



# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

### Abstract

The present study analyzes human trafficking related charges in Harris County from January 2018 to December 2020. In total there were 549 cases filed during the period of study and those cases were dispersed amongst 217 defendants. We subcategorized the 217 defendants into 6 groups including: defendants currently out on bond; defendants on bond at the time of the new charges in custody; defendants wanted for bond forfeiture (wanted fugitive); defendant with cases transferred to federal custody and dispositions (state and federal); and defendants with cases dismissed due to a missing witness, lack of witness, or defendant death, or issues related to probable cause. We found that 67% of defendants charged in state courts received sentences of 5 years or less or community supervision. We also found that 90% of offenders did not have to register as a sex offender after conviction. These findings can aid Harris County and anti-trafficking advocacy work better comprehend the landscape of human trafficking offenders in Houston.

*Key words: Unsecure Bond, Recidivism, Human Trafficking, Compelling Prostitution*

### Introduction

In October 2019 Crime Stoppers in conjunction with Houston Police Department and the Harris County District Attorney's Office held a press conference regarding an alarming trend we discovered of defendants charged with murder that had previously been released on multiple felony and Personal Recognizance bonds. In March of 2020, Crime Stoppers of Houston, under the supervision of Victim Services Director, Andy Kahan, began compiling a list of victims allegedly killed/murdered by defendants who were either on multiple felony bonds, Felony Personal Recognizance (PR) bonds (also known as unsecured bonds), or bond forfeiture. In this list we included victims who died as a result of Intoxication Manslaughter and Hit-Run Fatalities because these are presumably preventable deaths if the defendant has not been released into the community on bond. The criteria excluded defendants who were charged with Murder while out on only 1 Felony Bond. The time period of the study looked at cases filed in the Harris County District Courts (HCDC) from January 2018 through December 2020. The examination of loss of life due to the actions of repeat felony offenders released on multiple felony bonds, PR bonds, or with a motion to revoke bond denied led to the desire to learn more about how repeat offenders and human trafficking cases correlate.

In November of 2020, we filed an open records request seeking information from the Harris County District Courts (HCDC) regarding defendants charged with Human Trafficking and Compelling Prostitution from January 2018 through December 2020. The impetus for this study was based upon Houston being nationally known as a Hub for Human Trafficking. Looking at each individual case we were able to categorize defendants into 6 categories to include: defendants currently out on bond; defendants on bond at the time of the new charges in custody; defendants wanted for bond forfeiture; defendant with cases transferred to federal custody and dispositions (state and federal); and defendants with cases dismissed due to a missing witness, lack of witness, or defendant death, or issues related to probable cause. All our findings are supported by public court records. Crime Stoppers of Houston hopes this information will give Harris County a clearer understanding of what happens to defendants after they are arrested and charged with Human Trafficking and/or Compelling Prostitution.

### Background

According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2016), Houston ranks #1 for the amount of human trafficking in all cities in the United States. Since being named the top place for trafficking in the nation, the City of Houston and Harris County at large has worked to implement programs and policy to combat human trafficking



# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

in our city. In May of 2016, City of Houston, Mayor Sylvester Turner unveiled the first phase of a plan to fight human trafficking in conjunction with community partners, and later that year launched a media campaign called “Watch for Trafficking” to help Houstonians recognize and report human trafficking. Most recently, Mayor Turner introduced the Office of Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence in September of 2020 which has a goal to “...increase victim identification and protect our residents by raising awareness about human trafficking and facilitating partnerships with community stakeholder.” Additionally, the City of Houston has created the Houston Area Council on Human Trafficking (2020) also known as HAC-HT. HAC-HT’s mission is to “[bring] community stakeholders together to eradicate trafficking through partnerships to support Strategic Plan execution.”

Similarly, Harris County has taken profound steps to prevent and combat human trafficking. In 2019 the Harris County District Attorney’s Office filed 244 Human Trafficking or Compelling Prostitution cases which was more than double the 106 cases filed in 2016. Harris County District Attorney, Kim Ogg, has spoken out about the rising problem and has made it a priority to address it via the creation of Project 180. Project 180 seeks to redefine Harris County’s approach to human trafficking by utilizing a multi-disciplinary team to identify victims while aggressively prosecuting their exploiters. Project 180 is a program funded by the Texas Governor’s Office and has four major goals that include: “reduce the harm of a criminal conviction for young offenders, aged 17 to 24, charged with prostitution-selling who likely entered into this life as adolescents and trafficking victims; bridge this same population with a community agency (Houston Area Women’s Center) for services with an eye toward leaving the life; increase accountability of exploiters (sex buyers and traffickers) through increased prosecution and sentencing; and gather data and research to inform future policy regarding this population.”

Not only are city and county agencies working tirelessly in Houston to combat human trafficking, but local non-profit organizations and law enforcement agencies are also coming together in new and innovative ways. One collaboration that is working to identify and eradicate human trafficking is the Houston Trafficking Rescue Alliance (HTRA). HTRA is a nationally recognized collaboration of local, state and federal law enforcement agencies, working in tandem with service providers and nonprofit organizations, to identify and assist victims of human trafficking in the greater Houston area so they can effectively identify, apprehend and prosecute human trafficking offenders. A second innovative group is the Houston Rescue and Restore Coalition (HRRC). HRRC is a coalition founded by United Against Human Trafficking and is a group committed to “creating a systemic solution of care and community resources for our great city.” HRRC is made up of 55+ social service agencies, faith communities, business, and other non-profit organizations with a common goal of uniting to be a unified voice in the identification of victims and survivors and to advocate for needed change in Houston. As active members of many of these initiatives, as well as many other incredible programs and organizations such as: The Houston Area Against Trafficking (HAAT), Citizens Empowered Against Sexual Exploitation Coalition (CEASE), The Houston 20, just to name a few, we were led to further investigate what we hypothesized to be a breakdown in our system. We suspected that, as we found when examining homicide cases, a large percentage of Human Trafficking and/or Compelling Prostitution cases in Harris County would be positively correlated with defendants released into the community on multiple felony bonds. With so many separate entities working both independently and collectively in Houston to combat human trafficking, we hope this information provides a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the human trafficking related cases in Harris County.



# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

### Methods

We sent an open records request to the HCDC office for all human trafficking and compelling prostitution related cases filed from January 2018 through December 2020. We received 549 cases and then used a retrospective approach to sort the cases. We found that 549 cases filed were dispersed amongst 217 defendants. We then looked for commonalities amongst the cases filed to create subcategories. The subcategories we established are defendants currently out on bond; defendants on bond at the time of the new charges in custody; defendants wanted for bond forfeiture; defendant with cases transferred to federal custody and dispositions (state and federal); and defendants with cases dismissed due to a missing witness, lack of witness, or defendant death, or issues related to probable cause.

Once our subcategories were established, we further examined each subcategory to provide more robust and detailed information about each subcategory. Finally, we looked at defendants' previous convictions history and checked all sentenced offenders against the sex registry to see which offenders are currently registered or will be required to register upon completion of their sentence.

### Results

The present study of 549 Human Trafficking and Compelling Prostitution cases filed in Harris County from January 2018 to December 2020 found that those 549 cases were distributed amongst only 217 defendants. This means numerous defendants had multiple human trafficking related cases filed against them during the time of study. We found 31% (N=67) of the 217 total defendants who had at least one Human Trafficking or Compelling Prostitution case filed against them during the time of study was released into the community on multiple felony, human trafficking related bonds. The defendants studied could be categorized into 6 subcategories to include the following results (see Figure 1): 39% of defendants were released on at least one felony bond (N=84) and awaiting trial (see Figure 2), 30% of defendants are currently in court custody (N=65) (see Figure 3), 14% of defendants were sentenced (N=30) (see Figures 4 & 5), 9% of defendants are currently wanted fugitives (N=19) (see Figure 6), 6% of defendants cases were dismissed for a variety of reasons (N=13) (see Figure 7), and 3% of defendants cases were transferred to Federal Court (N=6). We also discovered that 18% (N=40) of defendants evaluated had previous felony convictions.

### *Sentenced Offenders*

Of the 30 defendants charged during the time of study, 17% (N=5) received deferred adjudication or Community Supervision sentences (parole), 10% (N=3) received less than a 1-year sentences, 40% (N=12) received 1-5 year sentences, 17% (N=5) received 6-10 year sentences, 10% (N=3) received 11-15 year sentences, and 7% (N=2) received 16+ year sentences (see Figure 8). In contrast, of 6 of the defendants whose cases were elevated to Federal courts, 2 of the 6 have been Federally convicted and 4 are awaiting trial. Of the 2 federal convictions, 1 offender was sentenced to 40 years in prison, and the other offender was sentenced to 21.5 years in prison. 27% (N=8) are serving their sentence at Texas State Jail, 10% (N=3) are serving their time at the Harris County Jail, 47% (N=14) are serving their sentence at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), and 17% (N=5) are serving their time in the community on Deferred Adjudication/Probation (see Figure 5).

### *Sex Offender Registry*

3% (N=1) of the 30 sentenced offenders are currently registered as a sex offender. The offender's charges include: Trafficking of Child Prohibited Conduct and Attempted Compelling Prostitution < 18 YOA). 7% (N= 2)



# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

of 30 offenders are required to register as a sex offender when released. Those offenders' offenses include: 1<sup>st</sup> offender was charged with Trafficking of Child Prohibited Conduct and Sexual Assault of Child 14-17, and 2<sup>nd</sup> offender was charged with Online Solicitation of a Minor; Compelling Prostitution by Force/Threat/Fraud and Trafficking Person Prohibited Conduct Force/Fraud (both of those charges were dismissed as deal under

conviction of Online Solicitation). 33% (N=10) of the 30 offenders are charged with Human Trafficking related charges involving a minor. 70% (N=7) of the 10 offenders with Human Trafficking related charges involving a Minor such as: Trafficking of Child Prohibited Conduct, Compelling Prostitution < 18 YOA, and Sexual Assault of Child 14-17 are NOT required to register as a sex offender when released (see Figure 10). None of the offenders charged with Human Trafficking related charges involving adults (N=20) are required to register as a sex offender when released.

### ***Defendants Released on Bond & Wanted Fugitives.***

79% (N=67) of the 84 defendants examined who are out on at least one felony bond are currently out on multiple felony bonds, and 21% (N=18) are out on only one bond (see Figure 2). Of the 19 wanted fugitives examined, 58% of them (N=11) have 0-2 warrants for their arrest, 37% (N=7) have 3-5 warrants for their arrest, and 5% (N=1) have 6+ warrants for their arrest (see Figure 6).

### ***Defendants Currently in Custody***

There are currently 65 defendants in custody and of those 65, 29% (N=19) are in custody for one human trafficking related charge and 71% (N=46) are in custody for 2+ human trafficking related charges (see Figure 3). 4 defendants (6%) have served time for previous Human Trafficking Related Convictions. Of those 4 defendants, 2 defendants previously served time for charges of Promoting Prostitution, 1 defendant previously served time for charges of Aggravated Sexual Assault of a Child under 14 years old, and 1 defendant previously served time for charges of Sexual Assault of a Child 14-17 years old.

### ***Dismissed Cases***

Of the cases filed during the time of study, 13 cases were dismissed for a variety of reasons. 31% (N=4) were dismissed for missing witness, 7.5% (N=1) were dismissed due to lack of victim cooperation, 7.5% (N=1) were dismissed due to the defendant being deceased, and 54% (N=7) were dismissed due to issues with probable cause (see Figure 7).

## **Discussion**

The information uncovered via this study helps the residents of Harris County and concerned parties better understand the criminal landscape of human trafficking cases in Houston. An issue of primary concern is that our staff had to spend roughly 250 hours of staff time to interpret these cases. We are an independent, non-profit organization and should not be the entity responsible for the analysis of this information. It should be required for the information provided in this report to be readily available to community members on an ongoing basis.

Our team found the cases to be dismissed by the courts to be of particular interest. 38% (N=5) of the dismissed cases involved either lack of witness or a witness who no longer desires to press charges. This is of interest for human trafficking cases in particular because we see through our work in this space how scared victims are to come forward with their stories. Not only is it retraumatizing to ask victims to recount their stories repeatedly and



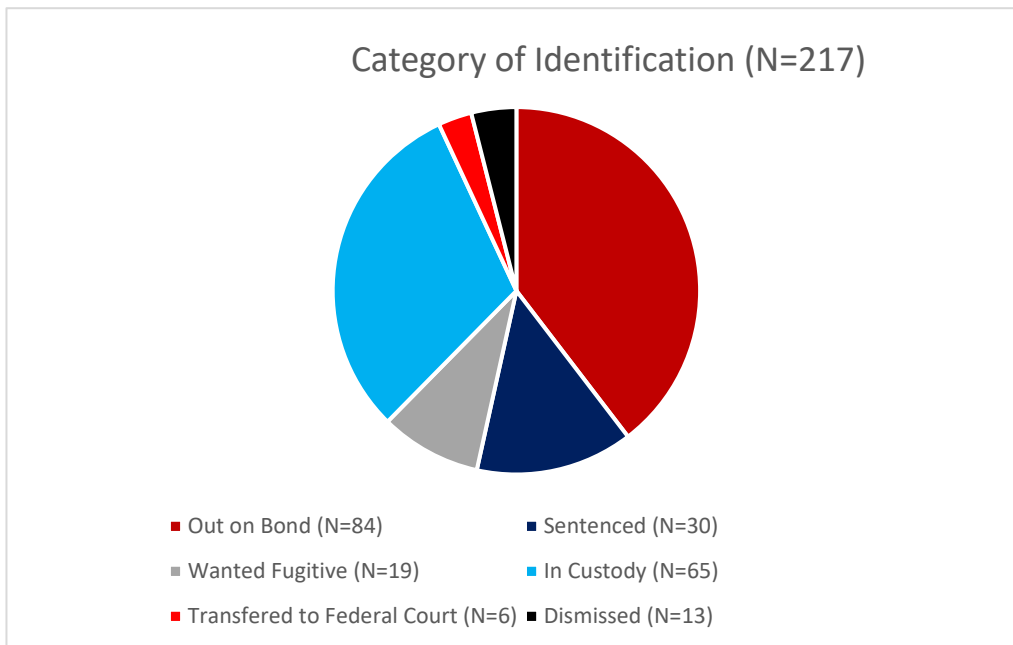
# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

to ask them to testify in court, but it can also be incredibly dangerous to them to do so. This brings us to our concern with the length of sentences and the number of defendants released on bond. Our results show that 67% (N=20) of the offenders charged were sentenced to 5 years or less, or deferred adjudication. If a victim were to testify against their trafficker, and then their trafficker receives a low sentence, the safety of the victim could be highly compromised in a few short years when the offender is released. Likewise, when we allow human trafficking defendants to be released on bond, we put their victims at risk once again and perhaps even increased risk. Houston and Harris County should take these findings and trends of traffickers into consideration when deciding upon court proceedings and sentences in human trafficking related cases.

Future research should be done on longer-term trends of human trafficking offenders and correlated with homicide findings. Additionally, better analysis of data should be provided to the public so that all those working in the anti-trafficking space have a more transparent view of what is occurring in our courts.

Figure 1: Defendant Category of Identification (N=217)





# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

Figure 2: Defendants out on Bonds (N=84)

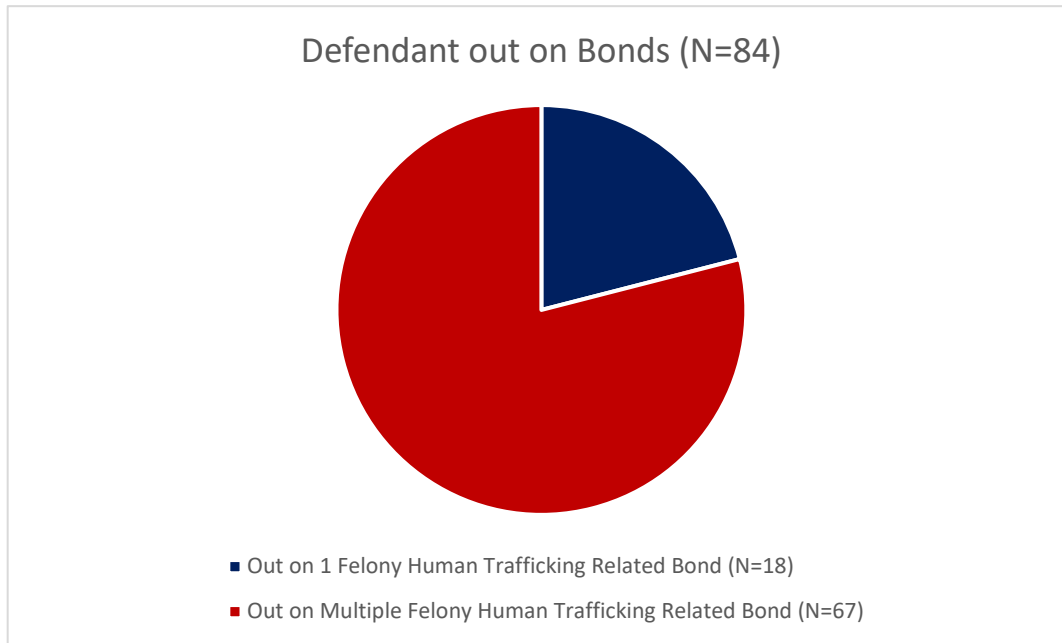
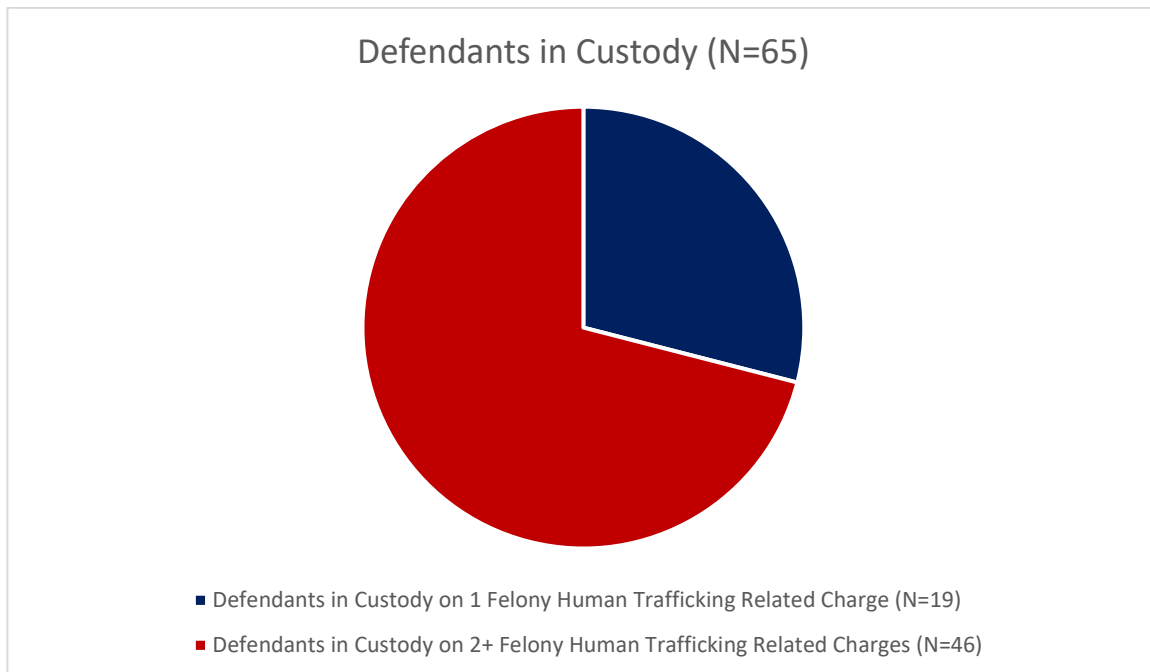


Figure 3: Defendants in Custody (N=65)





# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

Figure 4: Offenders Serving or Served (N=30)

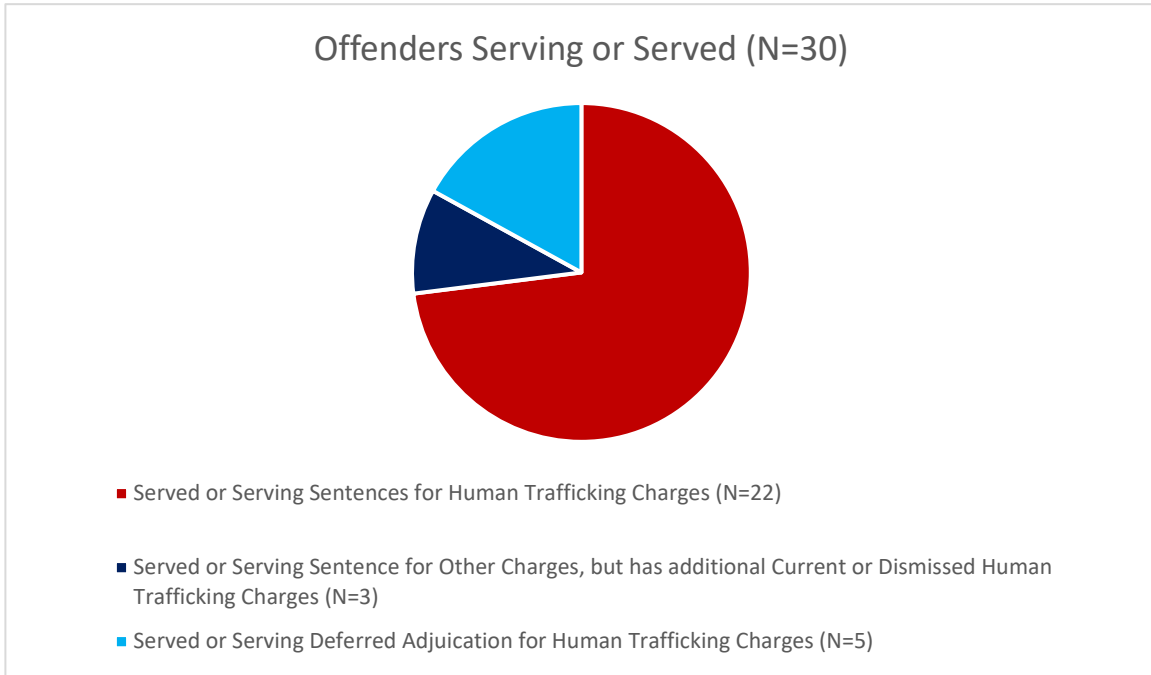
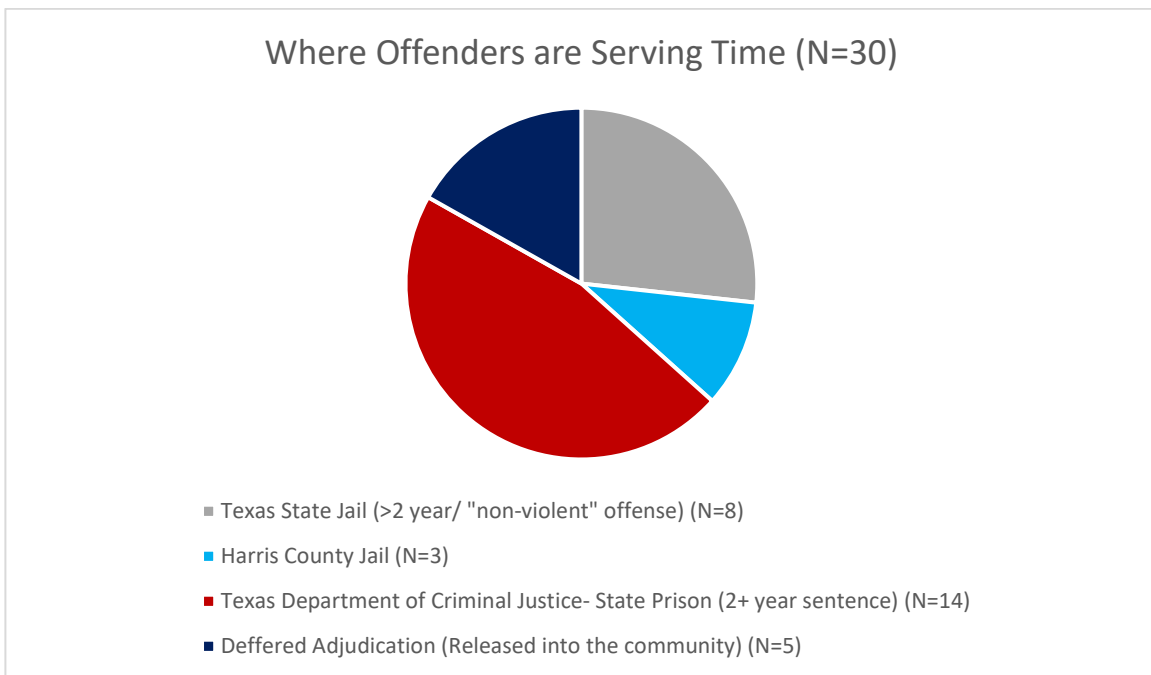


Figure 5: Where Offenders are Serving Time (N=30)





# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

Figure 6: Number of Warrants for Wanted Fugitives (N=19)

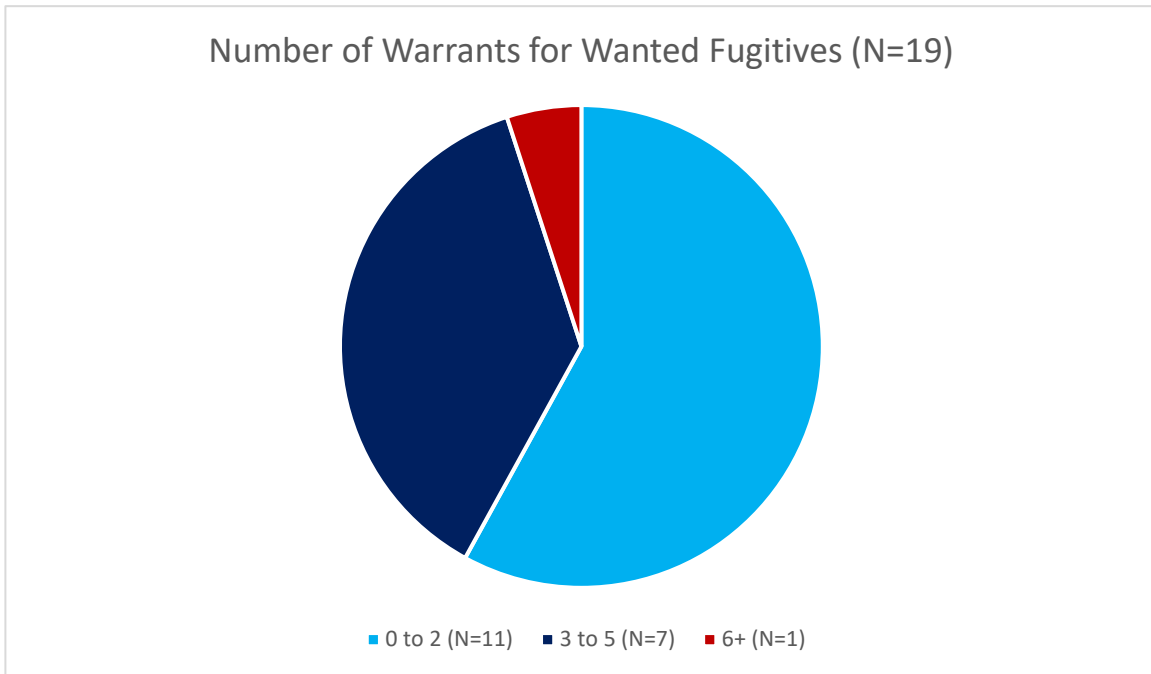
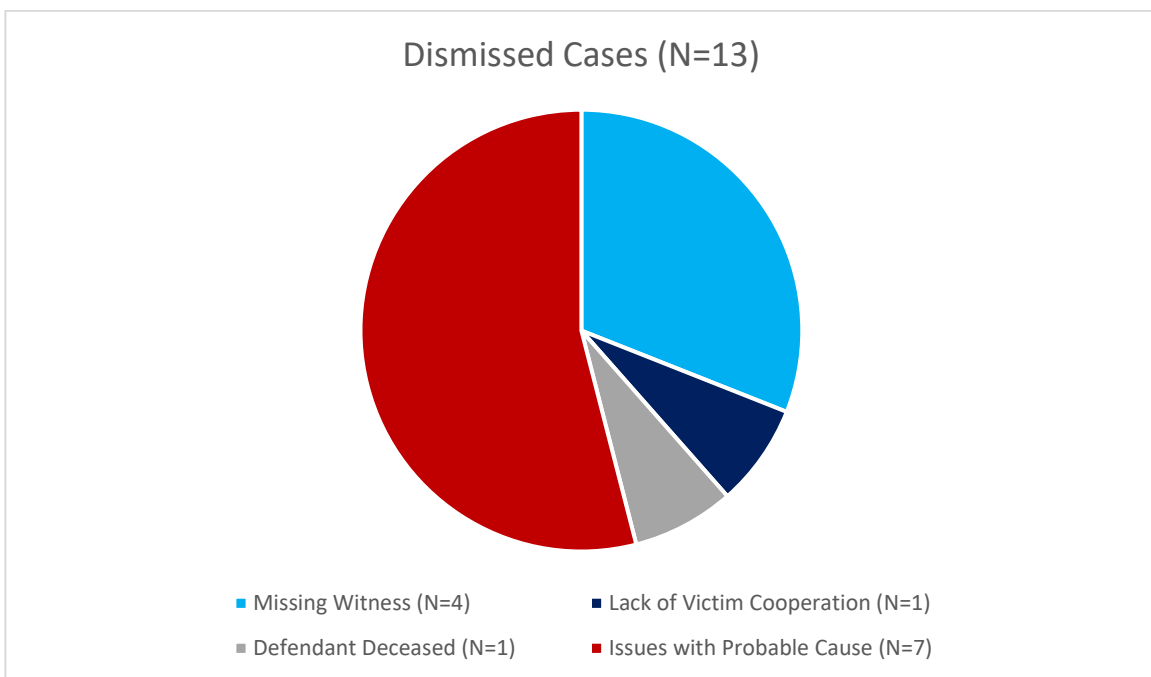


Figure 7: Dismissed Cases (N=13)







# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

Figure 8: State Sentence Length (N=30)

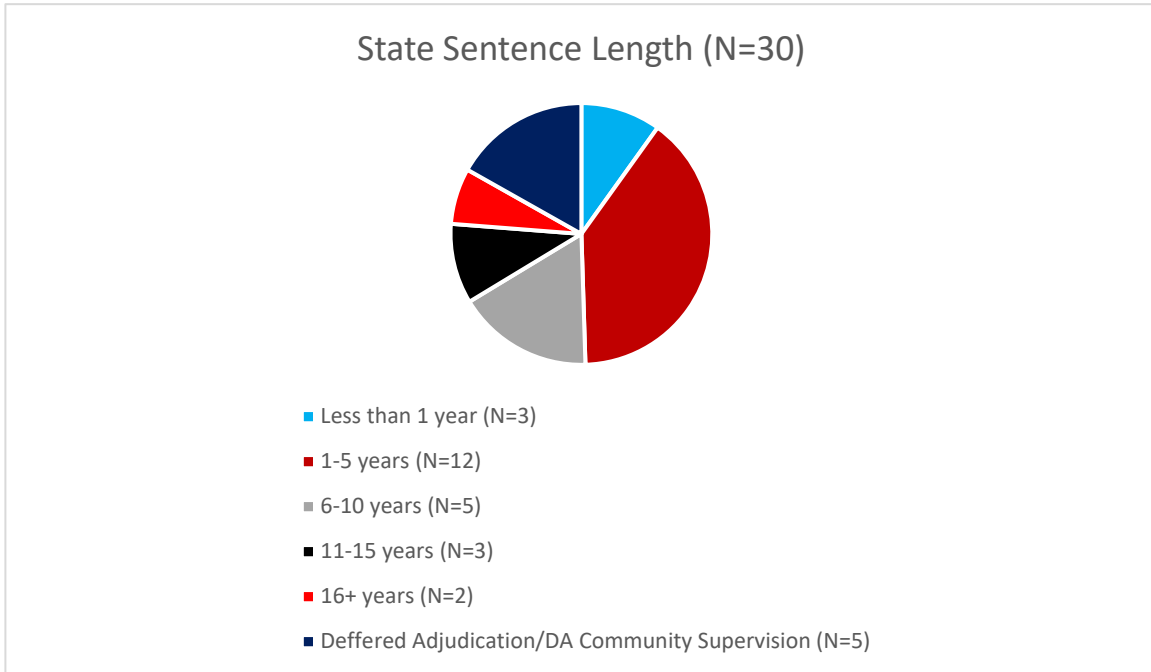
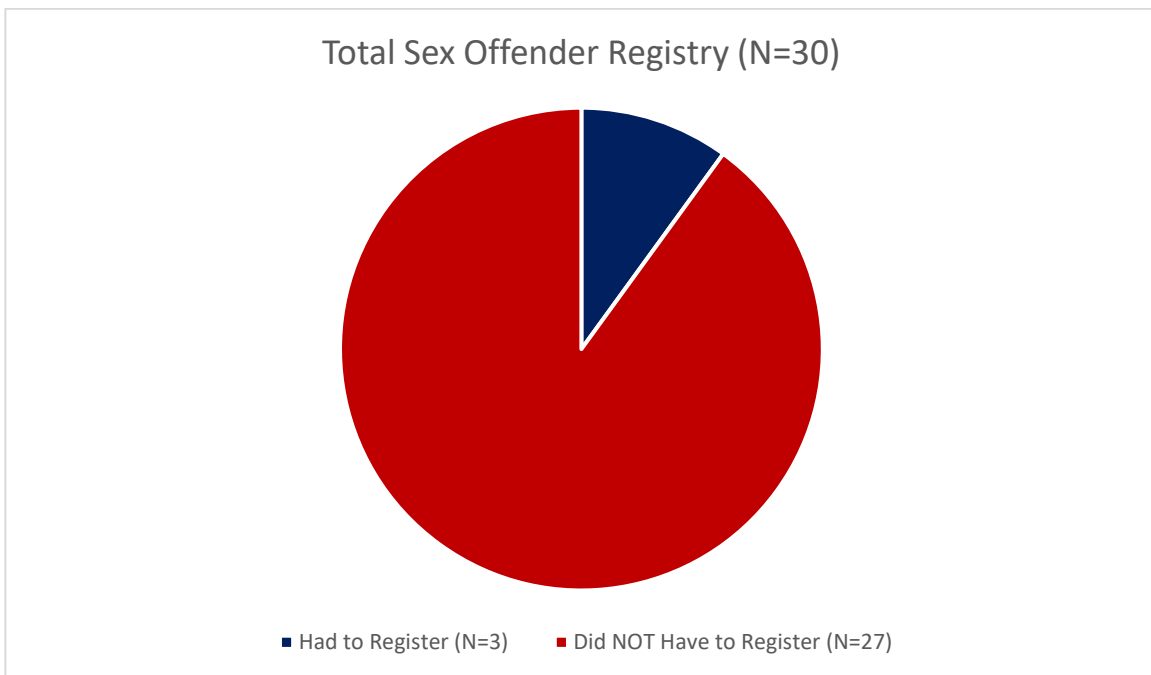


Figure 9: Total Sex Offender Registry (N=30)





# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

Figure 10: Offenders Charged with Offenses Against Minors & Sex Registry (N=10)

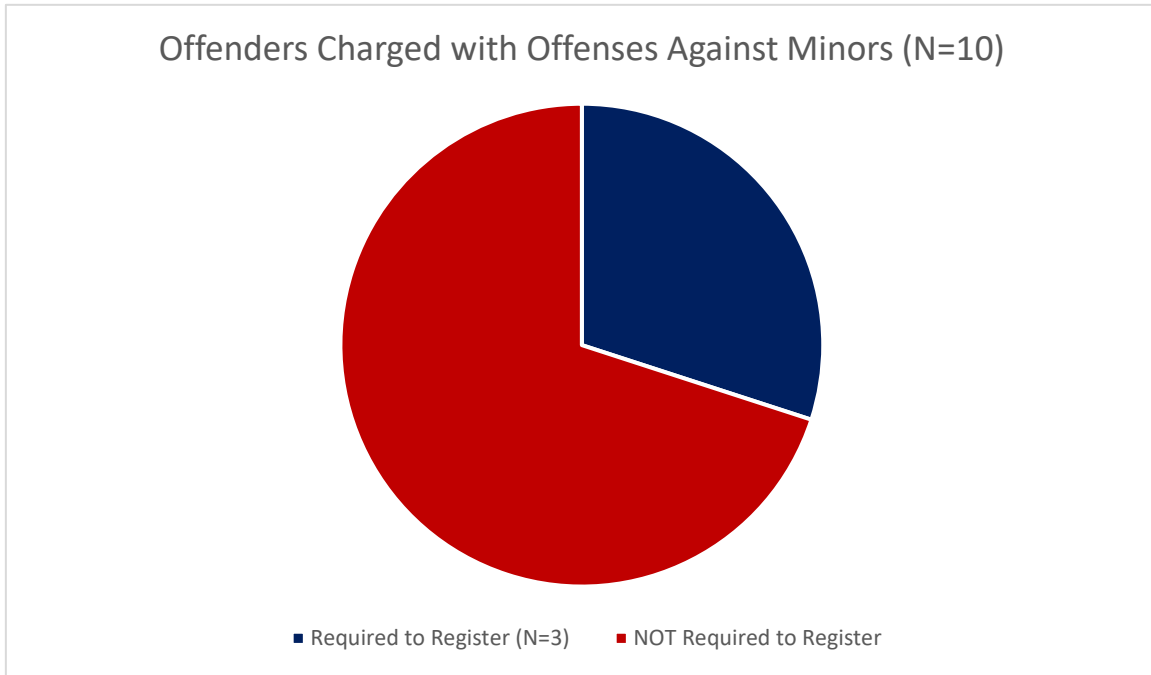
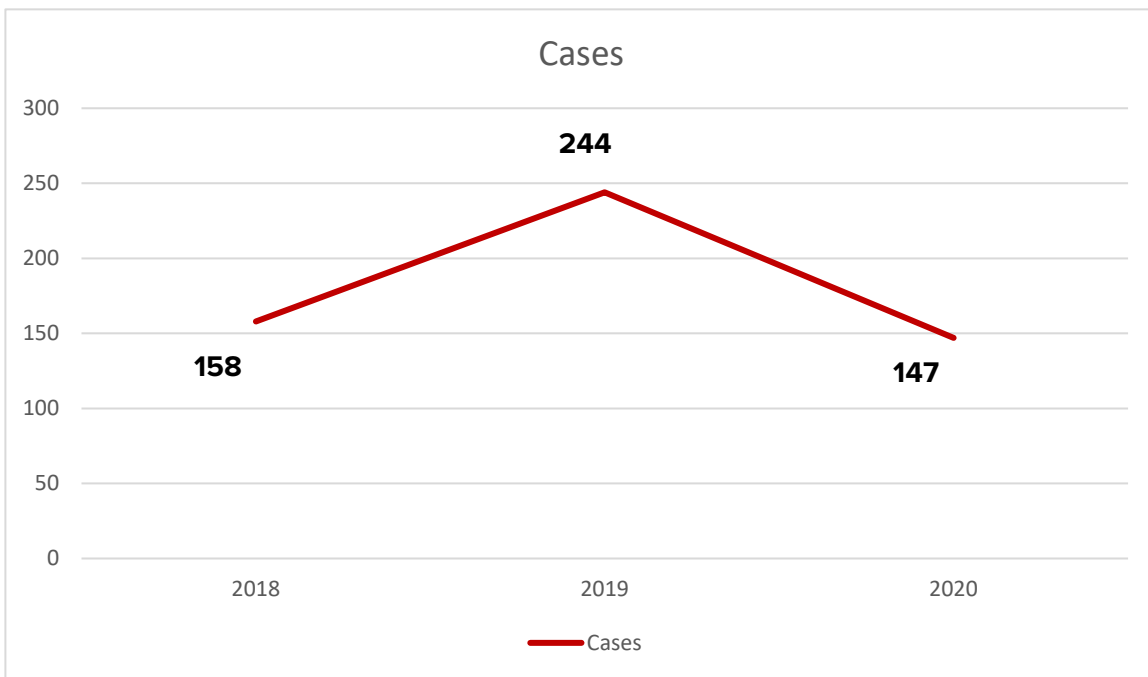


Figure 11: Cases Filed by Year (N=549)





# CRIME STOPPERS OF HOUSTON

## Report: Outcomes of Human Trafficking Related Cases Filed in Harris County

### References

[https://www.traffickinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2016\\_Global\\_Report\\_on\\_Trafficking\\_in\\_Persons.pdf](https://www.traffickinginstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2016_Global_Report_on_Trafficking_in_Persons.pdf)

<https://www.houstontx.gov/mayor/humantrafficking.html>

<https://humantraffickinghouston.org/houston-area-council-to-combat-human-trafficking/>

<https://app.dao.hctx.net/>

<https://gov.texas.gov/uploads/files/organization/criminal-justice/Project-180-Version1-External-Assessment.pdf>

<https://hawc.org/>

<https://bjaojp.gov/funding/awards/2019-vt-bx-k025>

<https://uaht.org/coalition/>

<https://uaht.org/>

<https://www.fightforus.org/>

<https://www.ceasenetwork.org/>

<https://childrenatrisk.org/human-trafficking/#:~:text=The%20Cities%20Empowered%20Against%20Sexual,execute%20strategies%20for%20reducing%20demand.>