

Street Grace

A Justice Ministry operating in Houston, TX

“To demand an end to the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC).” It’s the mission of Street Grace, a ministry that has made its way to Texas through the work of MDPC’s Justice Initiative, our home-grown fight against human trafficking and the exploitation of minors for sex. The Justice Initiative has offered **education and awareness** events since it began in 2018, and MDPC provides ongoing support for **victim services organizations**. But we are incredibly excited to now partner with Street Grace to address the **demand side** of the child-exploitation industry.

What does “addressing the demand side” mean? It puts the buyers of minor sex “on notice” that they are not anonymous; that the crimes they commit are not being ignored. Effects range from disrupting transactions to arresting or prosecuting buyers, sellers, and others (landlords, victims’ family members) complicit in the crimes. Local and state law enforcement work with Street Grace to find perpetrators, and local and state political officeholders have also come on board, making legislative changes to transfer protection from exploiters to victims.

Uncovering the industry’s clients has gone digital in a fascinating way. *Gracie* is an artificial intelligence chatbot developed with generous donations of coding talent, software hosting, and telecom services. It’s Street Grace’s digital “Transaction Intercept,” a tool to help find the buyers of minor sex and erode their notion of anonymity. Street Grace says, “This is quite possibly the single greatest weapon in reducing the commercial sexual exploitation of children in the marketplace.”

Through the use of decoy ads, Gracie identifies potential buyers and communicates with them using text messaging artificial intelligence to mimic a minor selling herself (or himself). Once the intent to purchase a minor is confirmed, Gracie communicates to the buyer that the conversation and phone number have been recorded for sharing with law enforcement. (Shockingly, not all buyers cease communication at this point.) In keeping with their faith-forward ethos, in addition to the threat of prosecution, Gracie also sends a text message of trauma and therapy resources to help the buyers take a first step in addressing their sex addiction or other issues. The click-through rate on this “resources” message is encouraging.

The original Atlanta office of Street Grace is managed by three boards – a church board (funders/founders such as Peachtree Presbyterian); a bipartisan legislative and law enforcement board (including the Georgia Bureau of Investigation); and a business executive board (seats which have been held by C-level executives from American Airlines, the Atlanta

Falcons, Emory Healthcare System, Choate Construction and more). Street Grace is seeking to build a similar model now in Houston with the goal of operating autonomously in Texas; seeds of the same also are germinating in Tennessee and California.

Street Grace is already impacting Houston, a hub of minor sex exploitation. One of its local initiatives is a partnership with Spring Branch ISD, which is allowing age-appropriate intervention curriculum into middle and high schools and counselors to be trained to identify potential victims.

Most exciting, though, is that **student leaders** are being recruited for peer-to-peer intervention. Kids can support the vulnerable among them with the most valuable message: “You are *enough*.” It is said that exploiters target “the 3rd or 4th-prettiest girl in a group,” preying on her insecurity. Street Grace teaches the importance of bolstering the self-worth of all teenage girls to increase their resiliency to predators. **This is an actionable item for you, too!** Encourage your daughters, *and* their friends. Give a little extra attention to the quiet one in the group; help her feel seen. While Street Grace and law enforcement go after the perpetrators, at the same time, we must make our children less vulnerable.

What else can you do to help in this fight? Donate, of course, to help fund Street Grace’s Texas initiatives (streetgrace.org/donate). But your role as a caring adult makes the most immediate impact. Be present for the kids around you, whether they’re yours, nieces and nephews, or children of friends. Ask about their lives and remember to follow up on what they tell you. Give them a little attention, so they don’t fall victim to the first person who does.

MDPC’s Connection to Street Grace

The Texas arm of Street Grace was brought to Houston through the efforts of MDPC Outreach Ministries; its two staff members office here at MDPC. First Presbyterian, Grace Presbyterian, and Chapelwood Methodist Churches have joined us as initial supporters to start funding its operations. MDPC Outreach staff also contribute in myriad ways to the operation of Street Grace as the organization looks to make Houston connections and find its footing in our hometown.