

Reeling over alleged child sex ring, Alabama community asks: 'Did no one know?'

At prayer meetings and other gatherings, Bibb County residents have grappled with the realization that horrific crimes may have been happening in their town.

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By Holly Bailey

CENTREVILLE, Ala. — Inside a small Presbyterian church off the courthouse square, a few dozen people packed the pews on a hot summer evening, their faces a mix of sweat and tears. There were Baptists and Methodists and some who claimed no denomination at all, heads bowed and eyes closed in a rare show of interfaith unity amid criminal allegations considered so evil that some openly wondered if Satan himself had taken up residence here.

Days earlier, just across the street, Bibb County Sheriff Jody Wade said his office had uncovered an alleged child sex trafficking ring operating from a concrete bunker behind a home on the dusty outskirts of Brent, an adjacent town of about 3,000 people located an hour south of Birmingham. At least 10 children between the ages of 3 and 15 were allegedly victimized.

Over a period spanning at least three years, the children had been taken to the bunker, a structure on the edge of a wooded area that had been originally built as an underground storm shelter in a region known for destructive tornadoes.

But that refuge of safety was transformed into a den of horrors, according to Wade. The children were allegedly drugged and abused in an operation that included sex trafficking, torture and acts so cruel that Wade said they led to him to question humanity. Seven people were arrested and charged with a laundry list of crimes, including numerous charges of rape, sexual abuse, trafficking and kidnapping. The defendants include the parents of at least four victims.

Wade has repeatedly warned that the revelations are likely only “scratching the surface,” with additional victims and more arrests expected. “I know God’s forgiveness is boundless, but if there was a limit to it, I think we reached it,” he said, describing the situation as the worst case of child abuse he has seen in his career.

The announcement stunned the communities of Brent and Centreville. The sister cities are on the rural county backroads of central Alabama, a region where churches are almost as prolific as the kudzu vines swallowing much of the summer landscape. For some, the allegations of something so sinister happening in their own backyard has been a test of their deep faith, an acknowledgment of how small towns and rural communities have changed and how systems intended to protect vulnerable children often fail to do so.

“Like everybody, my emotions are all over the place,” said Bobby Terry, a local minister who has been attending the prayer vigils. “I just don’t want the world to think that this is our community. I’ve been living here my entire life and there’s never been anything of this magnitude. I mean, we have problems, you know, but there’s never been anything like this.”

To some local residents, sex-abuse scandals are the province of rich elites, like the late financier Jeffrey Epstein, who is pictured on a billboard in nearby Birmingham with President Donald Trump, along with the question, “What’s the big secret, fellas?” It is a reference to accusations that Trump’s Justice Department is covering up details from Epstein’s alleged sex crimes that could also ensnare the current president, his predecessor Bill Clinton or other famous people who spent time with Epstein decades ago. (Trump has denied any knowledge of Epstein’s crimes and had claimed that the two had a falling out years before the disgraced billionaire’s convictions on sex crimes.)

Now, at prayer meetings and other gatherings, Bibb County residents have grappled with the realization that even more horrific crimes than those Epstein was accused of may have been happening in their own town. For some, it has shattered a sense that their small community was safer than bigger cities. But experts say rural areas are among the places where people are the most vulnerable to trafficking and abuse — including in Alabama, where local prosecutors say such cases have been on the rise.

“We can’t assume that just because we’re in small towns that everything operates like it did in the days of ‘The Andy Griffith Show,’” Robert Turner Jr., the district attorney for Alabama’s fourth judicial circuit, which includes Bibb County, told WAKA-TV. “A lot of these small towns may appear to be Mayberry, but they are far from it.”

Lynn Ellinghaus, a Brent native, physically shivered thinking about images she had seen of the bunker on local television. It looked like something “out of horror movie,” she said, as she attended a community vigil.

The case was all anyone she knew was talking about, from the kids to the suspects and then the biggest mystery of all: “How did no one know?” she wondered. “All that time, and no one saw any sign?”

An isolated shelter

Wade said his office was tipped off about the possible abuse earlier this year by a caseworker with the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR), the agency that oversees child welfare. An agency spokesperson declined to comment on any aspect of the case, citing "confidentiality laws," and Wade did not respond to requests for comment. But it led investigators to a property along Aaron Drive, five miles from the Centreville town square.

The home that investigators visited sits at the end of a long gravel driveway on the edge of thick woods, off a dirt road riddled with potholes. It is surrounded by overgrown grassy lots dotted with wrecked cars and dilapidated mobile homes. Across from the driveway, a faded yellow sign almost entirely concealed by thick green vines reads: "Watch for children."

The property is linked to a relative of William Chase McElroy, 21, who was initially arrested on Feb. 5 and charged with two counts of sexual abuse for inappropriately touching two young children. According to court records, Andres Trejo-Velazquez, the father of the children, is listed as a witness on the complaint. A judge said McElroy could be released from Bibb County Jail on a \$60,000 bond, but it is unclear if he left custody. A week later, he was arrested again and charged with sexually abusing two other children under the age of 7. This time, a judge denied bond.

Investigators took notice of structure behind the house that Wade said initially looked like a carport but had a rear door leading to an underground storm shelter. There they found a dirty mattress, a fan and other furniture. A little over two months later, Dalton Terrell, 21, a high school classmate of McElroy who lived near the bunker, was arrested and charged with multiple counts of rape, sodomy and human trafficking. According to an April 29 complaint, Terrell admitted to investigators that he had abused six children and that he "gave money to two adults to use the children."

Wade has said Terrell's cooperation blew open the investigation. The next day, Trejo-Velazquez, 29, was arrested and charged with six counts of human trafficking. Three of the victims were his own children, while a fourth was his partner's daughter, according to court records. On July 15, a Bibb County grand jury indicted McElroy, Terrell and Trejo-Velazquez on additional charges including rape, trafficking, kidnapping and abuse.

In late July, four others were arrested and charged in connection to the alleged trafficking and abuse, including Rebecca Brewer, Timothy St. John Jr., Ricky Terrell and Sara Terrell. Brewer, 29, is Trejo-Velazquez's partner and the mother of four victims. She was charged with the trafficking and kidnapping of eight children, including her own, and is also facing multiple counts of sexual torture.

Several of the defendants are related. According to public records, Brewer is a cousin of Dalton Terrell and the niece of Sara and Randy Terrell, who are Dalton's parents. Wade has said the victims were children who belonged to the defendants or related to other family members or friends. According to records, St. John, 23, was a high school classmate of several defendants and a neighbor of Brewer and Trejo-Velazquez.

Court records made public Friday show that a Bibb County grand jury on Thursday issued fresh indictments against McElroy, Terrell, Trejo-Velazquez and St. John with updated charges including sexual abuse and aggravated child abuse. The indictments allege the men conspired together to abuse and deliberately torture some of the victims. Additional charges against them and the three others are expected in coming weeks.

Stuart Albea, a court-appointed attorney for Trejo-Velazquez, said in an email that his client “denies any involvement in the conduct described in the indictment and looks forward to the opportunity to demonstrate his innocence in court.”

Good luck.

Albea said he was “deeply concerned” by how local law enforcement had made information about the case public even as it has not yet been provided to him or his client. He denied that Trejo-Velazquez was a gang member and said he is a U.S. citizen — two issues that law enforcement officials told reporters they are investigating.

“This conduct appears calculated to poison the jury pool and may make it impossible to seat a fair and impartial jury in rural Bibb County,” Albea said, adding it “also risks further harm” to the alleged victims “by placing sensitive allegations in the public eye prematurely.”

Attorneys for the other six defendants did not immediately respond to requests for comment. All seven are being held without bond at the Bibb County Jail and have not yet entered pleas.

Wade said in a July 28 radio interview that some defendants are cooperating with the investigation. “I think the longer they have time to sit there and maybe repent ... we’ll get the answers to all the questions that we have to better serve these children,” the sheriff said.

That allegations have left many in the community questioning what might’ve been missed. Wade said last week that the victims attended school and participated in other routine functions — a comment that has sparked scrutiny over whether teachers or others noticed and reported anything. The superintendent of Bibb County Schools did not respond to a request for comment.

Months before Wade says their office was tipped off about possible abuse by a DHR caseworker, court records show the agency removed four children from Brewer and Trejo-Velazquez’s home and placed them in DHR custody. Though it is unclear when the removal happened, records suggest it took place around the time Brewer filed an Aug. 1, 2024, domestic claim against Trejo-Velazquez.

Records about that allegation are not public, but a court docket notation describes the case as “protection” from abuse. In October, an attorney for DHR filed claims against both Brewer and Trejo-Velazquez seeking to garnish any income or financial assistance to help pay for the children’s care. Brewer was unemployed, but that December, a judge approved the state’s efforts to garnish Trejo-Velazquez’s income from a construction firm.

Brewer's complaint against Trejo-Velazquez was ultimately dismissed because neither appeared in court. By February, DHR filed petitions in Bibb County to drop the financial claims, writing to the court that the children were no longer in state custody and were with back with their parents. A circuit court judge dismissed the cases on March 18, about a month before Trejo-Velazquez was arrested. It's unclear when the children were placed back into state custody.

Speaking to reporters, Wade said that so far he believes only those with direct knowledge of the alleged trafficking operation were aware the children were being abused.

But Carolyn Potter, a longtime child advocate who is the chief executive of the WellHouse, an Alabama based nonprofit that operates one of the largest residential treatment programs for trafficking survivors in the country, is skeptical of claims there were no signs. She said people in rural communities beset by poverty are particularly vulnerable to being trafficked by relatives or others with family connections. That's especially true in areas that are less vigorously patrolled by law enforcement, she said. Forty-seven percent of Brent lives below the poverty level.

Identifying trauma in children can also be difficult, Potter said. Teachers often play a key role in reporting possible abuse, given the close bonds they form with their students, she added.

Last week, a former Bibb County teacher told Birmingham's WBMA that she repeatedly reported concerns about one of her students during the 2023-24 academic year to school administrators. The student, believed to be one of the victims, showed signs of neglect, including poor hygiene, had chronic absences and exhibited developmental issues, the former teacher told the station, adding that her complaints went nowhere.

Terry, the minister who was also a former Bibb County High School teacher and coach until he retired last year, said that teachers undergo mandatory reporting training with DHR representatives. But he also recalled instances in which teachers reported possible abuse and said sometimes, "nothing happens."

He feared teachers would face criticism for not spotting the alleged abuse in these cases, which he said would be unfair.

"Teachers have too much to do. ... They're already being mom and dad and aunt and uncle. And they're being doctor and they're being counselor and they are being so many different things that they're already doing," he said. "These teachers, they love these kids like they're their own."

'Absolutely shattered'

Residents gathered on the lawn of the Bibb County Courthouse two days after Wade's news conference to pray for the victims, law enforcement, the community and each other. Many were angry. They saw the notes on social media calling for things like vigilante justice for the suspects.

“Why do we even need a trial?” one person posted on Facebook.

Mike Oakley, the mayor of Centreville, had leaped into action, organizing vigils and other public events because he wanted people here to talk and reflect.

“When this happens, you’re literally shocked like a punch in the face, a community punch in a face,” he said.

Deep down, Oakley knew the small-town experience wasn’t the same for everybody. Many in Brent and Centreville now commute into Birmingham and Tuscaloosa instead of working in town and getting to know their neighbors.

“In the South, we are all about being front porch people, knowing our neighbors, talking to them,” he said. “We need to be that way again.”

But first, they needed to pray. They prayed outside the courthouse, where the defendants will appear before a judge in coming weeks. Inside the church the following evening, they sat in small groups praying for everybody involved — some grudgingly including the accused.

Ellinghaus, who grew up in Brent, kept thinking about another event in her small city that made national news 52 years ago. In May 1973, the town took a direct hit from one of the most violent tornadoes to ever hit the state. It destroyed 90 percent of the city, including her childhood home. Many people here lost everything.

A memorial along Main Street marks the date, describing Brent as a city “proven by tempest.” But Ellinghaus worried the allegations of child sex abuse and trafficking, if proved, could end up being more damaging to the city than the tornado.

“People are just absolutely shattered over this,” she said. “... No one thought anything like this could happen here.”

What readers are saying

The comments emphasize the need for concrete actions to prevent horrific crimes, such as increasing funding for child protective services, social services, and mental health care, rather than relying on “thoughts and prayers.” There is a call for better oversight and response to... [Show more](#)

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