Google weaves a web between human trafficking hotlines

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A sex worker stands outside a brothel in Madaripur, Bangladesh on July 14, 2012. Sex workers are more likely to call in to a hotline for victims of human trafficking on a Wednesday, and a Google-backed initiative could help to explain why.

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The Internet search giant is giving a total of $3 million to three groups in Europe, Asia and the United States combating modern-day slavery to help them share and analyze the mountains of data that grows out of their frontline work.

"There are a lot of different hotlines that exist around the world, but they're completely disconnected," Jared Cohen, the head of Google's in-house think tank Google Ideas, told AFP.

"The data is not integrated across all of them," he said. "If you call one hotline, it doesn't necessarily feed into an integrated system that meshes with all the others."

Sharing the Google funding will be La Strada International, based in Amsterdam but focused on central and eastern Europe; Hong Kong-based Liberty Asia; and the Polaris Project that covers the United States.

The initiative was unveiled Tuesday at Google's offices in Washington, where a few hours earlier the White House published what it called a Federal Strategic Action Plan on Services for Victims of [Human Trafficking](#).

Open for public comment until May 24, the 61-page document comes three years after the [Department of Homeland Security](#) launched a so-called "Blue Campaign" to cut across bureaucratic lines in a bid to address human trafficking.

Jared Cohen, Director of Google Ideas, talks about technology's role in aiding anti-trafficking efforts in Washington, DC on April 9, 2013. Google is announcing a $3 million gift to three nonprofits working to use technology and data to combat human trafficking worldwide.

In a statement online, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said that in 2012 alone, the US authorities "investigated a historic amount of cases and rescued more victims of human trafficking."

They also, she said, "provided support to over 1,200 human trafficking victims... Working together, we can take comprehensive action to stop this terrible crime, rescue victims, and put perpetrators behind bars."

Worldwide, human trafficking is responsible for enslaving nearly 21 million people, from sex workers to manual laborers to street beggars, in an illicit trade that generates an estimated $32 billion a year, Cohen said.

"Bringing all the data together illuminates certain patterns and questions that one might not otherwise see without looking at holistically," Cohen said.

"There are, in the United States, nearly double the number of reports from women who are controlled by their pimps on a Wednesday than any other day in the week," he said by way of example.

"We don't know why that's the case—but because of the integration of this data, we are able to see this as a question."

Google has previously committed $11.5 million to anti-trafficking efforts—and Cohen said "any ads (that appear on [Google](#)'s search result pages) known to fuel human trafficking absolutely gets taken down, period."

Hotlines have also started to notice how calls from trafficked individuals forced into the selling of door-to-door sales scams are more frequent in northern states in the summer, and the south in the winter, he added.

More access to more data from more sources can help campaigners and law enforcement allies to identify choke points where human trafficking can best be disrupted.

Polaris alone has collected data from more than 72,000 calls to its hotline, while Suzanne Hoff of La Strada International said her organization last year took 13,000 calls over its eight hotlines.

"By sharing data, you can see a picture at the global level (and) it gives you more information on your own situation," Hoff told AFP.