

The U.S. takes on trafficking: The Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act

by [Linda Bales](#) in the [August 11, 2009](#) issue

The International Labor Organization estimates that 12.3 million people worldwide are in forced labor, bonded labor or sexual servitude. Approximately 800,000 people are trafficked across national borders each year. Up to half of trafficking victims are minors, and 80 percent are female. A majority are women and girls trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation.

Human trafficking is an international crisis, and the United States has taken steps to respond. Congress first voted on an antitrafficking act in 2000, then again in 2003 and 2005. So far, the government has appropriated \$528 million toward this effort. In December, the government's tools for combating trafficking were strengthened by the passage of the William Wilberforce Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) of 2008.

On the international front, TVPRA establishes the Trafficking in Persons Report as a diplomatic tool to encourage foreign governments to increase efforts against modern-day slavery. The annual publication will include reports on individual countries' progress or lack thereof. The bill also contains provisions for penalizing countries that violate trafficking laws.

Domestically, TVPRA increases penalties for traffickers and attempts to better protect victims on U.S. soil, regardless of their nationality. The bill provides funding for both law enforcement and programs to help victims.

For example, the Department of Health and Human Services is administering Rescue and Restore, a program in which law enforcement literally rescues trafficking victims, who then receive services to promote their safety and well-being. Nongovernmental service providers, many of them faith-based, are working with HHS on Rescue and Restore.

There's a shortage in funding, however, for shelter or housing for those rescued from traffickers. Additionally, victims sometimes lack access to good social workers, and they may find themselves back in the clutches of traffickers. Critics of TVPRA argue that the law should provide greater opportunities for victims to achieve economic self-sufficiency, as economic vulnerability is a primary factor that leads to people being trafficked in the first place.

Another problem is that minors need greater protection, since minors recognized by federal law as trafficking victims are often processed within the juvenile-offenders system. Fortunately, the 2008 law was strengthened by provisions to ensure that unaccompanied children are safely repatriated to their home country, unless they are victims of a severe form of trafficking, are at risk of being trafficked upon return or have a credible fear of persecution. The law requires yearly reports to Congress on the number of children repatriated.

Overall, the passage of TVPRA was a big step forward for U.S. antitrafficking efforts. But there's more to be done—beginning with securing funding for TVPRA's provisions through the U.S. congressional appropriations process, which began in April. Faith communities are involved in ongoing education and advocacy toward this end.

Like any trade, sex trafficking depends on demand as well as supply. Along with directly advocating for antitrafficking efforts, the church can be a vehicle for change on this issue by addressing the broader issues that affect both the supply and the demand sides: global poverty, gender inequality, the lack of respect for human dignity. Through engaging this issue, the church can live out its calling to be in ministry with the poor and marginalized—and it can save lives.