Introduction

Law enforcement and prosecutors have long used online escort advertisements to identify sex trafficking victims and investigate cases. Several ad characteristics are used and shared among investigators as signs of trafficking, but they have not yet been empirically tested for predictive power to support investigative decisions or the use of ads as evidence in court.

Study Objectives

To improve victim identification and investigations, this National Institute of Justice-funded study had two objectives:

1. Investigate whether there are indicators that can be used to differentiate online escort ads related to sex trafficking¹ from ads associated with consensual sex work

2. Determine which indicators are most likely to predict whether the ad represents a trafficking case

Study Goal

The goal is to create guidance investigators can use to help focus limited investigational resources on ads more likely to represent a trafficking victim. This project has three parts:

1. Analyze ads from closed cases from a variety of U.S. jurisdictions, supplemented by ads from three web scraper archives;

2. interview investigators to learn how they use ads in investigations; and

3. conduct focus groups with three stakeholder groups at the beginning and end of the project

- sex trafficking survivors,
- consensual (non-trafficked) sex workers, and
- criminal justice/victim advocate professionals.

¹For these purposes, we use the U.S. federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) (22 U.S.C. § 7101 et seq) definition because it represents the burden of proof most investigators must meet: “Sex trafficking involves the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person forced to perform such an act is younger than age 18.” (22 U.S.C. §§ 7101-7110 (2003), et seq.).
Indicators that Predicted Sex Trafficking

We tested 27 potential indicators derived from the literature, focus groups, interviews, and fieldwork. Four indicators emerged as strongly predictive of sex trafficking when compared to ads for consensual sex work, controlling for the effects of other indicators that might be in the ad:

1. **Obscured phone number.** Using obfuscation techniques to evade law enforcement or web scrapers, such as emojis between numerals or spelling out numbers, increased the likelihood of trafficking by almost 13 times. But, this was not significant in massage ads.

2. **Provider ethnicity listed in ad** was over 5 times as likely to represent a trafficking case. However, this was not a significant correlate in massage ads.

3. **Trustworthy Provider language** (i.e., professional, photos 100% me, discreet) was over 3 times more likely to signify trafficking in fieldwork ads and 20% more likely in massage ads.

4. **Language suggesting youth (use with caution)** increased the likelihood that a case was a trafficking case by over four times. However, the significance of this indicator may also be an effect of collecting data on cases from law enforcement, who use already use this language to decide which cases to investigate—thus raising the possibility that its effect is exaggerated in our sample. We recommend use of this indicator with caution, as non-trafficked sex workers also use this language for marketing purposes.

Fieldwork sites included:
- San Diego District Attorney’s Office (SDDA)
- San Francisco District Attorney’s Office (SFDA)
- Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI)
- Texas Department of Public Safety (TXDPS)
- Nebraska State Patrol and Nebraska Attorney General, with help from HTI Labs at Creighton University
- Additional ads for three more states (OR, NM, and NY), mostly for massage cases, were provided from a “ground truth” set held at Claremont Graduate School

“Looking young.” One photo indicator was statistically significant – the subject looking young – but not the way expected. This indicator occurred in almost four times as many non-trafficking ads as trafficking ads, the opposite pattern expected by investigators. Minors are often made to look over 18 using cosmetics and older individuals may use filters to look younger. Furthermore, photos do not always match the person advertised. Given that one of the top indicators cited by investigators when deciding which ads to pursue is whether the subject in the photo “looks young,” this should prompt a re-thinking of using “youthful appearance” as a decision criterion.
Indicator Combinations and Recommendations for Use with Other Evidence

Few indicator combinations (interactions) yielded significant results that would support their inclusion in statistical models using our data. However, there are indicator combinations – especially cross-ad dynamics combined with external, non-ad evidence – that may be more suggestive of trafficking than any single indicator:

1. **3+ Providers traveling in a large group who do not appear to know the established circuit, move every 3-4 days, and/or who do not have means for transporting themselves.** Investigating these cases takes detailed knowledge of local and regional markets, and the ability to connect individuals across ads. Additional factors to consider:
   a. 3+ providers posting separately, but in the same location and timeframe;
   b. Connectivity between providers (e.g., same phone number across ads for providers with different names, appearing in ads together, traveling the same circuit and wearing similar clothes, and ads for all individuals using mostly the same verbiage);
   c. Posting a high volume of ads on low-end sites
   d. Poor grammar or writing skills.

2. **Advertising prices lower than average** for the market. Focus group participants mentioned evidence of not being familiar with the business generally as an indicator of potential trafficking. However, this may be more difficult to spot given the frequency with which providers copy each other’s ads—especially if they are inexperienced.

   Investigators should also look at other online venues that have increased in popularity with the shutdown of Backpage in 2018 and in response to COVID-19 impacts on the nature of commercial sex activity. These include the movement of some activity further online into video sites or more open solicitation on social media that may begin with public posts and move to encrypted private chatrooms and messaging.

Future research should extend this work to test its applicability to content on these platforms and in studies with larger data sets of ads associated with confirmed cases.

Interested in joining the conversation? Come join us on our discussion boards, where you can talk to colleagues and the researchers about this important topic.

This work was produced under grant number 2017-MU-CX-0005 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this presentation are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.