

How two investigative teams overcame information gaps to report on sex crimes: sex trafficking in Boston and sexual violence in Singapore.

Bad data & sex crimes

ADVANCED **Jenifer McKim** (she/her), WGBH

Trafficking occurs every day on a global scale, and the U.S. is no exception. The National Human Trafficking Hotline receives more than 10,000 cases reported every year (a fraction of the actual problem), while the U.S. Department of State estimates 24.9 million trafficking victims worldwide at any given time. The majority of sex trafficking cases involve girls and women. But what about boys and men?

Jenifer McKim, Deputy Investigative editor at the GBH News Center for Investigative Reporting, and colleague Phillip Martin embarked on a year-long journey to investigate the missing data and tell the stories of these invisible victims.

The resulting six-part series, “Unseen: The Boy Victims of the Sex Trade,” won a national Murrow Award in 2022 for Excellence in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

The reporting duo had previously written about illicit massage businesses and the domestic sex trafficking of girls. When they wrote those earlier

Tools

Grindr, Excel,
Google Workspace

Link

bit.ly/3Er5qit

stories, sources asked about male victims and lack of coverage. “We realized that there was this area that was even more hidden, misunderstood and under-prosecuted than the victimization of women and young girls,” McKim said.

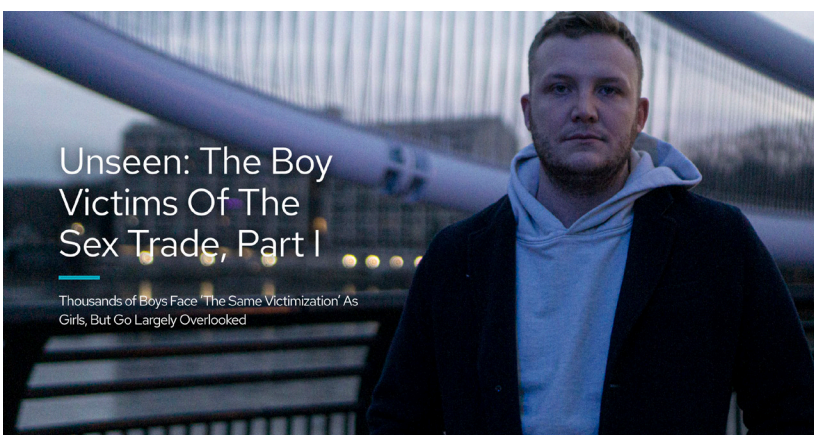
She said the biggest problem in reporting on human trafficking is the lack of data. To address the information gap, McKim brought the issue to her students at Boston University. She was teaching investigative journalism at the time, and the students’ classroom work helped lay a foundation for the subsequent in-depth series for WGBH, Boston’s local NPR station.

They reviewed available data and reports on male sex trafficking, and categorized source material into spreadsheets for determining what national data shortcomings needed to be filled in via primary source interviews. Next came more than 60 interviews with advocates, survivors, law enforcement and researchers.

“It’s so important to combine human stories with data,” she said. Aware that predators may use online dating applications to connect with potential victims, her team scanned the internet and documented more than 100 cases of men charged with sexually assaulting or attempting to meet minors for sex on the LGBTQ+ dating app Grindr (which officially requires users to be 18+). They interviewed survivors who talked about their exploitation.

Meanwhile, they continued digging for documents, pulling public records and adding information from studies into their database of pre-existing research. They consulted the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children and filed public records requests with district attorney offices to see which cases were being prosecuted. Combining these elements allowed them to fully develop the series of online articles.

“It’s important to stay organized,” said McKim, who primarily used Excel to track sources. For collaboration, the team used Google Workplace (Google Sheets and Google Drive) to keep track of data and interviews in clearly marked folders.





MUNIRAH MANSOOR / KONTINENTALIST

INTERMEDIATE Mick Yang (he/him), *Kontinentalist*

Tracking sexual violence statistics is a data-collection challenge. Acquiring exact numbers can be tricky with domestic violence often going unreported.

Women Unbounded (a collective of independent intersectional feminists in Singapore) approached Kontinentalist (a “data-driven storytelling studio” focused on Asia) to propose a story addressing this data problem.

The resulting collaborative report was titled “Sexual violence in Singapore: a crisis.”

This massive project required many collaborators — from coding to design and data collection. Mick Yang, the story’s author, described local media coverage and available data on sexual violence as limited and superficial, lacking insight into the root of the systemic problem.

“This was the only story to my knowledge in [Singaporean] media that exists that takes that data-first approach and tries to look at this topic from the bird’s eye view,” Yang said.

Tools

Google Sheets,
Flourish, Figma

Link

bit.ly/3tpfO3x

They began with the basics. Researchers sorted through five years of publicly accessible news reports and archives from major newspapers in Singapore, or “secondary literature,” as Yang described the data.

He said Singapore’s comparatively limited media ecosystem benefited the team because data collection was not as overwhelming as it would have been in a larger media market like the U.S. Then, they cross-referenced findings with available data from nongovernmental organizations.

Next came deciphering what information was relevant or proven and what could be discarded. With

sexual violence, especially domestic violence, it can be difficult to verify and sort cases into neat categories. Yang said working with the data required a delicate approach with “a lot more emotional tech and empathy.” The entire project from start to finish took eight months.

“The team worked collectively and shared a platform to track each link and resource,” Yang said. “They organized all the data in columns, with one having the age of a victim, one with the age of the perpetrator, their relationship, the year of the first offense, etc.” He said Google Sheets offered an efficient and effective platform for sorting and tracking collaborative data.

Once the data had been collected, the Kontinentalist team looked for patterns. Then, coders and designers developed the article and its interactive visualizations. The final digital package featured sleek infographics with data linked back to secondary literature and clear source attribution.

Yang described the team’s work as daunting, extensive, time-consuming and definitely worth the effort. “I think this story was really important,” he said, “and the reason why we didn’t have to call on databases was because, to our knowledge, no such database exists” on sexual violence in Singapore. ♦