Kelly Brownell:

Hello, and welcome to Policy 360. I'm your host Kelly Brownell, the dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. My guest today is Susan Coppedge, the United States ambassador at large to monitor and combat trafficking in persons. Susan has had a long and distinguished career. Prior to being appointed by President Obama and confirmed by the Senate in October of 2015, Susan served for 15 years as assistant U.S. attorney in the northern district of Georgia. She prosecuted more than 45 human traffickers in federal cases and helped assist more than 90 victims of trafficking. Ambassador Coppedge is visiting Duke to participate in a panel about the United States anti-trafficking policies. She is very familiar with the campus because she is also a Duke. In fact, a Sanford alum. So welcome back, Susan.

Susan Coppedge:

It's really great to be here. Thank you for having me.

Kelly Brownell:

So let's set the stage for this very important problem. How big of a problem is trafficking in the United States?

Susan Coppedge:

So human trafficking is a problem both here, domestically, and internationally. Human trafficking can be found in every country in the world. The International Labor Organization estimates that there are 21 million people a year who are trafficked, and traffic doesn't necessarily mean that they have to move across international borders. People can also be trafficked internally to a country, and that's also counted in that number.

Kelly Brownell:

So when we think of trafficking, many people automatically think of sex trafficking, but there are other ways that people are trafficked. Could you explain?

Susan Coppedge:

So trafficking is really forcing anyone to work against their will, whether that's in commercial sex acts or working in a field or in a factory. So trafficking is, by definition, causing someone to engage in work by force, fraud or coercion. So that's the terms used in the U.S. law and the terms used in the international UN definition, which is known as the Palermo Protocol.

Kelly Brownell:

How are children involved?

Susan Coppedge:

Children are actually not ... Forced, fraud and coercion is not required for someone to be a child trafficking victim. U.S law and international law says someone under 18 cannot consent to commercial sex acts, so children under the age of 18 who were placed in prostitution are automatically trafficking victims.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, you mentioned 21 million people worldwide trafficked annually. Is there knowledge about what percentage of those might be people under 18?

Susan Coppedge:

It's hard to estimate the numbers of ages, or in fact whether it's more commercial sex or more forced labor. The statistics tend to indicate that it is more actually forced labor, but trafficking by its nature as a hidden crime. Traffickers try to keep it underground because if it was visible, governments would better be able to tackle it and root it out. So there's a combination of factors that keep victims from talking, whether that's physical threats to them or people they love, economic coercion as well, endangerment that they may face, embarrassment even. So that's why the definition is really flexible and broad. I used to tell juries that fraud, the force, fraud and coercion part, fraud is just lying to somebody about what job you're going to give them when they get to the country you're taking them to.

Kelly Brownell:

What about the traffickers? Who are they?

Susan Coppedge:

Traffickers are really different types of people. They can be individuals working by themselves. They can be family organizations. They can be criminal gangs. They can be businesses who are trying to compete on the global stage and not paying their workers sufficiently and forcing them into labor.

Kelly Brownell:

You can imagine the devastating consequences. I mean, you can obviously, but I can as well and the people who are victims of trafficking. Are there studies on that or have the consequences on the individual [inaudible 00:03:48] been documented in some way?

Susan Coppedge:

So that's an area where we still need more information and we actually at the state department fund studies and integration efforts on behalf of human trafficking victims. My office, which is the office to monitor and combat trafficking in persons, provides grants internationally every year to NGOs, to academics, to better define the problem where it exists and to better re-integrate victims back into society.

Kelly Brownell:

So in your work before you were in your current position, you did work with victims of trafficking. I mean, tell us a little bit, paint a picture of what it's like to have gone through that and what the long-term consequences might be.

Susan Coppedge:

So when I was a prosecutor, I would directly interview victims and build cases with them. In a trafficking case your best evidence is going to be the witness that this happened to, and so you have to build trust and rapport because that's been taken away from them. You also have to be sure that they feel safe in testifying. So it takes a while to build that into work with these people, but when they have been stabilized, when they realize that the traffickers threats were empty and that they really don't hold any control over them, I found it very moving and compelling to give these people a voice. These are people

that were often marginalized in their societies, which is what made them susceptible to trafficking in the first place, and to stand next to them as they addressed a federal judge was very moving.

Often they were very eloquent about what had happened to them and were wonderful at getting their point across to our juries and our judges here. It was a real honor for me when I was before the Senate having my confirmation hearing to tell the stories of a few victims to the senators as well, because now these girls' cries are not confined to a room they were held in, but they have been heard by juries and judges and U.S. senators. So it was really rewarding to me to work with victims of trafficking.

Kelly Brownell:

I can imagine. It must've been very moving to the members of Congress to hear that.

Susan Coppedge:

I hope it was. I think it was. I think that we can be really proud of the effort our lawmakers are undertaking to root out trafficking, both on the federal and state here. That's part of the message I carry when I travel to other countries, is we are all going through this learning and growth curve for this new crime, and we've had these same growing pains in the US. and here's how we found good practices, promising practices to share with other governments.

Kelly Brownell:

Is there bipartisan support for work on this topic?

Susan Coppedge:

Yes. I'm fortunate that this is a bipartisan issue, that it really doesn't divide down. Everybody wants to help trafficking victims.

Kelly Brownell:

Very nice. The way the U.S. handles trafficking has changed dramatically during the course of your career. Could you tell us about that?

Susan Coppedge:

Sure. When I started out, there was no Trafficking Victim Protection Act at all, no federal and no state laws. Now all 50 states have anti-trafficking laws and our federal law is very strong. When I first started trying cases, we had to use other laws that we could fit the crime into. We used racketeering laws for an organized gang of traffickers or kidnapping laws or our Mann Act, which was an old statute, I think, from the '50s. So we were cobbling it together until we got the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which has been reauthorized numerous times, and we started out really focusing in the U.S. on international victims and then realized we also have problems with domestic U.S. citizens as well who were being trafficked.

Kelly Brownell:

You spent some time in New Zealand, as I understand, where some sex work was decriminalized in 2003. Can you tell us about that and is that a strategy worth broader consideration?

Susan Coppedge:

So I took my practical courtroom experience and went back to the policy world for six months. I had a fellowship to work with the Ministry of Justice in New Zealand, mainly to look at what the decriminalization of sex work had done to trafficking. So it was really fascinating to see an environment were women who were in that field could actually report crimes that they observed, whether that was happening or not. The report that I did find that underage girls were being provided information about them was being provided to police, and also the international victims who were coming in and maybe did not want to engage in commercial sex work, but were being trafficked. There was an uptick in that information as well.

There is a healthy, robust debate internationally about what decriminalization of sex work means for the anti-trafficking communities. The Nordic model, or the Scandinavian model, looks at criminalizing the purchaser of commercial sex acts rather than the seller, the woman, in most cases. So many countries are seeing if that law is a better way to go then straight out decriminalization. So there are many countries where policy work is being done to see both how you can root out victimization and trafficking.

Kelly Brownell:

So I understand as well that you originally wanted to practice environmental law, but you had a special experience while you were assistant U.S. attorney that changed your path. Could you explain that?

Susan Coppedge:

Sure. So I started out doing environmental consulting after I left Duke and then ended up going back to law school, but still doing environmental law when I came out of law school. Then I met 14 and 15 and 16 year old girls who had been trafficked on the streets of Atlanta. It is not a problem that was unique to Atlanta, but Atlanta was doing something about it. So I met these young girls who no one had stood up for. They had been routed through juvenile court. In fact, a juvenile court judge drew the community's attention to them with an editorial letter she wrote to the paper. Then a group of, I guess I can use this language, kickass women came together in Atlanta and demanded that something be done for these young girls.

Because I was at the U.S. attorney's office, I wanted to work on their cases. Luckily, there was a mentor of mine there who allowed me to second chair my very first, the office's very first, trafficking case. It was a very impactful, and I've been doing this work ever since.

Kelly Brownell:

So I'm sure you've had very meaningful cases in your career. Is there one in particular that you think might be illustrative of some of the key issues we've been talking about?

Susan Coppedge:

I carry so many of the cases with me. They don't really leave you. I've had both sex trafficking of American young juveniles and adults, sex trafficking of international victims, domestic servitude involving international victims. They're all heartbreaking. But in all cases you feel like the victim was just looking for a better life, just wanted to improve her status. Most of my victims were women so I talk about it in terms of women. Improve her status, do better. Some were runaways who needed a place to live. So all of these vulnerabilities that are out there stay with you. I think as our policies are improving, we are doing more to address the vulnerabilities so that people don't become trafficking victims in the first place.

Kelly Brownell:

So what happens after the trials for some of these victims, some of them as young as 12 or 13? Is it possible for them to reclaim a normal life?

Susan Coppedge:

Yeah. I actually found that the younger they were, the more resilient they tended to be. I was so proud and I had a case with nine victims of sex trafficking who had been smuggled in from Mexico and three of them completed high school. One of them, by the time trial rolled around a year later, wanted to testify in English. I convinced her that it was probably best to use her native language, but her English was getting very good. Many of them can obtain jobs here. We have a wonderful program in the U.S. called the Trafficking Visa. So if someone is here as a trafficking victim and is threatened back home, they can stay here and start working and be on a path to citizenship as long as they comply with U.S. laws. So there's really opportunities for trafficking victims after this, and I've seen many move on from it. It's very heartening.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, I can just tell by the way you're talking about this how gratifying it must feel for that have gone through something so terrible to have those happy outcomes. So it's very nice to know that it's possible.

Susan Coppedge:

It is.

Kelly Brownell:

So your office releases an annual report called Trafficking in Persons, a global ranking of what countries are doing to comply with the United States efforts to combat trafficking. What sorts of criteria are used to determine these rankings?

Susan Coppedge:

So the report is dictated by the Trafficking Victim Protection Act. So the same law that let me prosecute traffickers now dictates the parameters for the report that the state department puts out. We analyze approximately 187 countries globally, including the U.S. So we write up a narrative of what's happening here as well. We look at the nature of their laws or their laws and compliance with international standards and the Trafficking Victim Protection Act. We look at what we call the three Ps, prosecution protection and prevention. So we look at convictions and sentences and whether there's a deterrent message for traffickers in a country. We also look at what efforts they do to stabilize and help the victims. Are there shelters secure and safe places? Are there programs like the T visa I just mentioned, where they can stay in work if they face danger back home?

We also look at preventative measures as well. Are they training law enforcement? Are they raising awareness in the community? The report is a great snapshot of what trafficking looks like in any one particular place, and then it makes recommendations as to what countries can do to improve their efforts. Even in the U.S. and other what we call tier one countries, there are recommendations for improvement.

Kelly Brownell:

During the past year, The Associated Press has done a series of investigative reports on trafficking in the food business, especially the seafood business. Can you explain more about what that's about?

Susan Coppedge:

Sure. There has been wonderful investigative reporting done by The Guardian, the New York Times, AP on trafficking in the seafood industry. What is happening still is that people who are fishing are being brought in from other countries, such as the Philippines and Malaysia and Burma, and there are fishing off Thai waters or on Thai flagged boats or boats that are bringing their catches to Thailand. The conditions were beyond abhorrent. I mean, they weren't paying people. I mean, we talk about trafficking being an isolated crime and I always say there's absolutely nothing more isolating than being on a boat out in the middle of the ocean. Where are you going to go for help, even if your trafficker wasn't beating you and locking you up at night? I mean, it is the most isolating experience one can imagine.

When these reports revealed that these people were being subjected to these abhorrent conditions and not being paid, not being let off ships often for a year at a time, it really galvanized the world community because we in the U.S. buy a lot of seafood from Thailand. It's in our cat food and in places like Walmart and Costco, I mean, we are unwittingly, by purchasing these products, supporting forced and slave labor. So it was a real wake up call to people. Like, "What can I do? I want to be able to contribute." Because Americans really care deeply about this and I think if they can be informed, they will demand that their seafood be caught free of slave labor, that their chocolate beans be picked free of slave labor. It's not just the seafood industry, but it's certainly a problem worldwide.

My office funded a website with a non-governmental organization called Verite, and the website is called responsiblesourcingtool.org, And it was designed to allow businesses to go in and look, "If I'm catching seafood, if I'm producing makeup products for women, if I'm selling chocolate, where in my supply chain am I likely to find [inaudible 00:15:45] forced labor? Where do I, as a manufacturer or a purchaser of these products, need to look?" Consumers can look as well, and they can see where there are areas that are rife for trafficking.

Kelly Brownell:

So how have the companies that sell a lot of seafood in the U.S. like Walmart or Costco responded to these investigative reports?

Susan Coppedge:

We are working with business coalitions as well. There is a shrimp taskforce that was established by many seafood businesses that came together to see what they could do across their industry to look at the supply chains. President Obama issued an executive order saying the federal government will not purchase and procure goods made with slave labor. The federal government's one of the biggest purchasers in the world. So having a really big consumer draw attention to this issue as well sends the message to companies that people want them and governments want them to clean up their supply chains. I have been very impressed with the work that some companies are doing in this area.

Kelly Brownell:

So are there types of businesses or venues where people might be surprised trafficking is occurring?

Susan Coppedge:

I always say trafficking can occur everywhere. I didn't even know this until I started my current job, that in the makeup that I wear, the shiny part of that is a mineral that comes from India and children are used to harvest that mineral. But it goes everywhere. It goes beyond just goods. It also can happen, with respect to sex trafficking, around big events. Whether it's a sporting event or a party convention, if there are a lot of people coming into a town for an event, then the sex trafficking numbers, we are afraid, increase. In fact, when I was a prosecutor in Atlanta, the final four came to town, Duke wasn't in at that year, unfortunately, but the final four came to town and the FBI did a sting operation where they went onto websites that exist out there that lists and post pictures of young girls, advertising them for commercial sex. The FBI agents do undercover work and they infiltrated a ring that operated with three juveniles and many adult women during the final four.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, thank you. This has been a very illuminating discussion on an incredibly important topic that not a lot of people know about. So it's wonderful to bring attention to this and thank you for all the wonderful work you do on the national and international scene. You make us very proud as a Duke alum, so thank you for joining us today.

Susan Coppedge:

Well, thank you, and I just want to encourage all listeners to do what they can to be aware of what this problem is and to not contribute to it.

Kelly Brownell:

Our guest today has been Susan Coppedge. Susan is the United States ambassador at large to monitor and combat trafficking in persons. The Sanford School of Public Policy has a faculty member, Judith Kelley, who has written a book about the report we talked about earlier, the State Department's Trafficking in Persons report and how that report actually influences country's behavior. The book comes out soon and we will talk with Professor Kelley about it in an upcoming episode. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.