this happened at Sturgis, having never been there, but I'm angry for the girls, and will promote your work as much as possible.

✚ Reply to *Renee Koenitzer*

**Eleanor Berton**

8/21/2020, 12:21:20 AM

Beautiful article. Reading from Portland, Oregon

✚ Reply to *Eleanor Berton*

**Susan Martin**

9/25/2020, 8:57:40 PM

I am a survivor myself of domestic violence, and found out my husband was molesting our children , 3 girls. It angers me to see all our young people going through this. I can't afford right now to send anything. But as soon as I can I will support this with you.We have to protect our young people bboys and girls!

✚ Reply to *Susan Martin*

**Kathleen Sawyer**

11/1/2020, 7:21:38 PM

I carry a Red Shawl made for me by Chamawa Indian School in Oregon

I wear it and speak about our missing women and children

Thank you for these articles. Aho

✚ Reply to *Kathleen Sawyer*

**Debera Smith**

8/8/2021, 12:29:59 PM

I rally hate to say this, but it does not surprise me that this is occurring. All any decent human has to do is see Wind River. The truth must be told. Thank you for making this another priority. I have had the honor of being a guest on Pine Ridge a few years ago. Love the state and the people. may Grandfather watch over all.

✚ Reply to *Debera Smith*

**Alfred McLendon**

8/9/2021, 9:52:16 PM

Thank you

✚ Reply to *Alfred McLendon*

**Cristal Kilson**

8/14/2021, 2:34:42 AM

Trafficking is epidemic n worldwide!Trafficking of drugs,guns n humans been around for yrs.n its not a color thing either.Professionals like politicians,drs.lawyers,etc,r involved in it n its big business.They dont give a shit that it ruin n destroy lives forever.In their eyes,the almighty \$\$\$\$ is more important n that the victims r expendable

✚ Reply to *Cristal Kilson*

**Elliott aka Slider Sharron**

10/4/2021, 2:14:35 PM

Thank you for this vital information about the residential schools, human trafficking's scourge and all the other articles. Your mission to inform and educate is so vital for change to occur. My paternal grandmother was Cree from Atlantic Canada. Little was spoken about her or our heritage. That was a shameful occurrence in our family. I have made it my mission to discover and search out our family's lineage. Again thank you. I hope this small gift will help your work. Aho ....

✚ Reply to *Elliott aka Slider Sharron*

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