



Houston, We Have a Problem:

A Quantitative Analysis of Online Advertisements of Commercial Sex and Sex Trafficking in Houston

by Free the Captives

September 2014

Authors:

Julie Waters, JD

Jillian Best

Jesse Bach

Research Team:

K.S., K.W., M.G., G.B.,

M.K., A.M., R.W., S.N.

In Partnership with Imagine Foundation



Fighting the Exploitation and
Trafficking of Houston's Youth

Abstract

It is well known that Houston is a hub for human trafficking. However, there has been very little quantifiable data to verify this knowledge. Free the Captives has conducted a research project that analyzes data from a webpage which hosts commercial sex ads. According to the research, due to a very large number of online ads, Houston is a major city for commercial sex and sex trafficking, and these ads are caused by a high demand for sex from buyers in Houston. Thus, it is the demand for sex that is fueling commercial sex and sex trafficking in Houston.

Besides revealing a tremendously high number of commercial sex ads posted in the Houston area, the study noted differences in ethnicities found in ads, locations/hotspots in the city, patterns in pricing, and women and girls coming from all over the US to be sold in Houston. While not every ad is directly tied to sex trafficking, it is our belief that these ads reveal patterns of sex trafficking in Houston. This information is designed to benefit law enforcement, government agencies and nonprofits as they combat trafficking and serve victims of sex trafficking. The study also provides much needed data to confirm that Houston indeed has a very large problem with the commercial sex industry and the sex trafficking that is encroached within.

Background Information on Houston

According to the US Census, Houston is the most populous city in Texas with a population of 2,099,451 in 2010 and the fourth most populous city in the United States

after New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago.¹ Due to its large population, it is not surprising that Houston is considered one of the top cities in the US for sex trafficking.

In Houston, Hispanics make up 44% of the population while Caucasians and African Americans constitute 26% and 23% of the population, respectively.² Houston is known for its healthcare, oil and gas, and aeronautics industries.³ As for healthcare, Memorial Hermann Health System and MD Anderson each have over 19000 employees making them the largest employers in Houston. With regards to the oil and gas industry, the city and its greater metropolitan area have more than 3700 energy-related businesses. Chevron, BP America, Schlumberger Limited, National Oilwell Varco, Shell Oil Company, and ExxonMobil all have over 9000 employees each. Also, the Port of Houston ranks first in US foreign tonnage, which contributes to the bustling oil and gas industry.

Lastly, living costs in the Houston area are 17.3% below the average for major metropolitan areas. Also, according to the US Census, almost a quarter of the city's population is below the poverty level at 22%, compared to 17% in the state of Texas.⁴

¹ US Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/popfinder/>, Accessed August 1, 2014

² City of Houston, Planning and Development, http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/Demographics/demog_links.html, Accessed July 20, 2014

³ Greater Houston Partnership, Houston Facts, <http://issuu.com/houston/docs/houston-facts-2014?e=1160936/8657745#search>, Accessed July 25, 2014

⁴ US Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/popfinder/>, Accessed August 1, 2014

Sex Trafficking in Houston

Houston is a hub for both international and domestic sex trafficking. International human trafficking is prevalent in Houston because the city is located near the border, has a port, an international airport, and is ethnically diverse. International women and girls are being trafficked in Houston's massage parlors and cantinas.

Additionally, Houston has a significant problem with the sex trafficking of American minors, which is Free the Captives' predominant focus. Typically, these minors are teenaged girls, but there are also boys being trafficked in Houston as well. The children most at risk for trafficking are runaways, throwaways, and homeless. The girls that we work with typically come from a background that includes sexual abuse, broken homes, low self-esteem, and fatherlessness. These factors make them greatly vulnerable to sex traffickers. American girls are being sold over the Internet and trafficked through local Houston motels or private residences.

Backpage.com

Backpage.com is a national website with listings for every major city in the US; it operates much like Craigslist.com and allows users to post items for sell, such as cars or furniture. However, a significant portion of the site is dedicated to commercial sex ads. These ads on Backpage.com typically list a description of the girl, photo, and price for

sex. According to Advance Interactive Media Group, in 2013, online commercial sex ads generate over \$45 million per year, with over 80% of profits earned by Backpage.com.⁵

The public, law enforcement and governmental agencies have been targeting Backpage.com for their role in facilitating the sex trafficking of minors. There are numerous examples of individuals being arrested and/or convicted for trafficking minors on Backpage.com. In Houston, in March 2014, four people were charged with the trafficking of minors. Provocative pictures of a fourteen year old and a fifteen year old girl were posted on Backpage.com. The fifteen year old girl told federal agents she had to sleep with ten men in one day. Furthermore, on July 17, 2014, an individual was convicted of trafficking a minor on Backpage.com in Houston, TX and Shreveport, LA. The trafficker used his cell phone to post pictures of multiple victims on Backpage.com, including a seventeen year old girl.⁶ The trafficker kept all her earnings and violently cut her face. Backpage.com has ads not only in Houston, but also has ads across the country. On March 28, 2013, in Miami, a man trafficked a thirteen year old girl on Backpage.com and marked her as his property by tattooing his name on her eyelids.⁷

There has been much outrage against Backpage.com. In July 2013, forty-seven state attorneys general and the National Association of Attorneys General called for an

⁵ Aim Group, Online Prostitution Ad Revenue Crosses Craigslist Benchmark, <http://aimgroup.com/2013/07/10/online-prostitution-ad-revenue-crosses-craigslist-benchmark/>, Accessed August 22, 2014

⁶ FBI, Killeen Area Man Found Guilty of Sex Trafficking of a Minor, <http://www.fbi.gov/houston/press-releases/2014/killeen-area-man-found-guilty-of-sex-trafficking-of-a-minor>, Accessed August 22, 2014

⁷ Miami Herald, Police: Miami Pimp Forced Teen, <http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/03/28/3312163/police-miami-pimp-forced-teen.html>, Accessed August 21, 2014

amendment to the Communications Decency Act (CDA) of 1996 to allow for state and local prosecution of online businesses in violation of trafficking and prostitution offenses. Currently, Section 230 of the CDA, title 47, U.S. Code, gives criminal and civil immunity to Internet content providers, even when they allegedly participate in illegal activity. As a result, online classified advertising sites, such as Backpage.com, are allowed to operate out in the open.

Free the Captives

Free the Captives is a 501(c)(3) non-profit that fights the exploitation and trafficking of Houston's youth. We engage and mobilize faith-based communities while partnering with non-profits, law enforcement, and government agencies in the fight against modern day slavery. Our primary focus is working with teenaged sex trafficking victims. The majority are American girls between the ages of thirteen and eighteen year olds. For teen victims, we assist with rescue by working closely with law enforcement. Then, we provide victims with mentoring, support groups, educational assistance, job preparation, and material needs such as groceries, clothing, and furniture. We also help with their medical, dental and legal needs.

Most of our victims are from the Houston area. These girls are referred to Free the Captives by non-profits, law enforcement, and the public. We work closely with the girls and their families, if appropriate. We have assisted girls from a variety of backgrounds. We have served girls from Katy and the Woodlands as well as Alief and Sharpstown. The youngest victim we have worked with was ten years old when she was trafficked; she has had four pimps. Another teen victim was trafficked in six states. Two of our victims were

raped by their fathers before they were trafficked. One of our sixteen year old victims was forced to be with over sixty men in one month. The girls we serve have been through severe violence. One of our girls was run over by her pimp in his car. It is our main goal to provide these girls with excellent, nonjudgmental, caring services and programs.

The primary anti-human trafficking objectives of Free the Captives are:

- (1) **AFTERCARE** by providing direct services to trafficked teenaged victims,
- (2) **PREVENTION** through programming for at-risk teenaged girls,
- (3) **DETERRENCE** through research and public policy work and through reducing the demand by focusing on the buyers/Johns through our "Buy Sex? Bye, bye Freedom!" billboard, radio and TV campaign, and
- (4) **AWARENESS** by educating thousands of people each year through our annual conference and trainings.

Executive Summary

Houston has an abnormally large number of ads posted on Backpage.com. In a three month period from March 17, 2014 to June 7, 2014, Free the Captives analyzed 25,950 ads for commercial sex that were posted for the Houston area. This is an extremely high number of ads. A similar study was conducted in Manhattan and New Jersey during the Super Bowl in 2014, and Houston had a larger number of ads than Manhattan and New Jersey per person.⁸ The sheer number of commercial sex ads in the Houston area is a clear indicator that a great deal of activity around commercial sex

⁸ Bach, Jesse. Imagine Foundation, *A Quantitative Analysis of Commercial Sex Advertisements during Super Bowl XLVII*, Spring 2014.

exists, including sex trafficking. Free the Captives worked with the Imagine Foundation to conduct this research.

Furthermore, the days of the week with the most ads posted were Monday and Tuesday. This was a surprising discovery. Logically, one would assume that the majority of ads would be posted on Friday and Saturday. This indicates that, in part, the demand for sex is driven by business professionals coming into Houston for work.

On average, there were approximately 300 ads for sex posted each day. There were six peak days in the three month period that were higher than the average: March 25 with 705 ads; April 29 with 594; May 5 with 535; May 6 with 548; May 16 with 521; June 6 with 517.

The study also tracked the phone numbers listed in the ads. There were 3830 unique phone numbers with 271 unique area codes. These phone numbers represented women and girls being sold in Houston hailing from every state in the U.S. except New Hampshire and Vermont. More than half of the area codes were the Houston area codes of 281, 713, and 832. After Houston area codes, Dallas/Fort Worth area codes were the most represented followed by area codes from Las Vegas, Miami and Los Angeles.

The ads mentioned which parts of Houston the girls and women were located. After analyzing this data, we identified the hotspots in Houston. The most frequently mentioned locations in the ads were, in the following order: Highway I-10, Westheimer

Road, the Galleria area, and Hobby Airport. Houston had a very large number of hotspots and some ads included specific addresses.

Out of the 25,950 ads, 65% showed pictures of the women and girls. When broken down by race, Caucasians were featured in the highest number of ads with African Americans following closely. Hispanics were next and Asians had the lowest amount of ads on the website.

The ads also listed the prices, which varied for out-calls and in-calls. An in-call is where the consumer travels to the woman's location to facilitate the transaction, while an out-call is the woman traveling to the customer. The prices were higher for out-calls. The average out-call price was \$164.50, and the average in-call was \$116.63. When broken down by race, Caucasian and Hispanic females listed the highest prices for in-calls of approximately \$150 per hour while African American females listed the lower price of \$118 per hour. For out-calls, Caucasians charged a median of \$183 per hour; Hispanics charged \$177 per hour; African Americans charged \$135 per hour.

Methodology

Over three months from March 17, 2014 to June 7, 2014, a team of seven researchers from Free the Captives recorded data from ads for commercial sex in Houston from www.backpage.com. The researchers were each assigned a specific day to analyze Backpage.com and record data. Researchers entered their data within forty-eight hours of the posted date (e.g. if an advertisement was posted on Monday, the researcher had until Wednesday to capture it). This was done with the expectation that ads for

commercial sex would not be posted on the website for long, and the sooner the team could record them, the more accurate of a data picture would be generated.

The researchers reviewed each ad for commercial sex on their assigned day of the week and recorded the following information for ads placed in Houston:

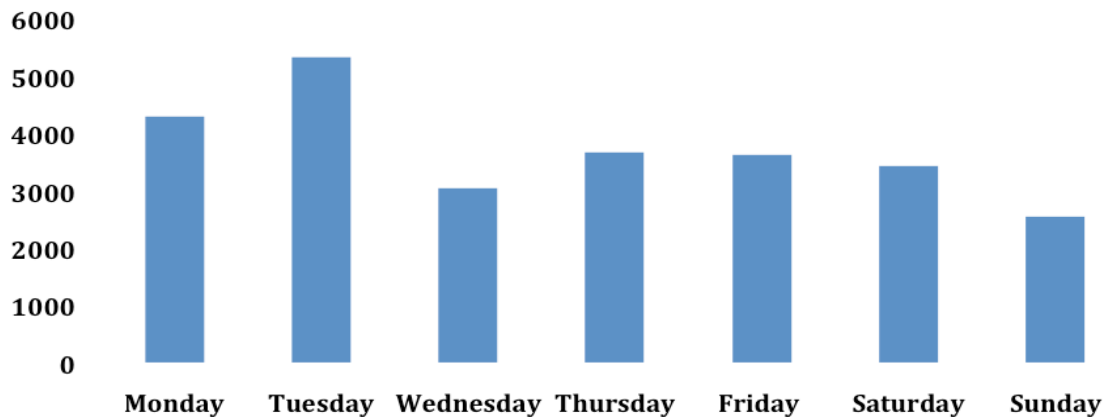
- | | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Researcher initials | 2. Day of the week ad was posted |
| 3. Date ad was posted | 4. Post ID |
| 5. Phone number | 6. Area code |
| 7. Race | 8. Face shown |
| 9. Price of in-call | 10. Price of out-call |
| 11. Number of people in ad | 12. Location |

Findings

Frequencies by Day and Date

The data was cleaned and coded in Microsoft Excel and then run through IBM's SPSS Data Analytics Software package to generate a descriptive statistics report. During the data capture period of March 17, 2014 through June 7, 2014, there were a total of 25,950 ads for commercial sex posted on Backpage.com in the Houston area. During the three month period, on Mondays, there were a total of 4,288 ads for commercial sex in Houston. On Tuesdays, the research team recorded a total of 5,331 ads. Wednesdays featured 3,054 ads. Thursdays held 3,668 ads. Fridays contained 3,635 ads. Saturdays showed 3,426 ads, while Sundays had 2,548 ads. Therefore, the most ads were placed on Mondays and Tuesdays, instead of the weekend.

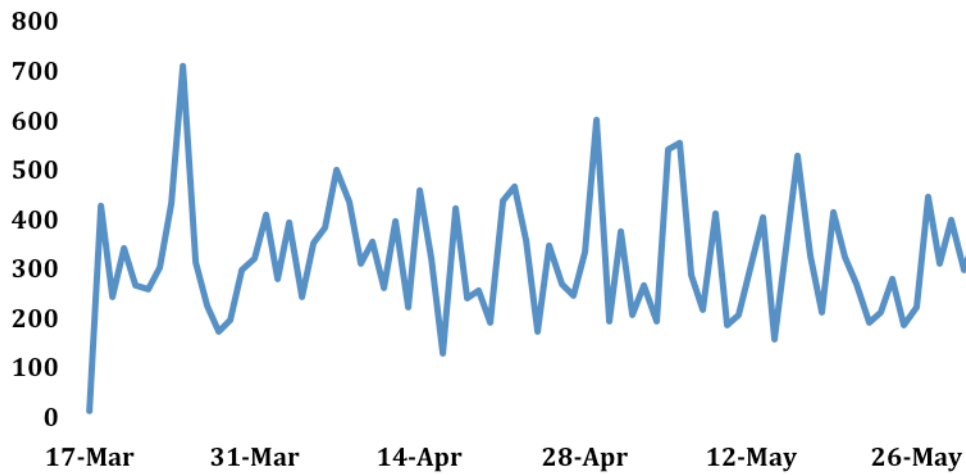
Ads per Day of the Week



When the dates (rather than days of the week) are charted beginning with March 17, 2014 (the first day of data capture) and June 7, 2014 (the final day of data capture), we found overall posting frequencies ranging from 121 ads per day on April 16, 2014 to 705 per day on March 25, 2014. We calculated the mean of data values to establish a frequency baseline of commercial sex ads and established a base of 288 ads per day (25,950 total ads / 90 days = 288.33).

Thus, most of the dates had approximately 300 ads. There were several dates that were higher than the average: March 25 with 705 ads; April 29 with 594; May 5 with 535; May 6 with 548; May 16 with 521; June 6 with 517. The Offshore Technology Conference was held in Houston on Sunday, May 4, 2014 through Thursday, May 8, 2014. During that time period, May 5 and 6 were among the higher days of ads. Over 100,000 people from all over the world attended this oil and gas conference.

Ads per Date

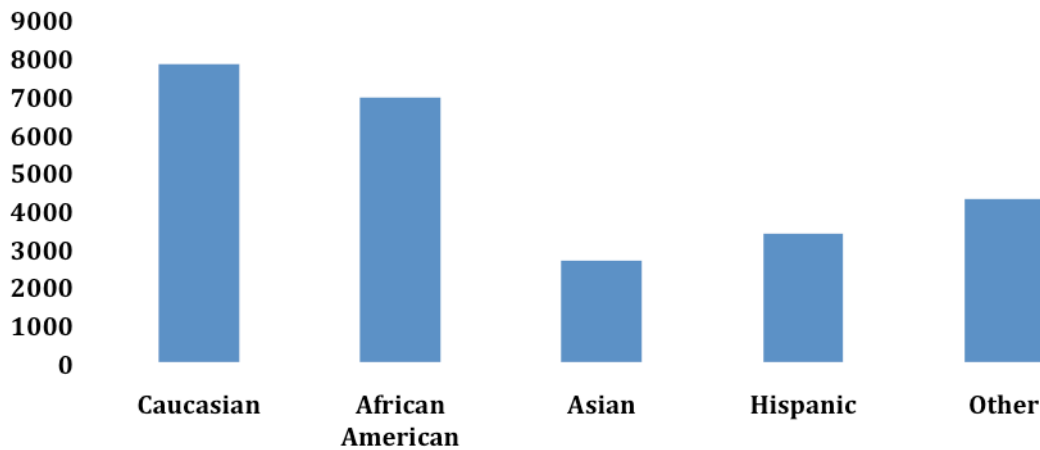


Price Per Hour and People Per Ad

Ads, at times, contained varying amounts of individuals within photographs. The ads contained identified races of Caucasian, African American, Asian, and Hispanic; and most of the ads featured only one person per ad. However, Asian ads were much more likely to advertise three or more people per ad than any other identified race. These were typically ads for massage parlors and spas.

When the 25,000+ ads were broken down by race, Caucasians were the highest with 7807 ads, African Americans with 6951, Asians with 2671, and Hispanics with 3383, and 4288 ads were unknown or other.

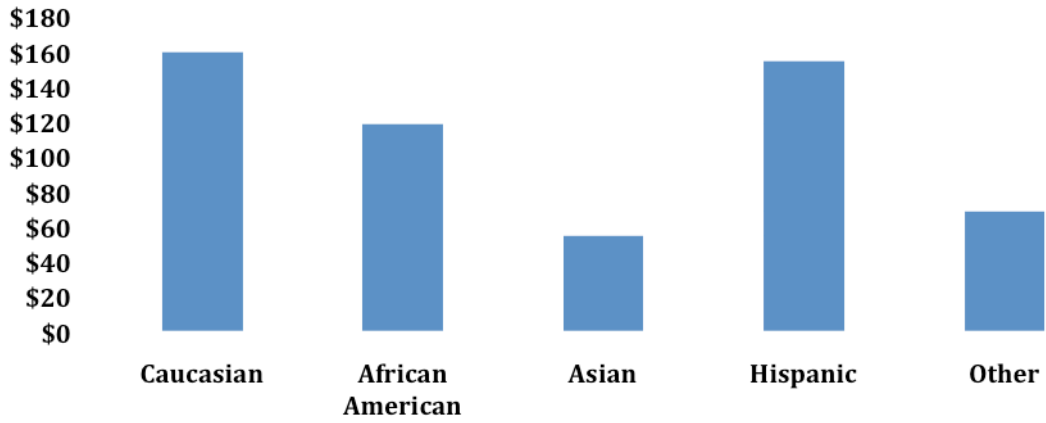
Ads Per Race



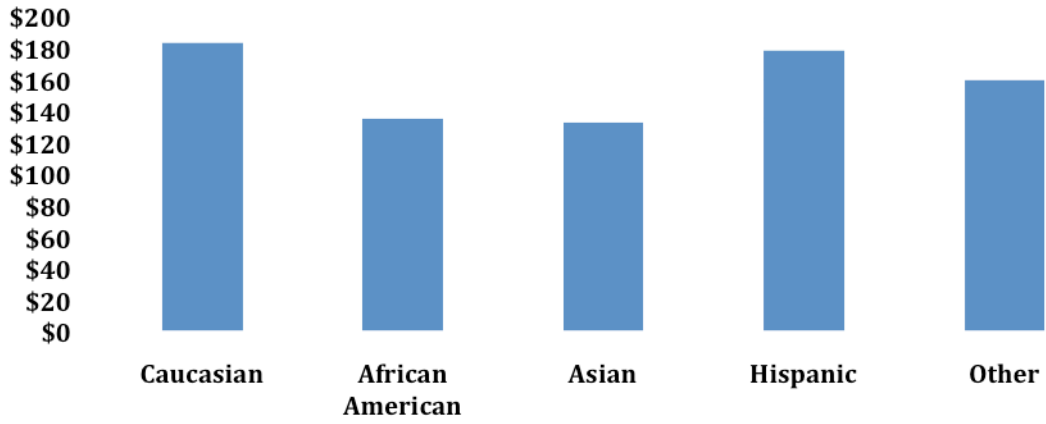
Not all ads for commercial sex in our data sample listed a dollar amount corresponding to sexual services offered. However, there were a considerable number that did list prices, and these particular ads constitute a distinct sample of our population. With a total of 25,950 ads, there were 18,097 ads with no price listed and there were 7,853 ads with a price listed. Our findings indicate an economic difference pertaining to race. Without being subjugated by race, prices averaged out at \$164.50 per hour for out-call (female travels to consumer's location) services and \$116.63 for in-call (consumer travels to female's location) services.

When broken down by race, Caucasian and Hispanic females listed the highest prices for in-calls at approximately \$150 per hour while African American females listed a lower price of \$118 per hour. Asians had the lowest price at \$54 per hour. For out-calls, Caucasians charged a median of \$183 per hour; Hispanics charged \$178 per hour; African Americans charged \$135 per hour; Asians charged \$132 per hour.

In-Call Price by Race (\$/hr)



Out-Call Price by Race (\$/hr)



Phone Numbers and Area Codes

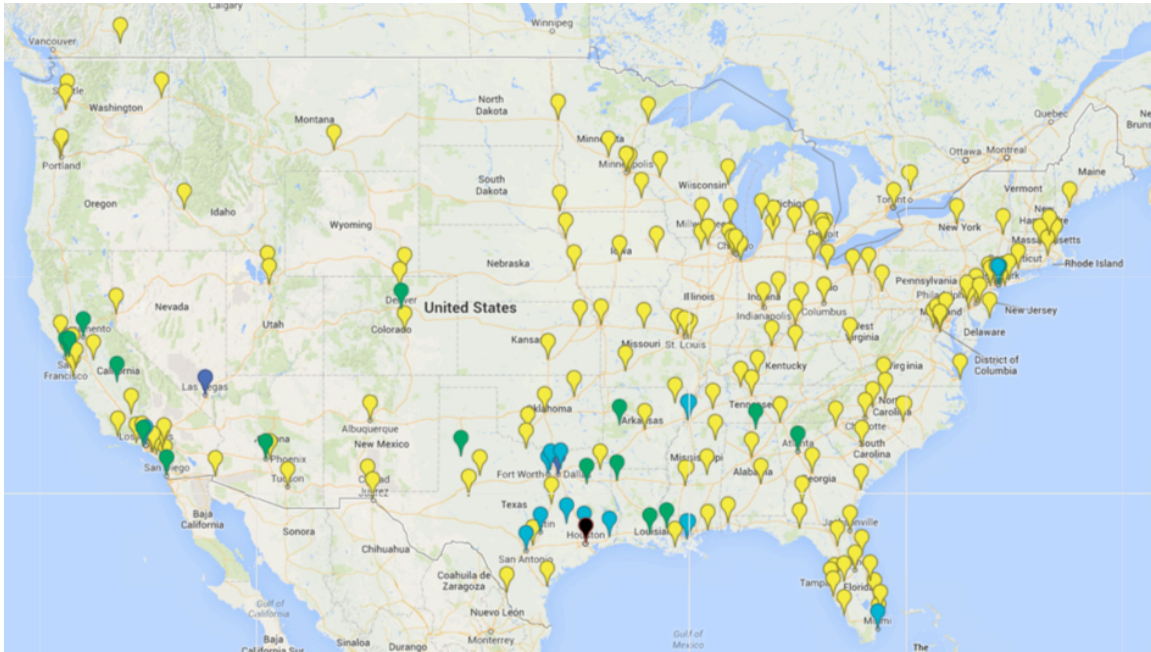
During our data capture period, there were 25,950 ads for commercial sex. However, within those ads, there were 3,830 unique phone numbers represented. Out of these numbers, there were 271 differing area codes. The phone numbers originated from a fairly diverse area. Cell phone area codes identify the areas of origin as that is where the cell phone is purchased. It is a near impossibility to purchase a cell phone in Houston with an area code outside of Houston, such as a South Dakota area code.

The largest representations of area codes were generally local, coming from Houston/surrounding areas of Houston or other cities in Texas. Within Houston, the total frequency of area codes represented was 18701. The frequency consists of the number of times that an area code showed up in an ad within a three month period. Thus, out of 25000+ ads, 18701 phone numbers listed in the ads had Houston area codes. This represents a total of three main area codes in Houston including 281 (frequency 3742), 713 (frequency 4548), and 832 (frequency 10411).

The top five area codes/cities in Texas include: 214/972/817/469 – Dallas/Fort Worth (frequency 876), 409 - Beaumont/Galveston (frequency 261), 979 - Austin to Houston (frequency 260), 512 - Austin (frequency 245), and 936 - Nacogdoches/Huntsville (frequency 235).

Interestingly, the third largest frequency came from the area code 702 - Las Vegas (frequency 447). There were also large frequencies from 504 - New Orleans (frequency 203) and 786 - Miami (frequency 201). In Free the Captives' Backpage study, area codes from almost every state were represented. The only states that were not represented in our study were New Hampshire and Vermont.

Locations of Area Codes found in Houston’s Backpage Ads



Number of Times an Area Code was Found on Houston’s Backpage.com

Yellow: 1-50	Green: 51-100	Teal: 101-300
Dark Blue: 301-500	Purple: 501-10,000	Black: 10,001-19,000

Most Frequently Mentioned Areas in Houston in the Ads

In the study, the data showed ads throughout many different areas in Houston. Every ad would list the female’s location or the areas that she would service, like Hobby Airport or the Galleria. There were however, certain parts of Houston that showed much higher frequencies than other areas. The frequency consists of the number of times that an area showed up in an advertisement within a three month period. The area with the largest frequency overall was Interstate Highway I-10. The most frequent freeways and highways included: I-10 (frequency 3455) and Beltway 8 (frequency 551). The most frequent streets in the Houston area included: Westheimer (frequency 1553), Richmond (frequency 963), Gessner (frequency 496), Center Street (frequency 347), and Dairy

Ashford (frequency 280). The most frequent areas included: the Galleria (frequency 1384), Hobby Airport (frequency 1011), Baytown (frequency 511), Katy (frequency 413), The Woodlands (frequency 371), Reliant Stadium (frequency 294), Medical Center (frequency 246), and Alief (frequency 217).

Although there were several ads mentioning the north part of Houston (Conroe, The Woodlands, and Spring), the largest frequency of the ads mentioned I-10 and south of I-10 within Beltway 8. The area south of I-10 within Beltway 8 contains major hot spots such as Westheimer, Richmond, the Galleria, and Hobby Airport. On both the west side (Katy) and the east side (Baytown) of Houston, along the I-10 corridor, there were also a substantial amount of ads.

Discussion

Large Volume of Ads

An important finding in this research project was validating the fact that Houston, indeed, is a major hub for commercial sex, which in turn indicates a high degree of sex trafficking. When compared to the same research conducted in Manhattan and North Jersey during a five month period encompassing the Super Bowl in 2014, Houston had a larger number of ads. This is surprising because one would expect an increase in the number of ads during the largest sporting event in the US. Anytime large amounts of people gather, demand increases and traffickers, in turn, respond with more supply. For example, there was such peak during the Offshore Technology Conference in May 2014, with over 100,000 people coming to Houston for this oil and gas conference. These

events and their sponsors are not actively promoting or facilitating sex trafficking. Rather it is a byproduct of what happens when so many people congregate for a large event.

On average, Houston had 288 ads per day equating to 13.3 ads per 100,000 people per day. In contrast, Manhattan and North Jersey had a combined average of 117 ads per day for 2.3 ads per 100,000 people per day. On average, Houston had many more ads per person than Manhattan and North Jersey, 13.3 ads compared to 2.3 ads per 100,000 people. In summary, Houston had six times as many ads per 100,000 people when compared to Manhattan and North Jersey.

During the week of the Super Bowl, there were several days that reached the high of 328 ads per day for both Manhattan and North Jersey, i.e. 6.4 ads per 100,000 people per day. This shows that there was a major increase surrounding the Super Bowl from the normal daily average of 117. During that study, Manhattan had a high of 360 ads on December 14, 2013. Interestingly enough, Houston's average (13.3 ads per 100,000 people per day) is almost double the highest day during the Super Bowl in Manhattan and North Jersey (6.4 ads per 100,000 people per day). It is important to remember that this is just Houston's average; Houston's busiest days are much higher, exceeding 5X the rate in Manhattan and North Jersey during the Super Bowl.

There were 271 unique area codes, which represented women and girls coming from every state in the U.S. to Houston, except Vermont and New Hampshire. Even though the women and girls typically travel all over the U.S. and post ads in many cities, these area codes more than likely represent where the women and girls originated. It is

difficult to purchase a cell phone with an area code different from the city where the phone is physically purchased. It was very interesting to see women and girls traveling very long distances to Houston, including overseas. More than half of the area codes were Houston numbers, but after Houston, the most number of area codes came from Las Vegas. Despite Las Vegas being a hub for commercial sex, it is interesting that such a large number of the area codes originated from Las Vegas. Thus, this would be another indicator of the high demand in Houston.

The highest number of Texas area codes, aside from Houston area codes, came from Dallas, Beaumont/Galveston, and Austin, respectively. This makes sense given the proximity to Houston. Lastly, even though smaller than the number of posts from Texas cities, there were still a large number of posts with area codes from Miami and New Orleans. These two cities are along the I-10 corridor, which is a well known trafficking route according to the Department of Justice.

It is truly astonishing the number of ads that are posted in Houston on a daily basis and the long distances traveled by the women, who are being trafficked or have come voluntarily. This shows that there is a very large demand for commercial sex in Houston, which is also an indicator of the severity of sex trafficking here. It is our belief that women are willing to travel long distances and/or many are being trafficked to Houston because the demand is very high in Houston and much money can be made.

Large Volume of Unique Phone Numbers

Houston had 3830 unique phone numbers over the three month period which

equates to 1.95 unique phone numbers per 100,000 people per day. Manhattan had 1.23 unique phone numbers per 100,000 people per day, and North Jersey had 0.45 unique phone numbers per 100,000 people per day. Since the number of unique phone numbers indicates the minimum number of prostitutes and trafficking victims, Houston has a larger proportion than either North Jersey or Manhattan. The raw data must be normalized for the length of the study and the population in order to account for the differences in sizes of the cities and the lengths of the studies.

Thus, Houston had 59% more unique phone numbers per 100,000 people per day than Manhattan and 329% more than North Jersey. Thus, Houston has significantly more prostitutes and trafficking victims than either Manhattan or North Jersey.

	Population	Unique Phone Numbers	Length of Study In Days	Ads per 100K people per day
Manhattan	1620000	2992	150	1.23
North Jersey	3492590	2389	150	0.46
Houston	2161000	3830	90	1.95
	Houston more than Manhattan			59%
	Houston more than North Jersey			328%

Races in Ads and Prices

Free the Captives' researchers tracked the ethnicity of the women and girls in the ads. The ethnicity with the most ads were Caucasian females with 7807 ads or 30% of the total ads during the three month period. African Americans followed shortly thereafter with 27% of the ads or 6951 ads. Hispanics were third with 13% or 3383 ads, followed by Asians at 10% with 2671 ads.

The breakdown of ethnicity does not correlate to the overall breakdown of ethnicities in Houston. According to the 2010 census, Hispanics make up 44% of the population while Caucasians and African Americans constitute 26% and 23% of the population in Houston.⁹ The percentages of ethnicities of the ads align with the census percentages for Caucasians and African Americans but are greatly skewed for Hispanics. If Hispanics make up 44% of the population in Houston but only appear in 13% of the commercial sex Backpage.com ads, this would suggest that Hispanic girls and women are not predominantly trafficked on Backpage.com. Rather, this would give support to Hispanic girls and women being trafficked primarily in Houston's cantinas. Law enforcement in Houston has cracked down on many large cantinas in the last decade.

The research also revealed that different ethnicities were able to charge different prices. Overall, Caucasian females charged the most with Hispanic females charging the second highest. For in-calls, the mean that Caucasians charged per hour was \$159.71 and Hispanics charged \$154.13. African Americans charged \$118.23 and Asians charged \$54.42. There are several interesting things to note about these prices. First of all, Caucasians and Hispanics must be in high demand if they are able to charge the highest prices. Secondly, Asians are charging a great deal less. Presumably many of these Asians are in massage parlors and spas, but it is unclear whether the lower price is driven by oversupply, meaning there is less demand for Asian females, or if the massage parlor/spa environment is less attractive to Backpage.com buyers. Thus, Asian females may be advertising through other avenues. Alternatively, the traffickers of Asian females may see

⁹ City of Houston, Planning and Development, http://www.houstontx.gov/planning/Demographics/demog_links.html, Accessed July 20, 2014

the women as expendable and rely on volume rather than higher pricing. The price of outcalls, where the female goes to the buyer, followed the same pattern when broken down by race.

Unusually High Demand in Houston and Law Enforcement Response

Sex trafficking and commercial sex fundamentally follows the economic principle of supply and demand. Items are supplied when there is a demand for them. Since there is a very large number or supply of commercial sex ads in Houston, then there must be a large demand from consumers for sex. As noted, there are ads posted for women who are from all over the U.S. If there was not a high demand in Houston, these ads would be placed in other cities besides Houston. Presumably, from an economic perspective, these women would only travel to locations where the demand was high and business was good.

Some of this demand may be stemming from business travelers that come to Houston. Commercial sex ads were more frequently posted on Mondays and Tuesdays. It is possible that this spike is correlated with the number of business travelers coming into Houston. Tuesday was the day of the week with the highest number of ads. Out of 25,950 ads, 5,331 ads or 20% of the ads were posted on Tuesdays, while only Fridays only had 3,635 and Saturdays had 3,426. One would expect that the weekend numbers would be higher, but with Tuesday having the most ads, this correlates to an increase in demand from business travelers who arrive on Monday and typically leave on Thursday.

Law enforcement in Houston has worked diligently to combat the demand. From July 17 to August 3, 2014, the Harris County Sheriff's Office participated in the National Day of Johns Arrest coordinated by the Cook County Sheriff's Office in Illinois. During this time, 28 law enforcement agencies in 14 states arrested 506 johns and 14 traffickers. The Harris County Sheriff's Office, under the leadership of Sheriff Adrian Garcia, arrested 76 Johns. According to a national coordinator of this effort, the Harris County Sheriff's Office had the most number of arrests by a single agency out of the 28 participating law enforcement agencies. Law enforcement in the Houston area has taken the demand issue very seriously. The buyers are being arrested in troves.

During the period of the Super Bowl of 2014, there was another National Day of Johns Arrest. The Harris County Sheriff's Office had 48 arrests out of the 359 Johns arrested across the nation, which again was the highest amount of arrests. These staggering arrests show the dedication of the Vice Division of the Harris County Sheriff's Office. They are working diligently to combat the demand side of sex trafficking.

The large number of arrests is a testament of how truly egregious the demand side is in Houston. Therefore, it is no surprise that Houston has had such a large number of commercial sex ads on Backpage.com. More resources must be funneled to law enforcement, not only in targeting traffickers and rescuing victims, but specifically for operations focusing on the buyers. Sex trafficking is a problem fueled by demand. Without the buyers, there would be no trafficking.

Conclusion

The data from this study shows that Houston is indeed a major city for commercial sex and sex trafficking. With over 25,000 ads and 3830 unique phone numbers online in a three month period, Houston is a national hub for this illicit criminal activity. These ads are driven by a high demand from buyers in Houston. To effectively combat trafficking, time, resources and attention must be focused on the buyers. It is not enough to target solely the traffickers; the buyers are as much of the problem as the traffickers.

With the Super Bowl coming to Houston in 2017, Free the Captives recommends that plans begin immediately to combat sex trafficking around this large sporting event. This research already shows that Houston on an average day has more commercial sex and sex trafficking on Backpage.com than Super Bowl 2014 did in North Jersey. Sex trafficking in Houston will only increase with the advent of Super Bowl 2017. Besides targeting traffickers, law enforcement must be prepared to crack down on the buyers and dry up the demand to keep traffickers from bringing underaged girls into Houston.

Houston is known for many things – being leaders in oil and gas and healthcare. Being known for sex trafficking is not a distinction this city wants. Fighting human trafficking requires a concerted effort of rescue and rehabilitation of the victims and arresting and prosecuting the traffickers **and the buyers**. Often, the main focus is only on the victims and the traffickers. It is easy to ignore the buyers – your “average Joe.” Unfortunately, “Joe” is as much of the problem as the trafficker forcing a 16 year old girl to sleep with 60 “Joes” in a month.

For questions about this study, email Julie Waters at Julie@freethecaptiveshouston.com.