

# Human Trafficking in Illicit Massage Businesses

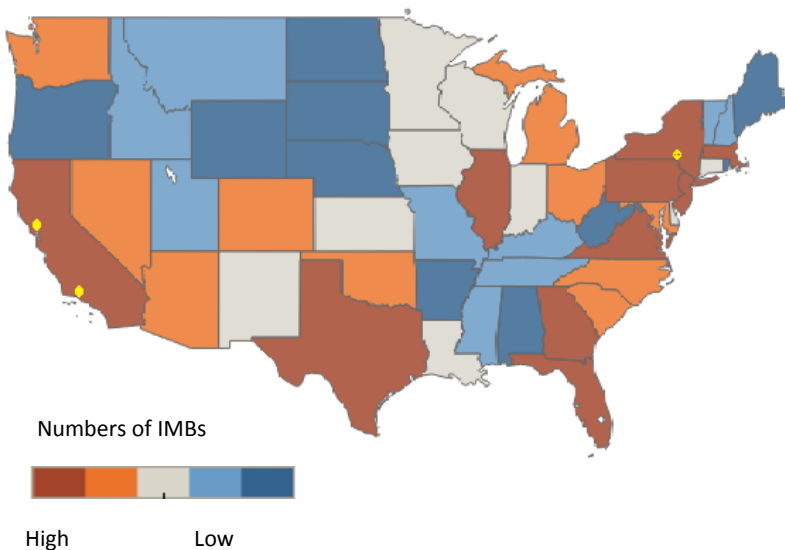
There are an estimated 7,500 to 9,000 illicit massage businesses (IMBs) currently in operation in the United States. IMBs are a venue that use the cover of a legitimate bodywork or massage business to provide commercial sex acts to a customer base of sex buyers. Many of the IMBs nationwide are at risk for engaging of human trafficking. These commercial-front brothels can include businesses claiming to provide massage, spas, reflexology, foot massage, bodywork, and modeling. Many of these venues are not actually individual businesses, but are instead part of larger networks that follow similar operating structures across numerous locations.

Networks of these venues enable traffickers to exploit vulnerable women for commercial sex and labor. The larger the network, the greater the likelihood that an illicit massage business in that network is engaged in human trafficking. These networks facilitate the recruitment of women, primarily foreign nationals, and their movement between locations to have a continuous rotation of “new” women available for buyers. Trafficking cases have been confirmed by law enforcement and service providers from New York to California, and from provinces in China and parts of South Korea and Thailand. Methods of control and coercion in IMBs include false promises, deceptive recruitment, lies, manipulation, debt bondage, threats, and intimidation. Focusing on disrupting criminal networks rather than a single business front or arresting the women themselves means disrupting the exploitation of women in these venues.

The average IMB network contains 2-3 individual IMB locations. Based on revenue estimates of IMBs that have been closed by law enforcement – the average IMB can net around \$250,000 in a year. The average IMB owner can easily earn over half a million dollars a year with 2-3 IMBs in a network and frequently requiring that victims pay down their debt with interest. Networks often place their businesses across different jurisdictions to avoid detection by any one law enforcement agency and to continue to collect their profits across a number of individual locations.

Polaris’ Disruption Strategies team launched the campaign to End Trafficking in IMBs to raise awareness about the reality of trafficking in IMBs, to equip stakeholders to permanently close these commercial-front venues, to provide survivors with culturally appropriate services, and to proactively respond to the needs of the field. The campaign is anticipated to run until 2020.

## PREVALENCE OF U.S. ILLICIT MASSAGE BUSINESSES



● Victims are primarily recruited in New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

## A SURVIVOR’S STORY\*

Min came to Los Angeles from the Fujian province in China. She had dropped out of school in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade but had worked hard all her life. Her husband had always gambled and now had more debts than they could pay, so she came to visit a friend and look for work. She found an online ad for women to work as massage therapists near L.A. and was promised \$6,000 a month. She took a bus to the location and was told that in order to earn the money she had promised her family, she would have to engage in commercial sex. This isn’t what the initial ad described.

Min did not know where she was and was terrified her family might find out what had happened. Every few weeks, she would be moved but was told that she was still near L.A. When police in Houston arrested her traffickers, Min was not sure where she was. The Houston police helped connect Min with service providers in Houston and then L.A. They helped Min understand her rights and helped her enroll in night classes. She is happy learning again and working with law enforcement to bring justice to her traffickers.

\*Based on composite information from dozens of survivors, service providers, and academic research

## Disruption Strategies – Engagement and Systems Shift

The following sections describe areas of work that Polaris is engaged in as part of the IMB campaign:

### Law Enforcement Engagement:

- Identify and elevate promising practices
- Assist the field in streamlining current processes across stakeholder groups and provide resources where needed
- Connect innovators and change makers across agencies and jurisdictions to facilitate peer-led shifts in processes and systems

### Survivor Care and Empowerment:

- Use survivor experience to inform all work and identify gaps in necessary services nationally to create a comprehensive safety net
- Elevate leaders working on this type of trafficking, facilitating connections across the field

### Policy Work

- Identify existing and new civil remedies that will increase consequences for traffickers
- Advocate for stronger, survivor-informed laws and steadfast enforcement of those laws
- Identify and harness non-traditional avenues and stakeholders to identify survivors and hold all relevant actors accountable

### Shifting the Narrative

- Shift the media narrative away from “happy ending” jokes and victim-shaming to one that focuses on exploiters
- Improve the quality of information about the lived experiences of IMB trafficking survivors
- Harness public desire to do good toward ending human trafficking

### Our Impact:

Total partner jurisdictions that we're now working with - **78 jurisdiction partners across 16 states**. Partners are committed to serving victims and tackling organized networks using a new approach.

Polaris analysts have **analyzed and mapped over 5,000 IMBs for network linkages**, or 86% of the total IMBs listed on commercial sex websites, giving the team and its partners a comprehensive picture of how IMB networks are organized across the country.

**482 IMBs have been closed** since the beginning of the campaign in late 2015. In 2017 there has been a **23 percentage point increase in closures occurring in partner jurisdictions**. The significant increase means that more jurisdictions are tackling this as organized crime and in a victim-sensitive manner in partner areas.

Recruited **20 NGO service providers into the national safety net**. 15 of these 20 are in the top 4 states where IMBs are most prevalent (CA, NY, TX, and FL) and have helped serve the **45 survivors that were identified after law enforcement operations arrested traffickers**.

New or updated local ordinances and state message laws have been proposed or passed in 25 partner jurisdictions, including 3 at the full statewide level. This has led to **legislative improvements on new message ordinance protections in over 1,000 cities**.

### TOP 3

#### COUNTIES WITH HIGHEST NUMBERS OF IMBS

1. Los Angeles, CA
2. Santa Clara, CA
3. Orange, CA

### TOP 3

#### NATIONALITIES OF POTENTIAL VICTIMS

1. Chinese
2. South Korean
3. Mexico/Central America