

Online sex trafficking bill will make things worse for victims, expert says

March 29 2018, by Shannon Roddel

A controversial bill to crack down on online sex trafficking was recently passed by Congress and sent to President Donald Trump's desk, but anti-trafficking advocates and experts, including a University of Notre Dame Law School professor, say the bill won't help the problem and will likely make things worse.

The Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) would increase websites' criminal and civil liability for content they host, including advertisements posted by traffickers, but Alexandra Levy, who teaches "Human Markets" at Notre Dame, opposes the law. She says that while it will likely cause a decrease in the number of reports of trafficking, that won't be because it has actually reduced trafficking—rather, it will be because it has forced victims into darker corners of the internet, where they are harder to find and recover.

"Contrary to FOSTA supporters' claims, there is no credible evidence that the internet has caused an explosion in [sex trafficking](#)," Levy says. "What the numbers actually tell us is that as the internet expands, more sex trafficking tends to be reported. The internet is shining a light on a terrible form of exploitation—and that's a step in the right direction."

Levy says FOSTA would shut off that light by providing a strong incentive for platforms to turn a blind eye to problematic content, including ads for trafficked sex.

"As anyone in the field can tell you, we need websites to be our eyes and

ears," Levy says. "They provide crucial information to law enforcement and anti-[trafficking](#) advocates, and scores of criminal indictments and news articles reveal their value as a point of connection between police and victims."

FOSTA also criminalizes certain speech associated with consensual sex work, and Levy says this too will expose people to more danger.

"Sex workers are far safer when they can freely communicate, screen clients online, exchange information on dangerous clients and share resources," Levy says. "A recently published study even suggests that making certain online advertising platforms available may decrease the murder rate among [sex workers](#). So when legislators speak disparagingly about sex work 'moving from the street corner to the smartphone,' they're actually describing a huge improvement in working conditions."

Levy says FOSTA will shuttle victims out of view, not out of danger.

"It will force sex workers from the safety of the [internet](#) back to the street corner, where they're more likely to experience violence and abuse," she says.

Provided by University of Notre Dame

Citation: Online sex trafficking bill will make things worse for victims, expert says (2018, March 29) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-03-online-sex-trafficking-bill-worse.html>

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