

TRAYLOR CASE: SEX INDUSTRY

RECRUITMENT

Traffickers target runaways and juveniles from troubled homes with promises of luxurious lifestyles, through social media and popular youth hangouts.

2007

2008

2009

2010

2011

ADVERTISING

Gang members buy hundreds of online prostitution ads on such sites as Craigslist.org and Backpage.com. When Craigslist shuts down its “adult services” section, traffic to Backpage.com spikes.

RESCUE

Authorities rescue 30 underage victims over the eighteen months of the operation.

EXPLOITATION

Owners of a hotel in California knowingly allow members of the Oceanside Crips gang to operate a prostitution ring out of the hotel.

ARRESTS

FBI, ICE, Sherriff’s Department, Escondido police, and Oceanside police arrest 29 Oceanside Crips members, six “associates,” and four “facilitators” and charge them with trafficking-related crimes.

THIRTY-SIX TRAFFICKERS, most of whom were members of a street gang, the Oceanside Crips, operated a prostitution ring that trafficked young women, including at least thirty minors, from the San Diego area. A local hotel owner furthered the conspiracy by allowing gang members to use his hotel for sex trafficking. This is one of the few trafficking cases in which a facilitator was held criminally liable.

Traffickers’ Methods and Strategies

Recruitment

The Oceanside Crips gang is itself composed of members of other gangs. At the time of this case, the gang operated in the San Diego area and primarily focused its profit-making enterprise on sex trafficking women and girls. Gang members and senior level sex workers, referred to as “bottoms,” recruited young women domestically. They often strategically targeted runaways and juveniles from troubled homes with promises of luxurious lifestyles, through social media and in popular hangouts. During the investigation of the case, more than 30 women and girls were rescued from the sex trafficking ring.

Exploitation

Once recruited, victims were required to engage in sex for money and to turn over their earnings in exchange for protection, clothing, housing, food, alcohol, and drugs. Defendants used the internet to advertise their victims, sending messages via Myspace and Facebook and purchasing “adult services” advertisements on sites like Craigslist.org and Backpage.com.

In addition to the hotel owned by one of the defendants, the traffickers in this case used numerous other hotels to exploit victims. Gang members would also trade, gift, or sell victims

to each other. They would closely control their victims, intimidating them through physical and verbal abuse. The sexual exploitation occurred primarily in motels in the San Diego area, though some gang members carried victims across state lines to engage in commercial sex.

The hotel owners also provided substantial assistance to the traffickers in this case by allowing the defendants to use their computer to post online prostitution ads and rent rooms knowing that they would be used for prostitution. Gang members used other people’s identification to rent the rooms and were allowed to wait until after “dates” or “tricks” to make payment, in exchange for higher room rates. The hotel owners housed prostitution activity in less visible hotel rooms to separate traffickers from other customers, and warned traffickers of law enforcement activity and inquiries.

Case Resolution

After an 18-month, multi-agency investigation, a massive RICO indictment was brought against 39 defendants, most of whom were Oceanside Crips. The indictment charged defendants with participation in a criminal enterprise to prostitute adults and juveniles. The indictment charged high-level gang members, sex workers who trained and recruited victims, and several facilitators, including the hotel owner, his corporation, and his son.

Thirty-six defendants pled guilty to various charges. The

highest level offenders in the gang received sentences of 10-12 years, while lower level members received 2-8 years. Several of the sex workers who assisted gang members received sentences of 2-3 years, while the rest got time served.

The hotel owner pled guilty to Conspiracy to Conduct Enterprise Affairs Through a Pattern of Racketeering Activity and received a sentence of time served and three years of supervised release, as well as a fine mandated in the form of a charitable contribution. He also pled guilty to criminal forfeiture of the hotel. The prosecutor dropped the charges against the hotel owner’s corporation, his son, and hotel managers. Many of the defendants were also subject to state prosecutions for related activities.

Opportunities for Intervention and Key Sources of Risk to Traffickers

This case involves domestic sex trafficking, and because victims were not transported across U.S. borders, points of intervention were markedly different from those in cases of international trafficking. Immigration and Customs officials did not come into contact with these victims; instead, because most victims were vulnerable youth, bystanders included social services providers, concerned parents, and school officials.

Since the traffickers in this case targeted children through social media, and advertised their services over the internet, other potential points of intervention are the social media outlets and websites that traffickers frequently use.

Additionally, the defendants forced victims to work as prostitutes out of hotel rooms. Although in this case the hotel owner was complicit in the scheme, training business owners and employees in the hospitality industry on how

to recognize the signs of human trafficking would provide another opportunity for intervention. These activities/signs include: gang activity and/or prostitution-related activity occurring in or around the premises, patrons’ apparent abuse or neglect of minors, and patrons’ attempts at bribery or collusion with hotel personnel.

Conclusion

Gang-related sex trafficking appears to be a growing phenomenon, with many cases involving American victims. A similar case currently pending in San Diego involves a scheme by a gang called the Tycoons who use victims and upper-level sex workers to recruit new young women on school campuses. The gang would sometimes enroll women who were already working for them into the schools of the intended targets. In that case, U.S. attorneys prosecuting the traffickers have credited parents and school officials with tipping off local authorities to the trafficking scheme.

The Traylor case also stands to remind law enforcement and the general public of the victim status of all minors involved in prostitution-related activity. Underage victims themselves should also become aware of their rights and their protected status under the law. Additionally, adult victims should be allowed to vacate prostitution-related convictions and arrest records once their traffickers are convicted of forced prostitution, but currently not all states provide such “vacateur” processes for adult sex trafficking victims. ■

PEOPLE INVOLVED

- 36** Traffickers
- 2** Facilitators/Enablers
- Many** Bystanders
- 35+** Victims