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# Law Enforcement Guide on Indicators of Sex Trafficking in Online Escort Ads

Kristina Lugo-Graulich & Leah F. Meyer

## Purpose of this Guide

To provide empirically based guidance to law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, and sex trafficking victim service providers on indicators of sex trafficking in online escort ads that can help increase precision in victim identification.

## Who is this Guide For?

Anyone that investigates or prosecutes sex trafficking cases involving escort ads.

## How to Use this Guide

This guide is best used to support proactive sex trafficking investigations or for detecting potential trafficking risk while searching for missing persons. Online escort ads cannot be used in isolation to determine whether sex trafficking is present; however, more precise analysis of these ads may lead to more solid leads for building cases.

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## A Guidebook for Law Enforcement and Prosecutors

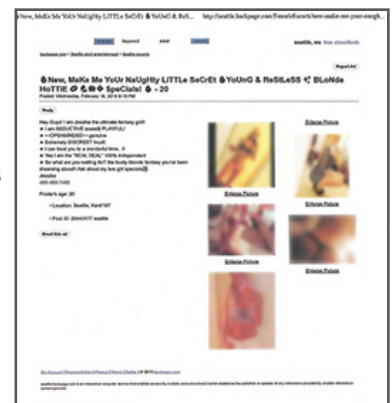
This guide presents results from a study by the Justice Research and Statistics Association and the Human Trafficking Intelligence Project that compared ads belonging to trafficking cases (positives) with ads that did not (negatives). It presents information on indicators that, if present, mean the ad was more likely to be associated with a trafficking case.

The study also resulted in evidence about indicators that were not associated with trafficking when the two types of ads were compared. Differences seen between ads associated with domestic/hotel sex trafficking and ads for massage cases are also described.

## Use of the Internet in Sex Trafficking and Commercial Sex Generally

The internet has been used since its earliest days as a tool to facilitate the operation of sex marketplaces and sex trafficking. While social media has become a prime venue for victim recruitment, escort advertisement websites often function as the means for sex providers and traffickers to sell commercial sex to potential customers.

Law enforcement and prosecutors have long used ads from various websites to identify victims and investigate cases. Several indicators have been used and shared anecdotally by investigators in the field, but little research has been done to test which indicators in these ads increase the like-



likelihood that an ad points to trafficking vs. consensual sex work. Investigators need an empirical basis to decide which ads to investigate and how to present ads as evidence in court.



### Important Considerations for Using this Guide:

To inform this research, we consulted with three stakeholder groups on multiple occasions: investigators, prosecutors, and victim advocates; sex trafficking survivors; and non-trafficked sex workers. Each group expressed different concerns about how this information would be used in practice; however, the shared goal throughout is to protect victims and non-trafficked sex workers from potential harm and to avoid misuse of information that could harm an investigation.

Therefore, investigators and analysts should keep the following points in mind as they investigate sex trafficking online:

➔ **Survivors stressed that the presence of indicators in escort ads should never be used alone to draw conclusive determinations of sex trafficking. Escort ads should be used as a tool to narrow the focus of investigations and not as a shortcut for comprehensive inquiry.**

➔ The motivations of sex providers and trafficking victims exist in an environment that is not well understood. There is no single profile for a sex trafficking victim. Sex providers' actions are influenced by complex dynamics of power and control that affect their responses to interventions. Furthermore, sex providers may experience phases of trafficker control and at other times work independently. Because of this fluidity, it is important to treat sex providers with respect, avoid assumptions about their status or victimization, and understand the complexity of trauma experienced from law enforcement, sex buyers, and traffickers.

➔ **Non-trafficked sex workers expressed concern that this information might be used to target consensual prostitution/sex work rather than non-consensual sex trafficking. Sex workers are frequently arrested or threatened with arrest and the resulting hardships contribute to distrust of law enforcement.**

➔ The ads analyzed for this work were mostly from cases that closed prior to 2019—before Backpage was shut down. Given the quickly evolving nature of sex marketplaces, current posting conventions and indicators may vary from those reported here. However, per the focus groups, the results of this study are still relevant to interpreting ads in this ever-changing landscape.

## How We Defined Sex Trafficking

We used the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) definition of sex trafficking because it reflects the burden of proof that most investigators and prosecutors must meet:

*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.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000, 22 U.S.C. § 7101 et seq.

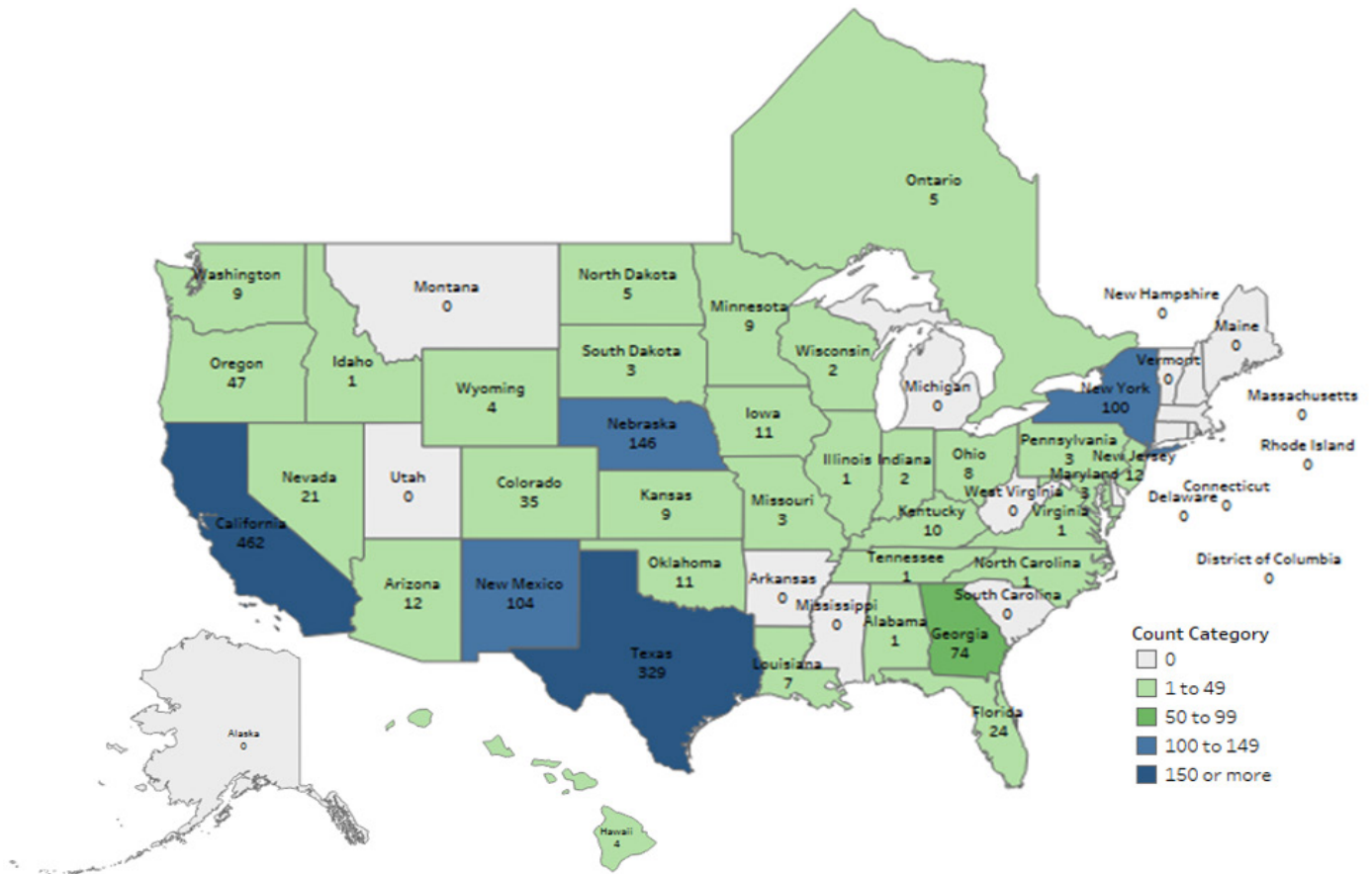
## Project Methods

This project consisted of five phases of work, during which we sought input from a wide variety of stakeholders and collected data on closed cases that involved escort ads from law enforcement, prosecutors, and a sample from a “ground truth” set of cases compiled by researchers at Claremont Graduate School that allowed us to examine massage ads.

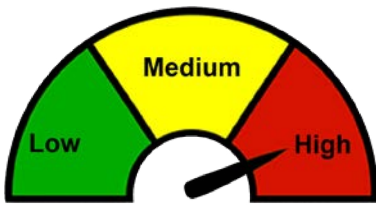


## Sample of Ads Analyzed

Our final sample included cases investigated in seven states that involved ads extending to 35 states and Ontario, Canada.

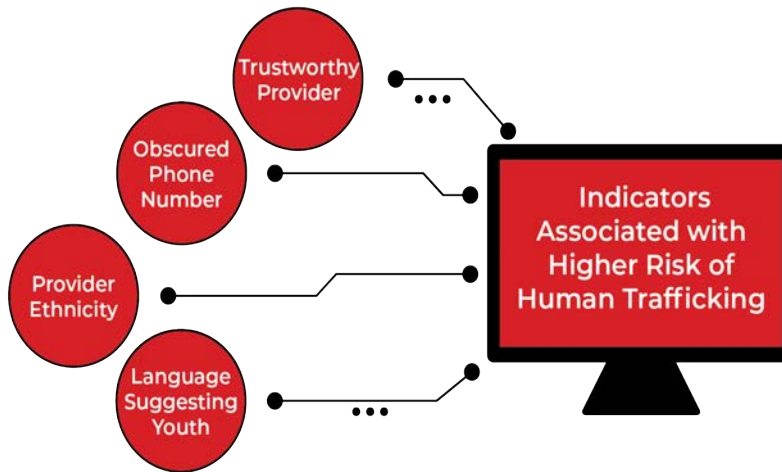


# Results



## Indicators Associated with a **HIGHER RISK** of Trafficking

Four indicators were associated with a higher risk of trafficking when present in escort ads, controlling for effects of other indicators.



### 1. Trustworthy Provider Language

**Conventional Wisdom:** Providers use language to indicate trustworthiness, e.g., “100% professional,” “photos 100% me,” “discreet,” to create an environment catering to client comfort rather than to the provider’s preferences and safety, which can point to potential exploitation.

**Result:** Language assuring potential clients of provider trustworthiness was over **four times** as likely to represent a trafficking case. In message ads, this language was used in 20% more trafficking ads than non-trafficking ads.

**Interpretation:** Traffickers may use trustworthiness language to convince the buyer that the provider is willingly engaged, that the buyer will not be robbed, and that foul play is less likely – while ignoring the provider’s preferences.

### 2. Obscured Phone Number

A phone number that uses obfuscation techniques to avoid collection by technology platforms and detection by law enforcement, such as emojis between numerals, spelling out numbers, extra spaces, or other methods.

**Conventional Wisdom:** Purposefully obscuring phone numbers to avoid detection by law enforcement implies the presence of sex trafficking.

**Result:** Presence of these techniques increased the likelihood that the ad was associated with trafficking by almost 12 times, controlling for the presence of other indicators. However, an obscured phone number was not a significant correlate in message ads – likely because they advertise as legitimate businesses and do not use this practice.

**Interpretation:** Traffickers may use obfuscation techniques to avoid collection of phone numbers by technology platforms and detection by law enforcement.



### 3. Provider Ethnicity

**Conventional Wisdom:** Traffickers post ads catering to the desires of sex buyers, which includes providing explicit choice of ethnicity or race.

**Result:** If the ethnicity of the individual advertised is described, the ad was over **five times** as likely to be associated with a trafficking case. However, specification of provider ethnicity was not a significant correlate in message ads.

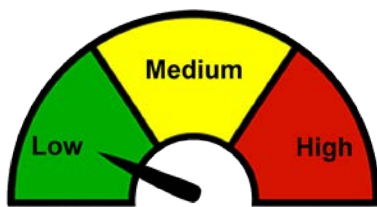
**Interpretation:** Traffickers may focus more on racialized descriptions in their marketing of victims than non-trafficked sex workers.

### 4. Language Suggesting Youth (use with caution)

**Conventional Wisdom:** Language communicating that the provider is young is coded language to sex buyers that the provider is under 18.

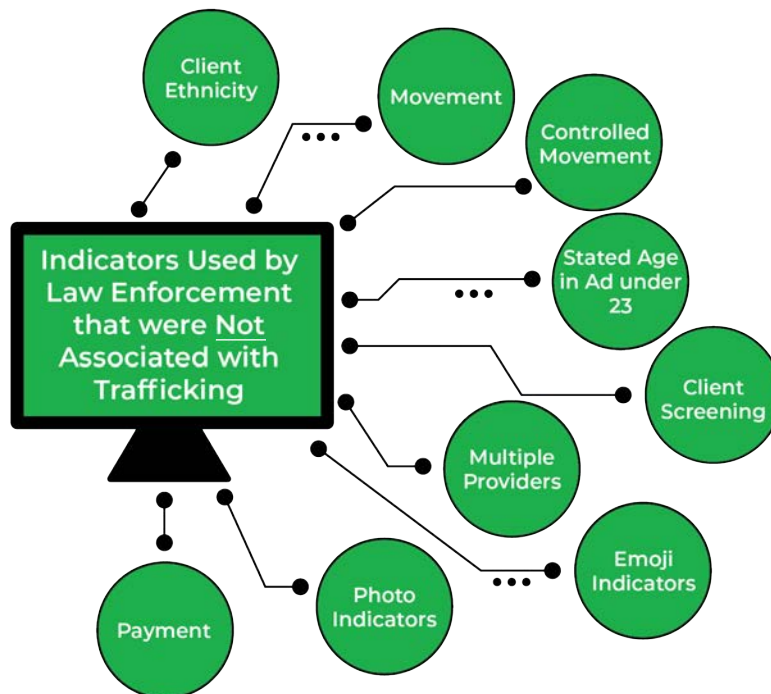
**Result:** This language increased the likelihood that a case was a trafficking case by over **four times**. However, the significance of this indicator may also be an effect of our sample.

**Interpretation:** Given that common law enforcement practice has been to search for ads with young language for investigation, our sample may have contained more ads with this language than would be seen in the wider marketplace. We recommend interpretation of this result with caution, as non-trafficked sex workers also use this language regularly for marketing purposes.



## Indicators Used by Law Enforcement **NOT ASSOCIATED** with a higher risk of Trafficking

Several indicators previously considered signs of sex trafficking were found **not** to be significant predictors; some were even more likely to be associated with non-trafficked sex work than with trafficking.



### 1. Stated Age in Ad Under 23

**Conventional Wisdom:** Ads for minor victims of sex trafficking tend to list their ages as between 18 and 23 years old.

**Result:** A stated age under 23 was not a statistically significant predictor when accounting for other indicators. It was a significant correlate in massage ads, but the proportion of trafficking ads containing stated ages under 23 was only slightly higher.

**Interpretation:** A stated age under 23 is more likely a marketing tactic used both by traffickers and non-trafficked sex workers to suggest youthfulness for older workers than to suggest the presence of a minor.

### 2. Movement Language

**Conventional Wisdom:** Victims of sex trafficking are moved frequently to avoid detection by law enforcement and to isolate and disorient the victim.

**Result:** The presence of movement language, e.g., “new in town,” “back,” “in town for the weekend,” which is separate from language indicating preference of location (controlled movement), was over 70% less likely to be associated with trafficking, which is the opposite effect.

**Interpretation:** Both non-trafficked sex workers and victims of trafficking travel regularly. “New” and “limited time” language may also be used for marketing purposes to drum up demand.

### 3. Payment Language

**Conventional Wisdom:** Information regarding pricing indicates trafficking. Pricing indicators can include direct statements of price with the abbreviations “hh/hr” afterward, or terms like “donations,” “roses,” or “specials.”

**Result:** Inclusion of pricing was not a statistically significant predictor of trafficking.

**Interpretation:** Pricing may be included by both trafficking victims and non-trafficked sex workers.

### 4. Controlled Movement Language

**Conventional Wisdom:** Restrictions on movement indicate trafficking. Specification of venue (buyer comes to the provider or vice versa, e.g., incall or outcall) is an indicator of such restriction.

**Result:** Controlled movement was not a reliable predictor of trafficking. Both ads featuring non-trafficked sex workers and ads featuring victims use this language to specify preferred location.

**Interpretation:** This result, which was surprising to our survivor focus group, comports with the non-trafficked sex worker focus group who indicated that independent workers also use this language to assert control in their interactions and ensure their own safety.

### 5. Client Ethnicity Restrictions

**Conventional Wisdom:** Previous research and the survivor and law enforcement focus groups indicated that restrictions on client ethnicity are signals to warn away other pimps.

**Result:** Restrictions or preferences for specific client ethnicities (e.g., no AA, I love white men) were not predictive of trafficking when controlling for other indicators.

**Interpretation:** This result is consistent with the input provided by the non-trafficked sex worker group, who said these restrictions may also reflect the preferences of an independent provider.

### 6. Client Screening Language

**Conventional Wisdom:** Client screening is carried out by traffickers on behalf of victims; the presence of such language is associated with trafficking. Client screening language can include stipulations like “No law enforcement,” “Text only,” “No blocked calls,” “Up-scale gentlemen preferred,” etc.

**Result:** This language did not predict trafficking in our analyses

**Interpretation:** Per our non-trafficked sex worker focus group, client screening practices are often used by non-trafficked workers who have the autonomy to dictate their terms of engagement and enforce practices to stay safe.

## 7. Multiple Providers

**Conventional Wisdom:** Advertising multiple providers or “bringing a friend” in an ad indicates trafficking because traffickers often control and travel with “stables,” or groups of several victims. An independent worker would not want to share the money earned.

**Result:** Advertising multiple providers was not a statistically significant predictor of trafficking.

**Interpretation:** Per our non-trafficked sex worker group, ads featuring multiple providers were as likely to represent victims as non-trafficked workers who travel or work together for safety.

## 8. Available 24/7

**Conventional Wisdom:** Specification of round-the-clock availability may indicate a provider’s lack of control over their schedule or demanding quotas set by a trafficker.

**Result:** Presence of language advertising a provider as available all hours indicated that the ad was 10% less likely to represent a trafficking case than non-trafficked sex work.

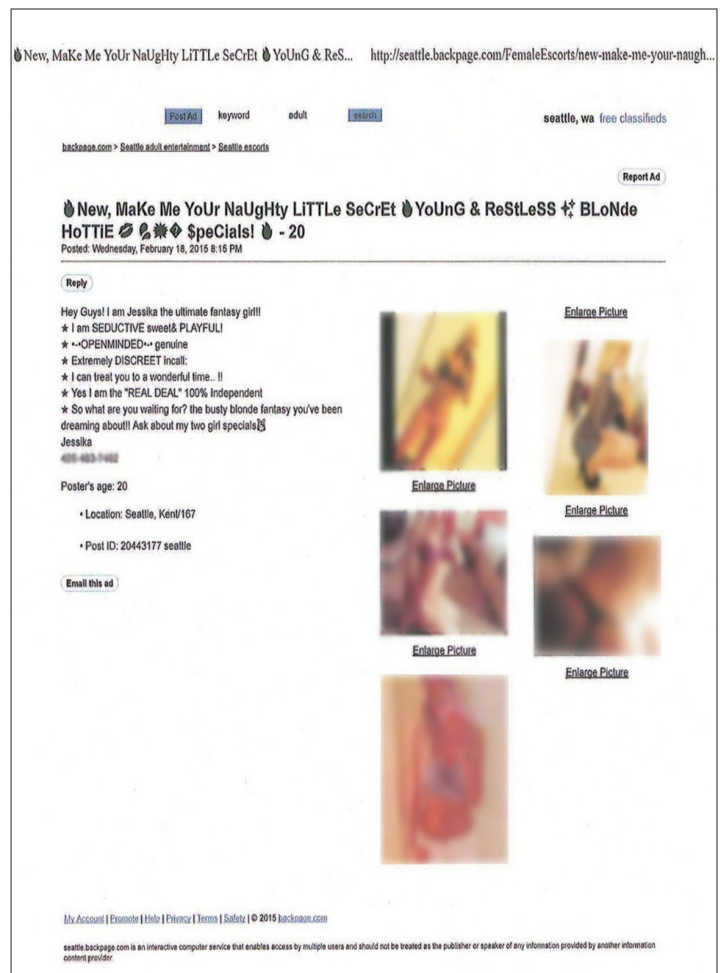
**Interpretation:** Inclusion of this language is more a marketing technique than an indicator of quotas or restricted activity.

## Emojis

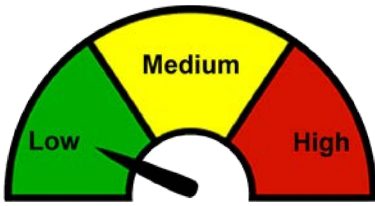
**Conventional Wisdom:** Emojis are used to hide coded messages in ads, such as the presence of minors or specific sexual services.

**Result:** Emojis were not useful as predictors of trafficking. Emojis representing provider services (e.g., tongues, water drops, open or closed umbrellas, Playboy bunny) occurred in slightly more trafficking ads than non-trafficking ads, but they occurred most often in ads for cases where trafficking could not be determined. The prevalence of other emoji types was not significantly different between trafficking and non-trafficking ads.

**Interpretation:** Emojis were most often used to get around character limits or make an advertisement more colorful and attention-grabbing. More research is needed, but these results support the input from our non-trafficked sex worker focus group who stated that emojis are a simply marketing tool and do not contain codes that can uncover trafficking.







## Indicators Used by Law Enforcement **NOT ASSOCIATED** with a higher risk of Trafficking: PHOTOS

### Photos

**Conventional Wisdom:** Image indicators are important for detecting potential trafficking, especially if an individual is under 18 and legally a victim under the federal definition. These indicators can include obscured faces, picture taken in hotel room, professional photos, or visible tattoos with a pimp’s brand or indicators of “the life” such as a crown.

**Result:** Most of the photo indicators tested were not significant correlates of trafficking.

**Interpretation:** This result was surprising to our survivor focus group members, especially obscured face indicators (e.g., pixilation, placing an emoji, or simply cropping the head of the subject out). However, widespread photo manipulation, use of stolen or fake images, and relative uniformity in photographic techniques, styles, and posing make using photos unreliable for identifying victims or determining potential trafficking unless already looking for a specific person.

### Combining Ad Indicators with Other Evidence

Members of the sex worker focus group provided input from their experience posting escort ads and interacting with human trafficking victims regarding the use of indicators in combination to point to ads with a higher likelihood of human trafficking. While not statistically significant in our sample, we highly recommend these be tested with larger data sets in research and considered during investigations. These examples show the importance of combining analysis of indicators in escort ads with other sources of evidence:

- **Three or more 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 requires detailed knowledge of local and regional markets, the ability to connect



### Photos: “Looking Young”

**Conventional Wisdom:** Ads containing photos of providers who appear young are more likely to represent victims of trafficking, as these providers are likely under 18.

**Result:** This indicator had the opposite effect: Photos of individuals that appear suspiciously young occurred in **three to four times** as many **non-trafficking** or **outcome unknown** ads as trafficking ads.

**Interpretation:** With photo filters and other manipulation techniques, images cannot be relied upon as they once were. Minors are often made to look older through use of cosmetics and other techniques and older individuals may use filters to try to look younger. Furthermore, photos do not always match the person advertised and may be of someone else altogether.

**Conclusion:** Given that one of the top criteria cited by investigators when deciding which ads to investigate is whether the subject in the photo “looks young,” this result should prompt a re-thinking of using “youthful appearance” as a decision criterion. This may have implications for some common proactive investigation practices, such as “john stings,” which some law enforcement have moved away from after uncovering little trafficking through those methods.

providers across ads, establish patterns of movement, and gain an understanding of the means of the providers or those who are transporting them.

- **Advertising prices lower than average for the market.** This may be more difficult to identify given the frequency with which providers copy each other’s ads—especially if they are inexperienced. However, combined with other evidence and knowledge of the market, this could be useful.

### Final Remarks

The study used to create this resource demonstrates the complexity of the online sex marketplace and shows the lack of clear-cut lines between consensual sex work and human trafficking when interpreting escort ads. However, the information provided herein could be used to increase precision in victim identification and to support the use of escort ads as evidence in investigations and prosecutions.

The sex trafficking survivors consulted for this study stressed that the presence of indicators in escort ads should never be used alone to draw conclusive determinations of sex trafficking. Escort ads should be used as a tool to narrow the focus of investigations and not as a shortcut for comprehensive inquiry. We hope that the insights provided here can help to improve precision and efficiency in generating actionable leads and to focus scarce resources for trafficking victim identification.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on this project and additional resources, please go to:

[www.jrsa.org/projects/escorts-new.html](http://www.jrsa.org/projects/escorts-new.html).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank the following project partners for making this work possible:

### Human Trafficking Intelligence Project

The Human Trafficking Intelligence Project focuses on the impact of technology to both hinder and enable human exploitation. Their projects center around foundational research on human trafficking, particularly in the online space and development of training resources to maximize interventions with a trauma-informed and victim-centered approach. Leah F. Meyer of the Human Trafficking Intelligence Project is the key research partner with JRSA on this project.

### Focus Group Participants

We are very grateful to all the sex trafficking survivors; law enforcement, prosecutors, analysts, and victim advocates; and non-trafficked sex workers who participated in focus groups at the beginning and end of this project and who provided additional consultative input throughout. Without them, this project would not have been possible.

### Fieldwork Sites that Provided Data on Closed Cases

Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI)

Nebraska State Patrol and Nebraska Attorney General (with help from HTI Labs)

San Diego District Attorney's Office (SDDA)

San Francisco District Attorney's Office (SFDA)

Texas Department of Public Safety (TXDPS)

### Partners Administering Web Scrapers, Escort Ad Archives, and Other Supplementary Data

Dr. Greg DeAngelo at Claremont Graduate School

HTI Labs, Inc. at Creighton University

Uncharted, Inc.