

Human trafficking activity on adult entertainment website more pervasive than expected

December 3 2012, by Joan M. Sherwood

Evidence of human trafficking through ads posted on a popular adult entertainment website is more prevalent than first thought, according to a new study published by Arizona State University.

"One-Day Trafficking Snapshot of an [Internet Service Provider](#)," a study conducted this month by a team of researchers from ASU's School of [Social Work](#), found that nearly 60 percent of the [ads](#) on Backpage.com Adult Entertainment Services were for selling sex/prostitution. Of those ads more than 20 percent were identified by the researchers to feature potential adult and minor trafficking victims.

The purpose of the study, according to its authors, was to better understand the scope of the online sex trafficking and prostitution enterprise in five major U.S. cities and to further develop a Trafficking Identification Matrix to accurately and systematically identify the characteristics and content typical of ads involving possible trafficking victims.

The study, led by Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, an associate professor with the School of Social Work within ASU's College of Public Programs, provides a one-day snapshot of sex ads posted during a 12-hour period on Nov. 1 in five markets: Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Phoenix, [Salt Lake City](#) and San Diego.

The Phoenix Police Department, Vice Enforcement Unit and the Minneapolis Police Department, Criminal Investigations Unit teamed up to develop a set of matrices that are useful in identifying possible trafficking victims and determinants of minor sex trafficking victims.

"The scope of the prostitution ads examined through the study was overwhelming," Roe-Sepowitz said.

The study initially was designed to analyze 24 hours of online [adult entertainment](#) ads but due to the high volume and reporting requirements of ads collected and found to be consistent with potential sex trafficked adults and minors, the review period was reduced to 12 hours. A total of 1,332 ads from the five cities were collected and analyzed by a 12-member research team guided by Roe-Sepowitz and Lieutenant James Gallagher, Phoenix Police Department, Vice Enforcement Unit; Lauren Martin, Urban Research Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC), University of Minnesota;

Sargent Grant Snyder, Criminal Investigations Division, Minneapolis Police Department; Kristine Hickie, doctoral candidate, School of Social Work at ASU; and Jessica Smith, master's candidate at ASU.

"Input from experienced law enforcement personnel was integrated with practical and clinical practice-based knowledge from our social work research team," Roe-Sepowitz said. "Additionally, all data collection team members had prior training in human development and more than half have worked closely with adult and minor human trafficking survivors in exiting programs in the Phoenix area."

Roe-Sepowitz will travel to Washington, D.C. next month at the invitation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, to participate in a meeting on services for victims of human trafficking. The meeting will take place Dec. 10 at the White House and is part of

President Obama's multi-faceted approach to improve efforts to combat and monitor [human trafficking](#) announced last September.

As her research study continues, Roe-Sepowitz said the next step is to continue revising the matrix and documenting the findings of the age and trafficking verification of the ads collected from Phoenix and Minneapolis.

"We will continue to partner with law enforcement agencies to obtain ads of known [sex trafficking](#) adults and minors to assist in the validation of the matrices," she said.

Lt. James Gallagher, of the Phoenix Police Department, Vice Enforcement Unit, said the department's participation in the initiative is part of a larger effort.

"The Phoenix [Police Department](#) is focused on building a strong network of collaborating agencies committed to working together to help victims connect with support services and move to a place of recovery rather than into the criminal justice system," Gallagher said.

More information on the study is provided here: "[One-Day Trafficking Snapshot of an Internet Service Provider](#)"

Provided by Arizona State University

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