

The Human Trafficking  
Initiative

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Nevada's  
Online  
Commercial  
Sex Market

## The Human Trafficking Initiative (HTI)

The Human Trafficking Initiative (HTI) is supported by the Women's Fund of Omaha. The research of HTI is conducted in the Heider College of Business at Creighton University. Awaken, a Reno based anti-trafficking organization, commissioned this report.

HTI uses data science to collect, analyze and evaluate the scope of sex trafficking across the United States and to identify effective policy solutions. The research initiative is directed by Crysta N. Price ([crystaprice@creighton.edu](mailto:crystaprice@creighton.edu)) and Terry D. Clark ([tclark@creighton.edu](mailto:tclark@creighton.edu)). Julie Faller ([JulieFaller@creighton.edu](mailto:JulieFaller@creighton.edu)) is the Chief Social Scientist for HTI. She performed the majority of analysis for this report.

## A Note on Terminology, Agency, & Exploitation in the Commercial Sex Industry

Throughout this report, individuals exchanging sex acts for something of value are referred to as *sex providers*. A sex act encompasses any sexual encounter with another person with the goal of sexual gratification, including but not limited to an erotic massage, stripping, and intercourse.

Sex providers have diverse experiences within the commercial sex industry, and the degrees of agency and exploitation they experience exist along a continuum. This continuum extends from those sex providers with full agency who voluntarily participate in the commercial sex industry to those who are victims of sex trafficking and have severely constrained agency. Even among independent sex providers, reasons to enter or stay in the industry are diverse and nuanced. For example, some independent sex providers exchange sex acts for basic survival needs (food, clothing, shelter, etc.).

The industry includes independent sex providers as well as those who are managed, trafficked, or facilitated by a third party. In this report, we refer to relatively formalized structures that sell multiple individuals for sex as *organizations* or *venues*. These can include legally licensed brothels, but also criminalized organizations selling sex such as escort agencies or massage parlors whose employees perform sex acts. We do not consider sex providers working together in groups or those controlled by a pimp to be sold through an organization.

Our use of the term sex provider is meant to act as an umbrella term that captures all of these diverse segments and experiences within the commercial sex industry.

## Backpage & Sex Trafficking

This report is based on data leveraged from Backpage.com, a website similar to Craigslist, that accounts for 80% of online commercial sex advertising.<sup>1</sup> Backpage is a commercial sex market hub, where providers differ in the prices charged, their target buyers, working conditions, and, importantly, the risk of having been trafficked.

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<sup>1</sup> AIM Group. 2013. Online Prostitution Ad-Revenue Crosses Craigslist Benchmark.

Only some sex providers who advertise on Backpage have been trafficked; however, many adults and minors who have been trafficked have been advertised on Backpage.

Backpage does not technically allow advertisements of minors, however, 71% of child sex trafficking reports received by the National Center for Missing and Exploited are linked to ads on the site.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the website itself turns in more than 400 potential ads of minors each month.<sup>3</sup>

While nearly all segments of the commercial sex industry can be found on Backpage, the website is not known to represent the very high-end of the market nor is it a popular hub for the male commercial sex market. As a result, the overwhelming majority of individuals in the analysis are women and girls. This does not imply that men and boys are not victims of sex trafficking.

## Data Source & Methodology

Sex trafficking is embedded in the commercial sex market, much of which occurs online. Data in this report are derived from scraping 435 Backpage sites associated with particular cities or locales twice a day according to local time zones.

After scraping advertisements, we perform a number of steps designed to ensure that our data reflect the actual online commercial sex industry. First, we eliminate ads identified by our spam algorithm. These include ads that are unlikely to reflect a sex provider, such as those posted by anti-trafficking organizations to provide a hotline number for those needing assistance in leaving the industry.

To characterize each sex provider represented in an advertisement, we apply a wide variety of parsers we develop using natural language processing, keyword-extraction, and various machine learning methodologies. These parsers identify the provider's name, age, phone number, Backpage account, geographic location, and other syntax features. We leverage all of this engineered information to match each ad to a sex provider "profile," essentially pooling ads together that likely reflect a particular sex provider.

Matching ads to an individual sex provider is inherently complex, given that an individual's advertised phone number, provider name, images, and syntax often change. It is important, therefore, to keep in mind that all reported statistics are *estimations*.

Individuals often will post multiple ads in more than one city on the same day. When this happens, an algorithm is utilized to determine the city in which they likely worked. To avoid including the 'noise' in our analyses on

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<sup>2</sup> Shesgreen, Deirdre. "Senators threaten sex ad website CEO with contempt." Available: [www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2015/11/19/senators-threaten-sex-ad-website-ceo-contempt/76066726/](http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2015/11/19/senators-threaten-sex-ad-website-ceo-contempt/76066726/).

<sup>3</sup> Letter from NAAG to Samuel Fifer, Esq., Council for Backpage.com LLC (Sept. 16, 2011), available at <http://www.kirk.senate.gov/pdfs/naagbackpage.pdf>.

commercial sex providers, we do not include any provider profiles with only a single advertisement in our analysis.

When reporting on demographics, travel, and risk information, we analyze a provider's entire advertisement profile to provide statistics that are indexed on individuals rather than advertisements.

In January 2017, Backpage shut down its "Adult" section, in which many sex services were advertised. Preliminary research indicates that many advertisers simply switched to other sections of the Backpage site, such as "Dating." To ensure that the shut down cannot affect the trends identified, this report uses data from 2016, before the Adult section was shut down.

## Nevada's commercial sex market takes place within a unique context.

Nevada is the only location in the United States in which licensed and regulated brothels coexist alongside the criminalized commercial sex industry.

Nevada's particular policy landscape reflects the historical relationship between tourism and commercial sex work in the state. Commercial sex constituted an important means to cater to an expanding tourist market in Nevada in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> But by the 1950s, brothel owners faced concerted opposition (led by resort-owners), which they sought to circumvent by obtaining licenses to operate legally.<sup>5</sup> This opposition culminated in a 1971 state law that prohibited licensing "houses of prostitution" in counties with populations above a certain threshold.<sup>6</sup>

The law prohibiting licensed brothels in populous counties continues to shape the commercial sex market in Nevada today. Legal brothels operate only in relatively rural counties and are regulated by a patchwork of state, county and municipal laws.<sup>7</sup>

As exemplified by its well-known slogan "What happens here, stays here," Las Vegas markets itself to tourists as a place to freely indulge. However, no licensed brothels can operate within Clark County, which encompasses Las Vegas. Las Vegas does have a sizable and well-known sex industry, which includes both legal (e.g., strip clubs and outcall dancers) and criminalized (e.g., commercial sex) elements. Nonetheless, the city attempts to

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<sup>4</sup> Brents, B. G. (2016). Nevada's Regulated Brothels. The Oxford Handbook of the Economics of Prostitution.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> NRS 244.345 Dancing halls, escort services, entertainment by referral services and gambling games or devices; limitation on licensing of houses of prostitution.

<sup>7</sup> Brents, B. G. (2016). Nevada's Regulated Brothels. The Oxford Handbook of the Economics of Prostitution.

control visible elements of the commercial sex industry, for example by reportedly enforcing stricter punishments for prostitution in areas closer to major resorts.<sup>8</sup>

Backpage hosts advertisements from sex providers working inside and outside of organizations. However, these advertisements are not directly comparable. This is because organizations – such as licensed brothels or criminalized escort agencies or massage parlors – frequently feature multiple individuals within a single advertisement. In contrast, those outside of organizations – such as independents and those working under pimps – rarely post ads featuring more than two individuals. Therefore, throughout the report we distinguish between organizations (e.g., licensed brothels and criminalized escort agencies) and individual sex providers.

Unless individuals sold through organizations also post their own advertisements, they will be undercounted by this report.

Because we can more accurately count the number of individuals sold outside of organizations, the figures in this report represent a lower bound on true size of the commercial sex industry in Nevada.

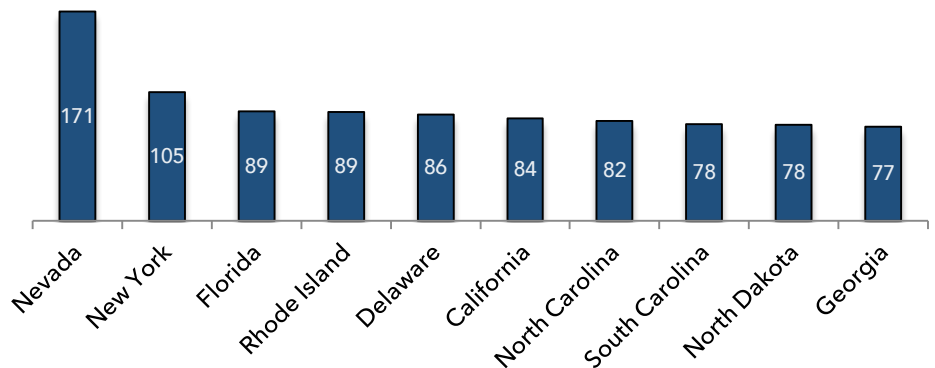
## NEVADA IN CONTEXT

### Nevada by the Numbers

Based on the number of unique sex providers<sup>9</sup> advertising on Backpage, at least 5,016 individuals are sold for sex in an average month in Nevada.

This figure excludes organizations whose workers provide sex (e.g., brothels, escort agencies and massage parlors). Therefore, this number represents a lower bound on the overall number of individual sex providers within the state.

Top states: Unique monthly sex providers per 100K residents



<sup>8</sup> Brents, B. G., & Sanders, T. (2010). Mainstreaming the sex industry: Economic inclusion and social ambivalence. *Journal of Law and Society*, 37(1), 40-60.

<sup>9</sup> We define a unique sex provider as a person who has appeared in at least one Backpage ad in that state or city on a given day. Thus, we are counting the number of unique sex providers, not the number of ads posted.

To understand how the size of Nevada's commercial sex market compares to that of other areas, the chart at the right shows the top ten states nationwide in terms of unique sex providers per 100,000 residents.

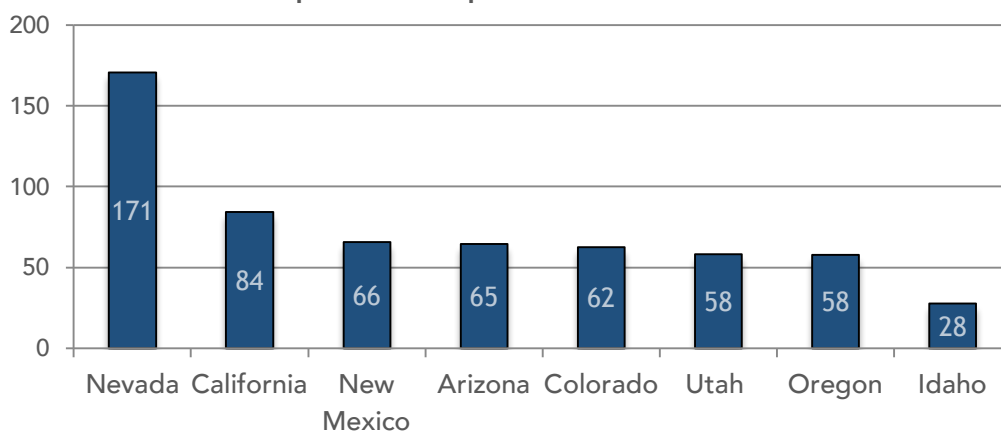
Adjusted for population, Nevada's commercial sex market is by far the largest of any state.<sup>10</sup>

In fact, Nevada's number of sex providers per capita is 63% larger than the next largest state of New York and nearly double the following state of Florida.

The large size of Nevada's commercial sex market is even starker compared to other Western states. In fact, Nevada has more than twice as many sex providers per 100,000 residents as California, the next largest per capita market in the region. Because tourism is so important in Nevada (as discussed

later in the report), it might seem reasonable to believe that the large number of out-of-state tourists are driving the size of the market. Indeed, some sex providers' advertisements in Nevada suggest they seek to sell sex to tourists in particular. However, California receives more out-of-state tourists than Nevada. In 2016 about 67 million out-of-state tourists visited California,<sup>11</sup> whereas about 56 million visited Nevada in the same year.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that the sheer number of tourists cannot explain Nevada's uniquely large commercial sex market.

Western region: Unique monthly sex providers per 100K residents



## A Statewide Issue

Sex is being sold in each of the three Nevada Backpage markets: Elko, Reno and Las Vegas.

Among these three, Elko is unique in hosting licensed brothels. However, despite the existence of regulated brothels in the Elko area, individuals and unlicensed massage parlors also advertise on Elko's Backpage market. Legalized brothels and criminalized massage parlors often post single advertisements featuring multiple sex providers, whereas ads for individual sex providers typically feature just one or two individuals. This difference in

<sup>10</sup> Washington, DC has more monthly unique providers per 100,000 residents (approximately 447), but this is likely a product of the District proper's relatively low population compared to the metropolitan region which actually constitutes demand.

<sup>11</sup> Easter, Makeda, "California tourism industry grows for the 7<sup>th</sup> straight year, report says," Los Angeles Times. 9 May 2017.

<sup>12</sup> TravelNevada "Discover the Facts – Fourth Quarter, 2016," [http://nvculture.org/travelnevadabiz/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/03/DTF\\_2016\\_Q4.pdf](http://nvculture.org/travelnevadabiz/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2017/03/DTF_2016_Q4.pdf)

online advertising makes it difficult to assess the relative size of the regulated and criminalized commercial sex markets in Elko. *However, it is clear that the regulated and criminalized commercial sex markets coexist even within the relatively low-population Elko-area.*

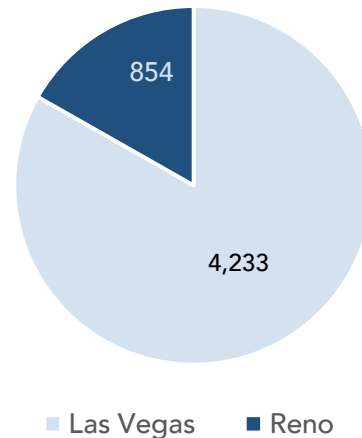
Because of the absence of licensed brothels, Reno and Las Vegas are more directly comparable markets.

*In absolute numbers, almost 5 times as many sex providers advertise monthly in Las Vegas as in Reno.*<sup>13</sup>

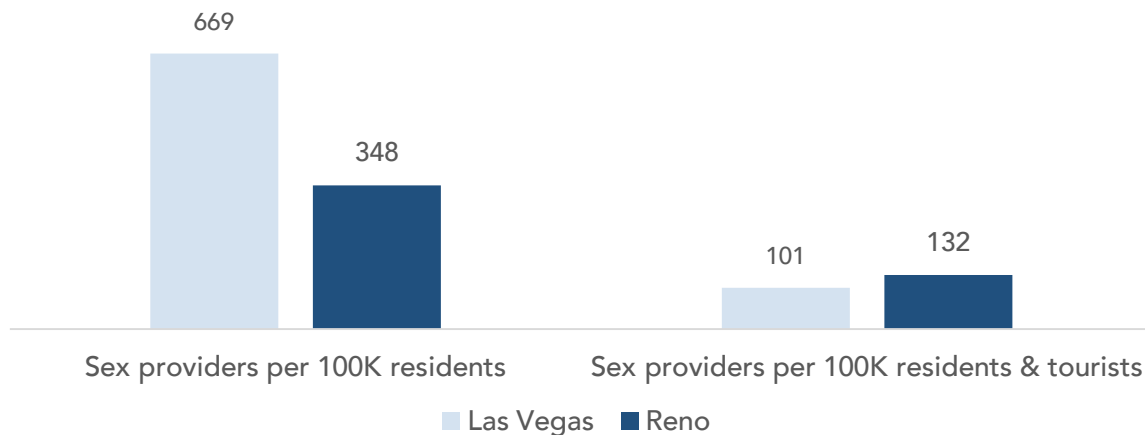
Since Las Vegas has a larger population than Reno, it is not surprising that it should dominate Reno in absolute numbers. Yet, even when adjusting for resident population, Las Vegas has nearly two times as many sex providers as Reno. This suggests that the tourists play a large role in the size of the commercial sex industry.

Since Las Vegas is known for its large number of tourist visitors, the population of the city can not only be thought of as its resident population. When one considers the population to consist of both the resident population and the tourist visitors, the ratio is flipped, with Reno having 1.3 times as many sex providers per person in Las Vegas.

Absolute number of sex providers advertised monthly



Monthly sex providers, per residents and tourists

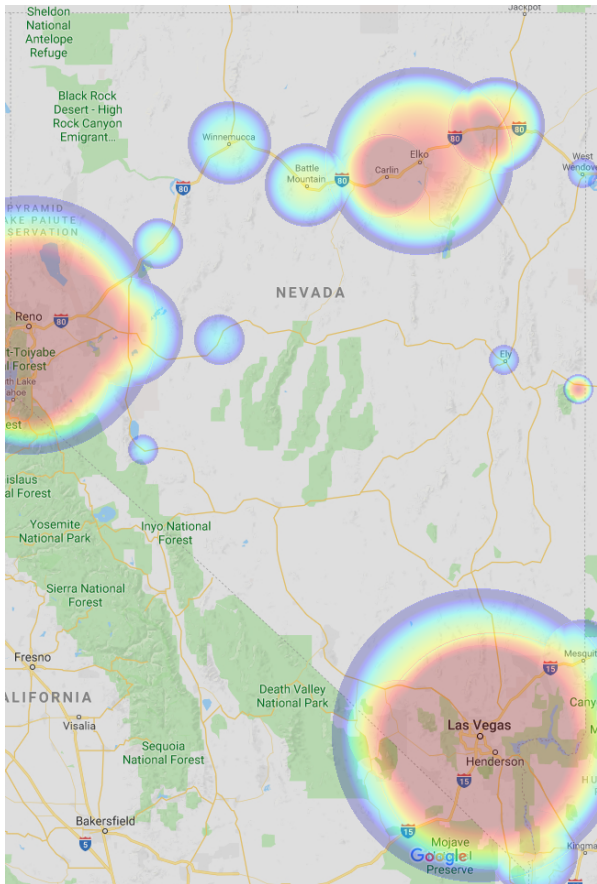


*When adjusted for numbers of tourists, there are more sex providers in Reno than in Las Vegas.*

<sup>13</sup> Note that these figures cannot be summed to get the total number of unique sex providers in Nevada. This is because the same sex provider may advertise in both Las Vegas and Reno (and indeed as shown later in the report, these markets have strong links).

The commercial sex industry is embedded in Nevada’s major population centers, but it extends out from these centers, particularly in the north of the state.

### Nevada’s Commercial Sex Market on Backpage



Low Intensity  High Intensity

Sex providers advertising on Nevada’s three Backpage sites may also indicate other towns or locations in the state they are willing to go to, often reflecting where the demand is.

As the heat map to the left indicates, *commercial sex is being advertised in many locations across the state*. The size of the circle represents the number of sex providers advertising the location, and the color indicates the intensity with which the location is advertised. The intensity is measured as the number of sex providers per capita of inhabitants.<sup>14</sup>

Not surprisingly, Las Vegas and Reno stand out. However, areas around Elko such as Carlin also stand out for the intensity of their advertising. Thus, commercial sex is not confined solely to the most populated areas.

To provide more detail on the geographic distribution of commercial sex activity, the next maps focus in on the Las Vegas and Reno areas.<sup>15</sup> These maps represent the absolute counts of providers mentioning particular locations within the Las Vegas and Reno metropolitan areas. They thus show the distribution of commercial sex activity, without adjusting for population.

Within the Las Vegas area, there is an intense amount of commercial sex activity throughout the entire metropolitan area. Perhaps unsurprisingly, within Las Vegas, ads most frequently mention The Strip. At an even more granular level, advertisements sometimes mention particular hotels and casinos within The Strip. For example, two particular hotels are the tenth and eleven most commonly mentioned locations in Las Vegas ads (just below “Downtown”). However, activity covers the entire metropolitan area – with providers specifically mentioning the south, north, southwest and northwest of the city. Indeed, for every 100 advertisements that mention The Strip, nearly 18 mention the more residential area of

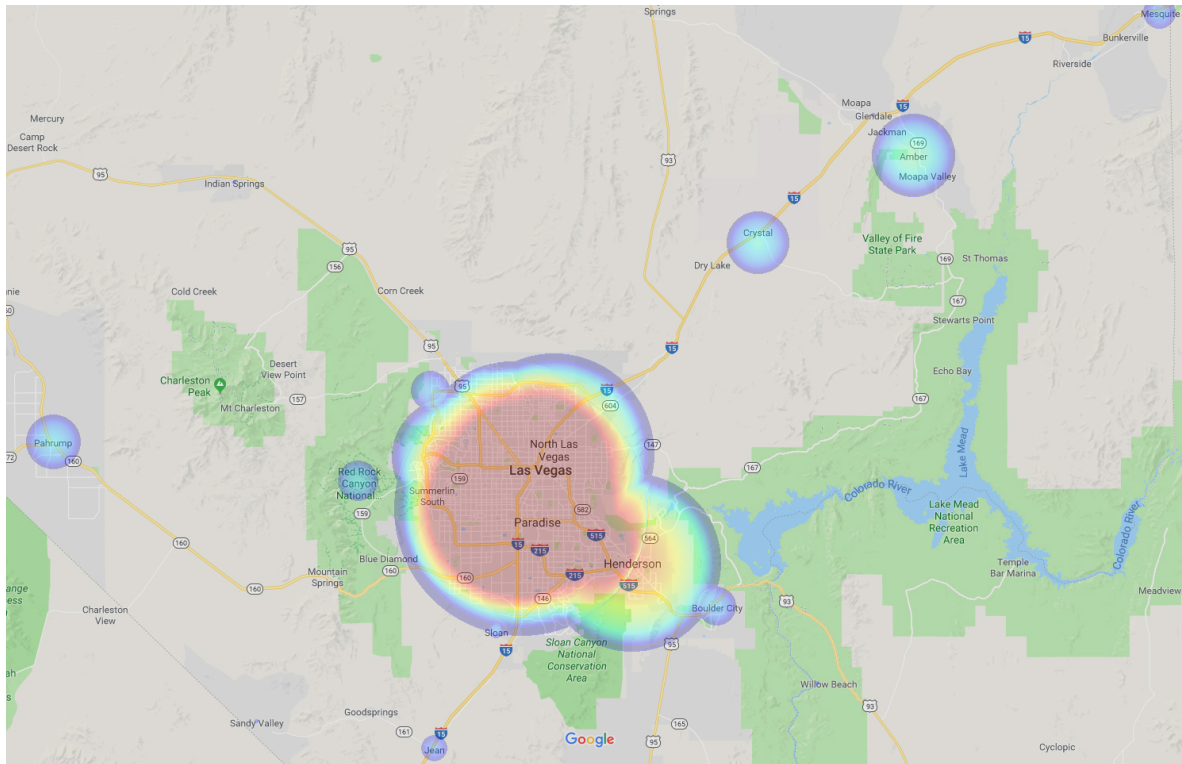
<sup>14</sup> This map includes sex providers working in organizations as well as outside of those organizations. A relatively small proportion of providers are sold through organizations in Reno and Las Vegas. However, omitting those sex providers from the Elko area would underrepresent the relative size of the commercial sex industry in that area. As noted, these figures may not be directly comparable. Therefore, more focus should be placed on the geographic distribution of the industry rather than the relative intensity of Elko vs. the other two Backpage sites.

<sup>15</sup> These maps exclude sex providers working in organized venues to allow more direct comparability.



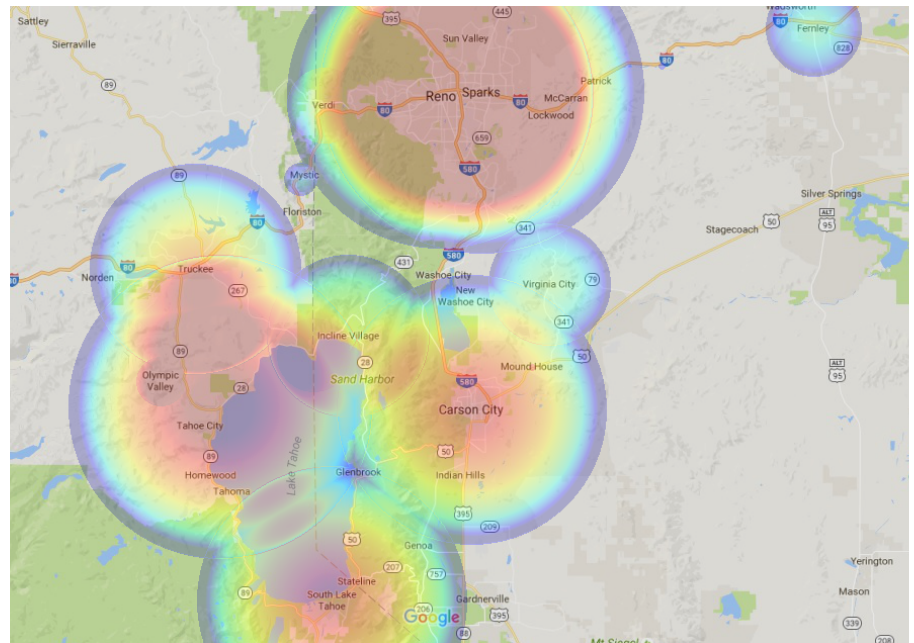
Henderson. While some locations outside of the Las Vegas metropolitan area do feature commercial sexual activity (e.g., Crystal and Amber), in general the activity in this region is geographically concentrated.

### A Closer Look at the Las Vegas Area



### A Closer Look at the Reno Area

Turning to the Reno area reveals a different picture of more diffuse activity. While there is strong commercial sex activity in the downtown Reno and Sparks area, individuals also mention areas throughout the region (such as Carson City, Tahoe and South Tahoe) at high rates. As discussed later in the report, the market within Reno operates as a regional hub with substantial overlap with markets throughout northern California in particular.

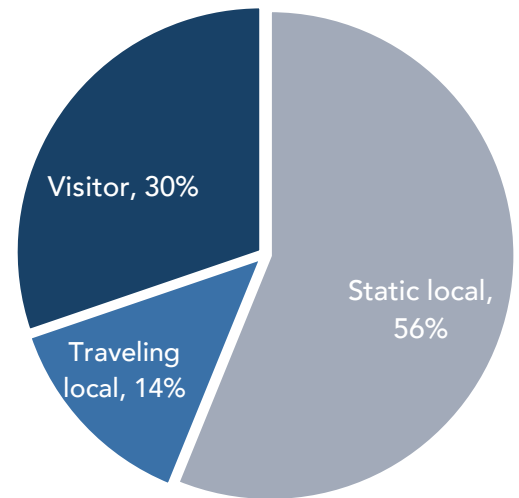


## Travel in Nevada’s Commercial Sex Market

To understand travel within the commercial sex market, we call the city where a sex provider most frequently advertises her “base city (or state)” and assume she’s a “visitor” when advertising in other areas. A slight majority (56%) of sex providers in Nevada only post advertisements within a single Nevada city. Nevada is very close to the median state of New Hampshire, where about 58% of providers only post in a single city.<sup>16</sup> However, travel is still an important characteristic of the Nevada commercial sex market.

More than 30% percent of providers who advertise in Nevada are based in another state. When ranking all states in descending order of percent of sex providers based in another state, Nevada ranks 19<sup>th</sup>. This likely reflects a mixture of factors. Nevada’s population base and the large number of tourists can both support local sex providers and provide the demand to encourage out-of-state sex providers to visit. California is by far the most important source of sex providers visiting Nevada from another state. Nearly 55% of visitors come from California, whereas Arizona, as the next most important source, supplies only about 5% of visitors. Over the course of a year, visitors based in almost all states and the District of Columbia advertise in Nevada.

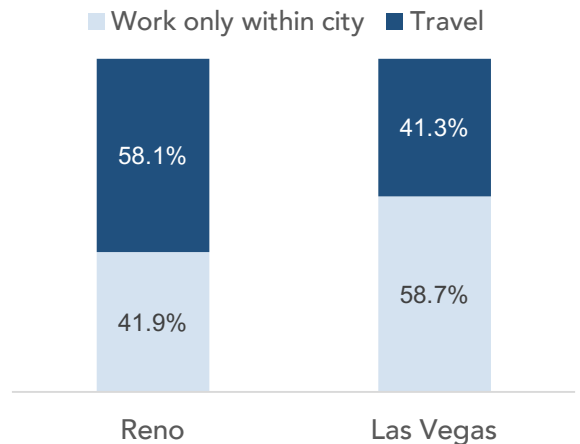
*Where do they come from?*  
 1. California, 55%  
 2. Arizona, 5%  
 3. Texas, 5%  
 4. Colorado, 4%  
 5. Florida, 3%



Many sex providers who are based in Nevada travel. Nearly 14% of those who advertise in Nevada have a home base within the state, but advertise across multiple cities or other states.

Moreover, the proportion of providers who travel is not uniform across the state. In cities with smaller populations, a larger proportion of providers travel. This reflects the desire for novelty on the part of buyers. The population of a large city can support enough sex providers to allow buyers to purchase sex with novel providers even if those providers do not travel. In smaller cities however, buyers may more quickly become familiar with available sex providers.

Percent of Sex Providers who Travel, by Site



<sup>16</sup> In fact, Nevada ranks 30<sup>th</sup> of all the states and District of Columbia in terms of percentage of sex providers who stay within one city.

Nevada reflects these trends. More than 58% of sex providers in Las Vegas are only advertised within that city. Conversely, only about 42% of sex providers in Reno are advertised exclusively in that city.<sup>17</sup>

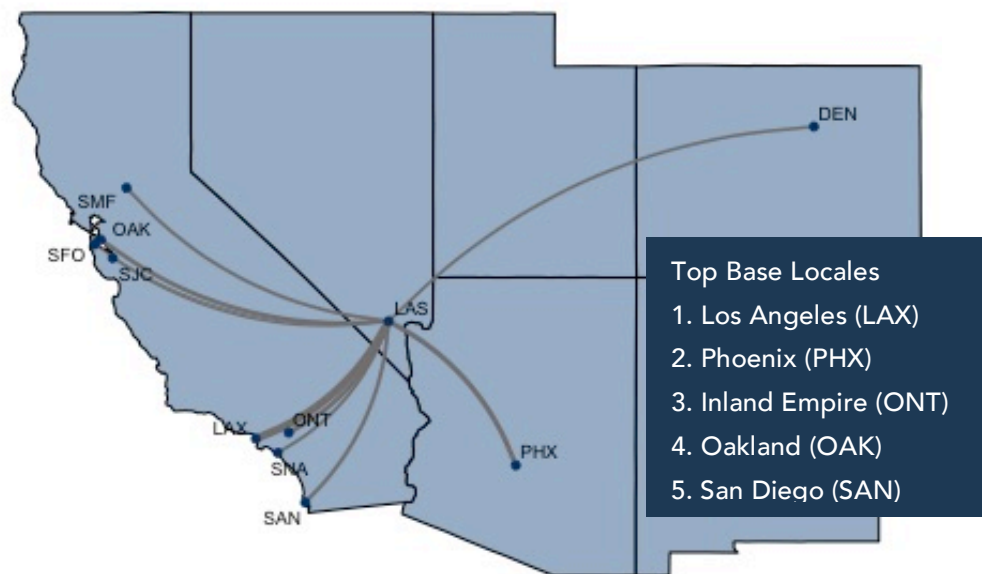
## Regional Integration of the Nevada Commercial Sex Market

The travel patterns of sex providers in the markets of Las Vegas and Reno reflect overall regional patterns of integration.

Las Vegas is heavily tied to California, both in terms of the base cities of visitors to Las Vegas and in terms of the cities those based in Las Vegas visit. Furthermore, while Las Vegas has ties to northern California and major cities in other states, southern California is particularly well represented.

The map to the right shows the top ten base cities of visiting sex providers in Las Vegas, with the width of the curves representing the proportion of providers visiting from each area. Three of the five top base cities are located in southern California.<sup>18</sup>

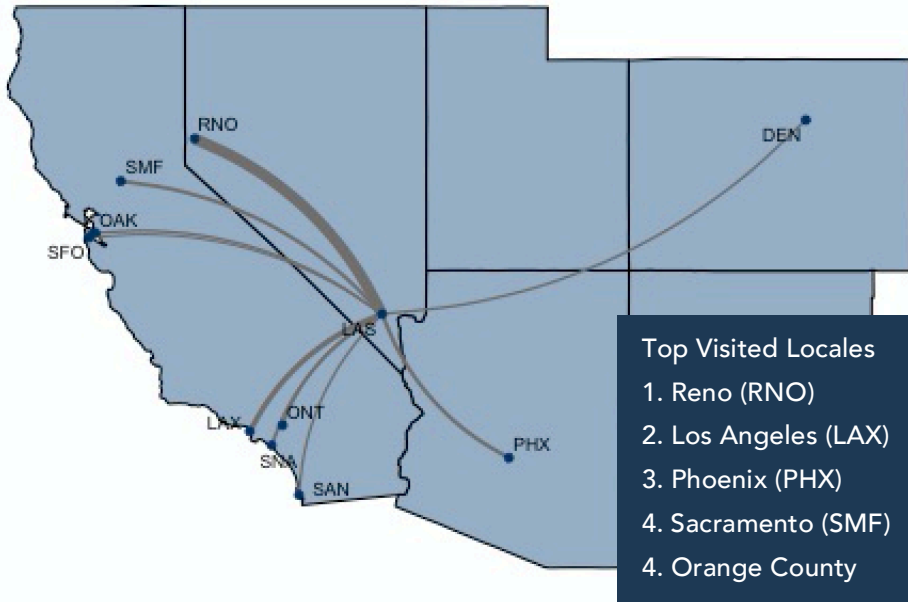
**Top 10 Base Cities of Sex Providers Visiting Las Vegas**



<sup>17</sup> As in earlier sections of the report, we exclude Elko from this analysis because the presence of licensed brothels make it less comparable to the other two cities.

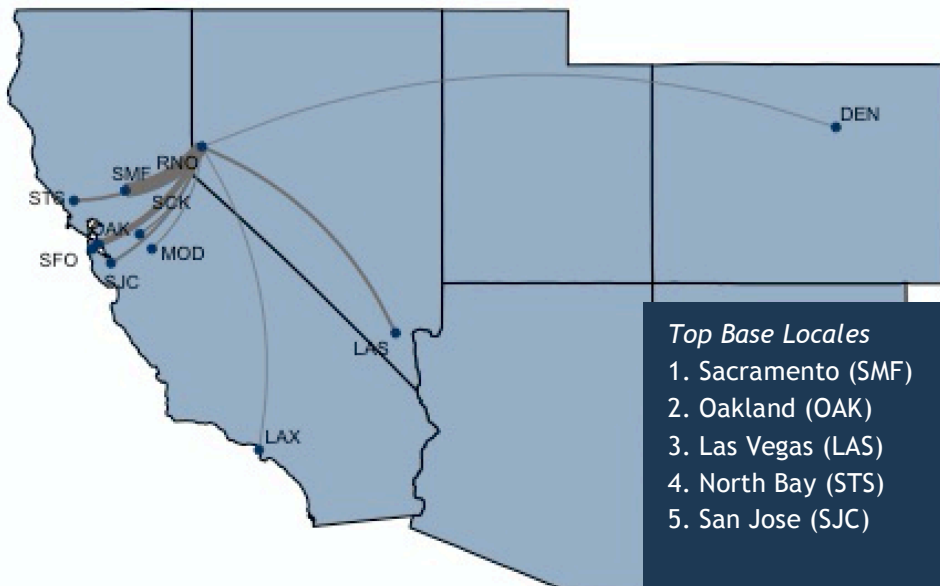
<sup>18</sup> Backpage sites do not always correspond to recognized cities. For example, the "Inland Empire" site includes advertisements from across that southern California region, including Corona, Ontario Riverside, San Bernadino. Similarly, Oakland is actually represented by a Backpage site labeled "East Bay."

## Top 10 Cities Visited by those Sold for Sex in Las Vegas



Examining the cities visited by those based in Las Vegas reveals a similar set of cities, but with a somewhat different distribution among those cities. For example, those with a home base in Las Vegas are most likely to visit Reno, showing that intra-Nevada travel exists despite the importance of out-of-state hubs.

## Top 10 Base Cities of Sex Providers Visiting Reno



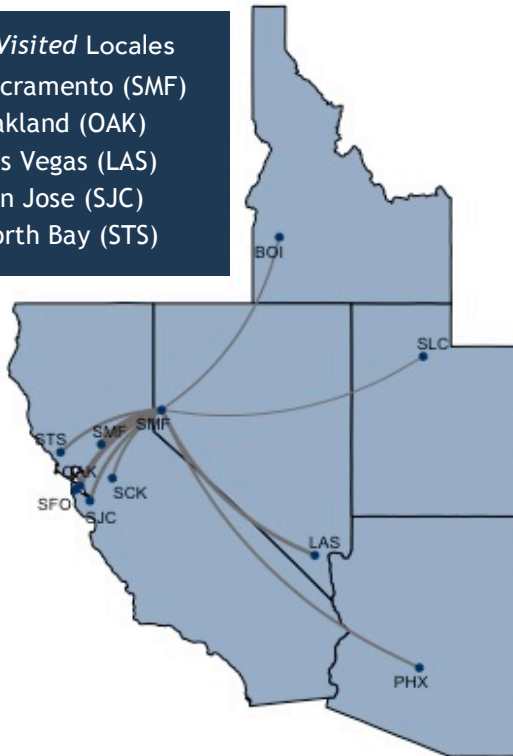
As the map to the left shows, compared with Las Vegas, the Reno market has a much stronger connection with northern California. Four of the five top home bases among sex providers who visit Reno are in northern California, with the other being Las Vegas.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> As noted, Backpage sites do not always correspond to recognized cities. The “North Bay” Backpage site includes advertisements from across that northern California area, including Napa, Santa Rosa, San Rafael and Vallejo.

## Top 10 Cities Visited by those Based in Reno

### Top Visited Locales

1. Sacramento (SMF)
2. Oakland (OAK)
3. Las Vegas (LAS)
4. San Jose (SJC)
5. North Bay (STS)



The same strong connection between northern California and Reno is evident when examining cities visited by sex providers based in Reno. These individuals are likely to visit the same cities that are the home bases of those who visit Reno. These trends show that particularly in the Reno – northern California market, one locale does not dominate as a “source” for sex providers. Instead, those individuals travel between a similar set of cities.

# CHARACTERIZING SEX PROVIDERS

## A Young Market

Those selling sex in Nevada on Backpage are quite young. Since it is impossible to post a Backpage ad listing an age under 18 years, the average age of sex providers is probably younger than the average posted age. Even so, more than 13% of Nevada sex providers are advertised under the age of 21.

This means that more than **1 out of every 10** sex providers in Nevada is too young to buy alcohol, but old enough for johns to purchase them for sex.

These young individuals are almost twice as likely to travel as sex providers who are 21 and older. Moreover, many sex providers are advertised for their youth, regardless of their stated age. For example, phrases like “fresh meat,” “brand new” and “daddy’s little girl” are all used to connote the youth of sex providers. We have included examples of some of these postings below. We use a combination of key phrases like these and posted ages to give sex providers an overall probability of being young– broken down into low, moderate or high probability.<sup>20</sup>

♥♥♥ **Young sexy & petite Just turned 18 - 18**

Posted: Thursday, June 16, 2016 11:18 AM

**Unexplored sexy young lady - 19**

Posted: Monday, August 15, 2016 9:43 AM

**New girl here. Cute, sweet, young - 18**

Posted: Saturday, December 31, 2016 3:56 PM

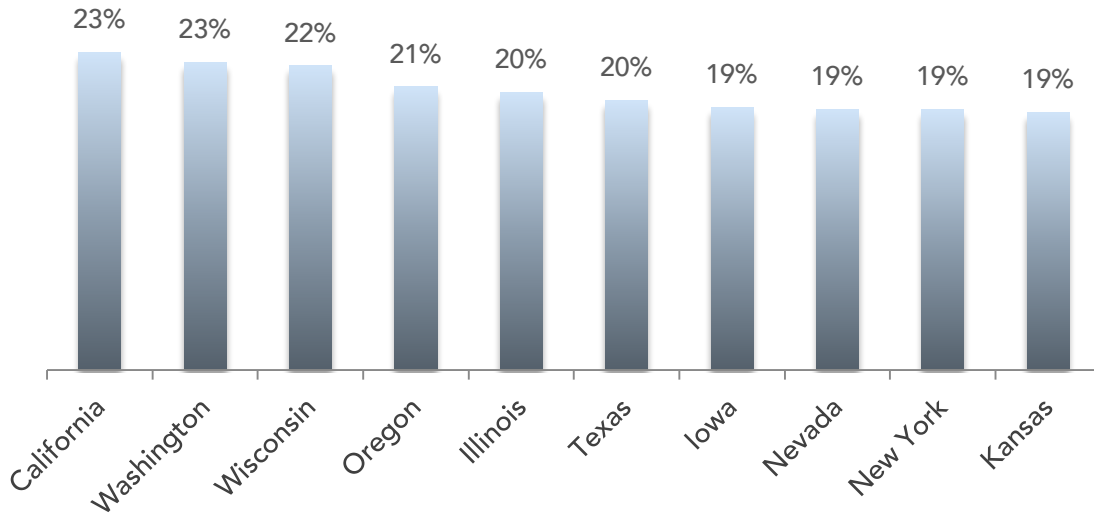
**Want some fun tonight? Sexy young limber kitty wants you to play!!! <3 - 19**

Posted: Saturday, August 13, 2016 8:24 PM

Overall, about 19% of Nevada sex providers have an either moderate or high likelihood of being young based on keywords or their posted age. This puts Nevada in the top ten states in the country in terms of youth of sex providers.

<sup>20</sup> Because Backpage does not allow those under 18 to post ads, we cannot definitely identify minors. Therefore, the group we identify as young likely includes any minors who are advertised on Backpage as well as young adults whose ads emphasize their youth.

### Top Ten States by Percent of Providers who are Likely to be Young

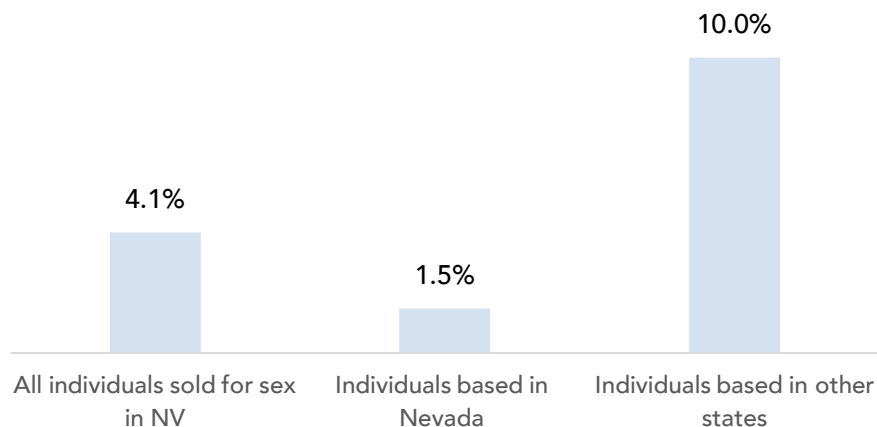


## The Prevalence of Drugs

Substance dependence can leave sex providers vulnerable to exploitation by both facilitators and sex buyers. While backpage ads do not capture all drug use among sex providers, certain advertisements explicitly identify individuals as being open to drug use through phrases such as “420 Friendly” and “ready to party.” By flagging these phrases, we can identify a lower bound of drug use among sex providers in Nevada.

Overall, about 4.1% of sex providers in Nevada are advertised with indicators for drug use. However, there is a

### Percent of sex providers with indicators for drug use, by base location



lot of variation in this rate among different types of sex providers. For example, only 1.5% of providers who are based in Nevada have indicators for drug use, while fully 10% of sex providers based in other states who also sell sex in Nevada have such indicators. Thus out-of-state visitors to Nevada are more than 7 times more likely to be advertised as open to drug use, compared to providers based in Nevada. In fact, this pattern— those who visit a

state are more likely to advertise that they are open to drug use than those based in that state— holds in every state.

Our data cannot definitely explain why travel and drug use are positively correlated, but this could reflect difference in the underlying pool of sex providers who travel versus those who do not. Indeed, indicators for drug use correlate with other potential vulnerabilities. For example, if a sex provider is always available (“open 24/7”) it could indicate that she does not control her own working schedule or is under intense pressure to meet a certain quota of sex buyers. In Nevada, individuals who are always available are more than 5.5 times as likely to have indicators for drug use as those who are not available 24/7.

We can look again at those who are at a moderate or high risk of being young to identify another potential vulnerability.

*In Nevada, young sex providers are more than 2.1 times as likely to have indicators for drug use as those who are not young.*

## Connecting Sex Providers: Reduced Agency

When multiple sex providers work together, this can be an indicator of having a facilitator. Facilitators in turn can constrain the autonomy of sex providers.

In Nevada, more than 18% of sex providers are advertised in “multiple girl specials.” Examples of these advertisements are shown below.

**\$150 ♥ 2 FOR 1 ♥ ALL NIGHT SPECIAL ♥ \$150 X X X Payton & Piper - 18**

**\*°.☆ ☆,°Double Trouble Sexy\*°.☆ ☆,° & Wild Young & Ready for fun \*°.☆ ☆,° We are what you need - 22**

Research shows that young girls rarely enter into the commercial sex industry without a facilitator actively recruiting them and breaking them in to the industry. We find evidence for this in Nevada, where young individuals are particularly likely to work in groups.

*In Nevada, young sex providers are more than 1.3 times as likely to work with others as sex providers who are not young.*

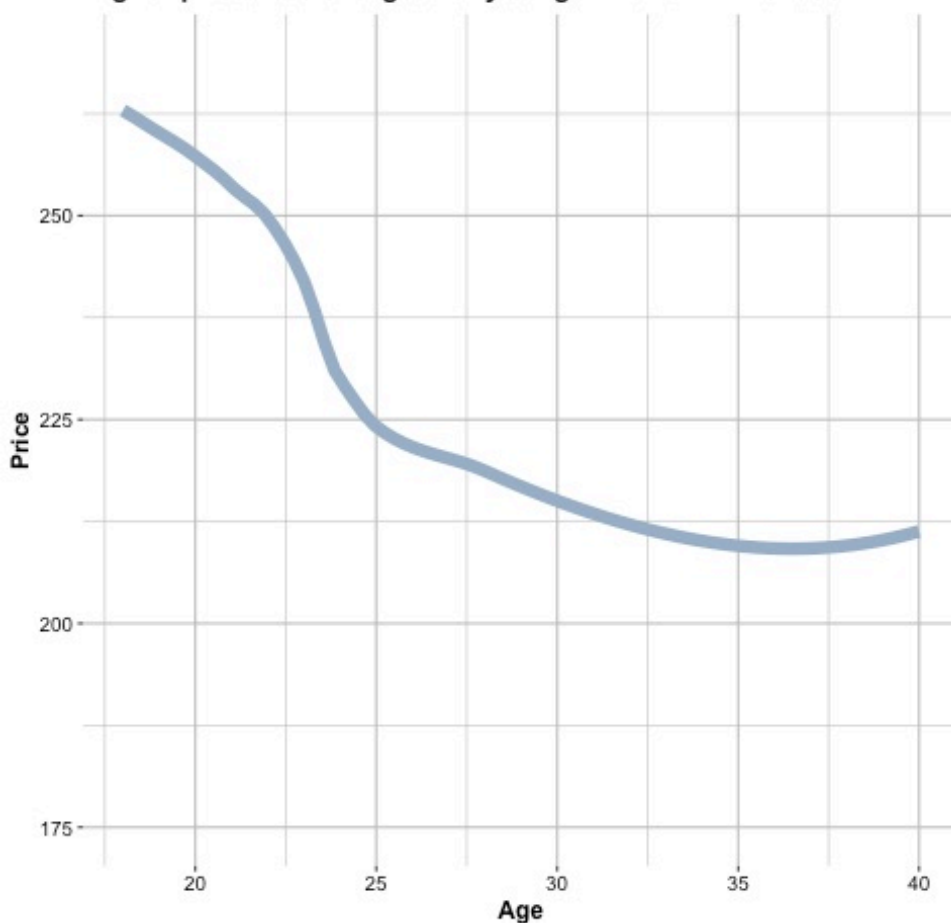


# UNDERSTANDING DEMAND

## How client preferences create the trafficking environment

Since ads market to the tastes of consumers, they provide insight into the Johns that create the demand for the market. The fact that sex providers are advertised with euphemisms suggesting their youth, despite the well-known risks of law enforcement, means that youth is an important characteristic sought by Johns.

**Higher prices are charged for younger women in Nevada**



Further evidence of the importance of youth to Johns in Nevada comes from advertised prices. As shown by the graph<sup>21</sup>, higher prices are charged for younger women in Nevada. Furthermore, the relationship between youth and price charged is strongest among very young women (i.e., those 18 to 25). In contrast, there is little relationship between age and price once women are over 30.

This demand for youth has serious consequences for trafficking into the industry. The higher profit margins create incentives for traffickers to recruit younger individuals.

Moreover, the prevalence and reliance of Johns on reviews means that attempting to

deceive sex purchasers about the youth of a sex provider is unlikely to be a successful market strategy. This leads to a relatively high turnover within the industry owing to the dramatic decline in demand as a sex provider is less able to be marketed as "young" and "youthful."

<sup>21</sup> The graph shows a local regression (LOESS curve) of price charged on age.

# THE POTENTIAL FOR SEX TRAFFICKING ON BACKPAGE: QUANTIFYING PREVALENCE

## Indicators of Trafficking

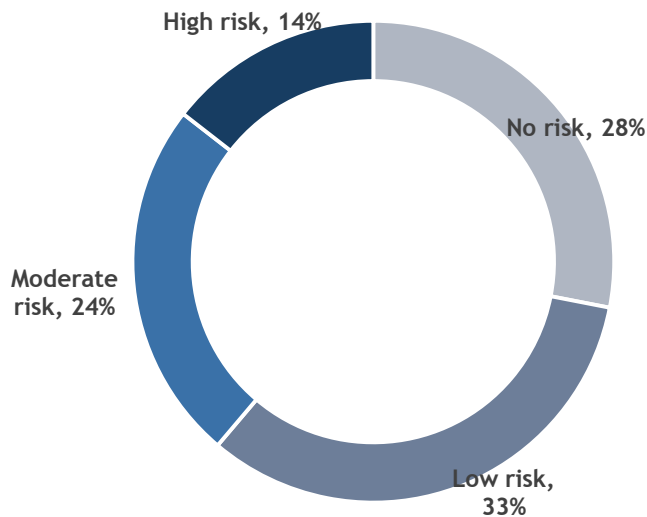
It is inherently difficult to identify individuals who have been trafficked because traffickers have incentives to hide their crimes. We have developed a framework that estimates risk of trafficking based on characteristics associated with trafficking, such as the potential for the provider being young or foreign and the possibility of exploitation. The numbers reported here – as throughout the report – are estimates based on Backpage advertisements.

Based off Backpage alone, only 28% of sex providers in Nevada’s online commercial sex market appear to be adults working independently with no risk of trafficking.

A full 72% of Nevada’s sex providers have at least **some** indicator of being young, with the potential of being underage, or working in groups likely to have an active facilitator.

This does not necessarily mean that these sex providers are trafficked – some appear to be at higher risk than others.

## Risk of Trafficking



### No Risk

- No identifiable indicators

### Low Risk

- Some partial indicators

### Moderate Risk

- Some indicators
- Need more information

### High Risk

- Multiple indicators

Those at low risk of trafficking have some weaker indicators of being young or having a manager. Sex providers classified as having a moderate risk to trafficking have some indicators, although more information is needed to place them into the high-risk category, which requires multiple strong indicators of trafficking. This high-risk category represents likely sex trafficking victims.

14% of Nevada's Backpage sex providers are at a high risk of being exploited in a situation that constitutes trafficking.

Since more than 5,000 sex providers advertise in Nevada each month, more than 700 individuals in an average month are at high risk of being trafficking victims.

It is more difficult to judge the risk of trafficking from advertisements for licensed brothels than for individual sex providers for a number of reasons. First, some characteristics (such as working with other providers) might be risk factors in the criminalized market but not imply the same degree of risk in a licensed brothel. In addition, licensed brothels have obvious incentives not to attract attention of law enforcement or regulatory bodies so if any sex providers in those establishments were trafficked, those characteristics might not be displayed in advertisements. Finally, only a subset of licensed brothels advertised on Backpage, so we do not necessarily observe a representative sample of all brothels. Nonetheless, within the ads for licensed brothels we do see, there are varying degrees of apparent risk. For example, the first ad on the next page emphasizes the sex providers' youth in both the text of the ad and pictures (obscured) which are very youthful-looking. In addition, the description of some providers as "Asian" or "Egyptian" raises the possibility (though it is not certain) that some providers may be international.

backpage Post Ad keyword escorts search reno, nv free classified

backpage.com > Reno adult entertainment > Reno escorts

••• The [REDACTED] ••• 7 NEW YOUNG GIRLS! ••• FULL BAR! ••• NEW ••• Current Lineup!! - 22 [Report Ad](#)

Posted: Wednesday, November 30, 2016 10:09 AM

[Reply](#)

NEW Asian Spinner Tiffany  
 NEW EGYPTIAN KATRINA 5'6 100lbs C cups!  
 BLONDE SHELDON- Super hot!  
 LATINA ROSA! Beautiful face!  
 Blonde JULIE- Tall Blonde.  
 LATINA EMILY - Super young with big C cups!  
 SAPPHIRE Porn Star! Tight body & Nicest ass!  
 BABY BLEU Youngest & hottest Chocolate!  
 Abby- Awesome Party well reviewed petite spinner

[REDACTED]  
 [REDACTED] Male Operator  
 Walk-ins welcome!

Poster's age: 22

- Location: Elko, Nevada, Reno
- Post ID: 19723767 reno

In contrast, the second ad below does not display risk factors such as being young, foreign, open to drug use, or available at all hours. Instead it is posted by a provider who, as far as is observable in the ad, is an older adult advertising her own services. The provider appears to move between licensed brothels as well the criminalized market in a transitory environment more indicative of autonomy.

**Carmen is back at the [REDACTED] come PLAY - 47**

Posted: Sunday, September 11, 2016 4:46 AM

[Reply](#)

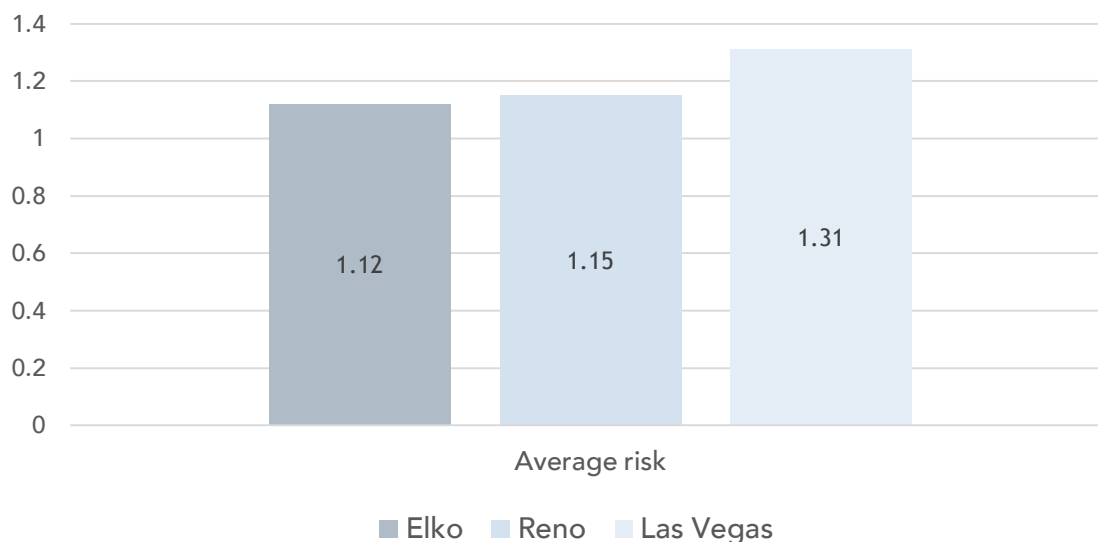
My name is Mistress Carmen and I'm at the [REDACTED] brothel and strip club and I'm 5'0 blonde hair and brown eyes and I'm very voluptuous. And if you would like to see me you can go to [REDACTED] and if you want to contact me you can call me at [REDACTED] appointments are available plus I do lapdances and pole dances and Vip dances and if you want to come see me in person the address is [REDACTED] Nevada

Poster's age: 47

- Location: Battle Mountain, Visalia / Tulare
- Post ID: 13700804 visalia

Importantly, however, individuals are sold in the criminalized sex markets even in areas with licensed brothels. When looking exclusively at those not sold through an organization, risk of trafficking across different markets in Nevada is similar overall. Specifically, individuals sold in Elko and Reno have similar average risk overall, whereas the pool in Las Vegas is slightly higher risk.

Average Trafficking Risk by City Visited



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Targeting ad venues will not eliminate risk of trafficking-** Data from this report show that it is possible to identify risk factors for having been trafficked based on online advertisements. On the other hand, policy efforts to shut down online advertising platforms such as Backpage are unlikely to reduce the risk of trafficking and may even be counterproductive.
  - Policies targeting platforms do nothing to eliminate either the demand or supply for commercial sex. In fact, they may encourage sex providers to work with facilitators in order to find buyers, potentially making trafficking more likely. Furthermore, a more fragmented online market is simply more difficult for law enforcement groups to monitor.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Resources** – Our data show that younger sex providers are more likely to advertise as being open to drug use and always available to sell sex. These same individuals are at a higher risk of having been trafficked. These factors indicate that providing adequate substance abuse and mental health resources to those who have been trafficked is critical to supporting their paths forward. Even if trafficking survivors have access to economic opportunities, challenges with

mental health and substance use could leave them at continued risk of exploitation without adequate supports.

- **System Collaboration** - Collaboration and information sharing with other states and across jurisdictions between private and public agencies is critical. Thirty percent of sex providers in Nevada are based in other states, and another 14% travel within the state. The transient nature of sex providers statewide makes victim identification difficult unless system collaboration occurs.
  - Regional hubs – Connections in the Reno / Tahoe area and between Las Vegas and southern California stand out as particularly important travel routes. Collaboration among service providers and law enforcement in these areas may be particularly fruitful in helping trafficking victims.
  
- **Licensing is Not a Panacea** -It is difficult to assess risk of trafficking from advertisements for licensed brothels. We have shown that ads for some licensed brothels depict what appears to be a high-risk trafficking environment, whereas other ads are consistent with some degree of autonomy being exercised by sex providers.
  - Even if we were to assume zero trafficking risk within legal brothels, the data in this report show that criminalized sex markets coexist with the licensed and regulated brothel industry. Unfortunately, individuals in the criminalized markets near licensed brothels are at a similar risk of having been trafficked as individuals in areas without legal brothels. This indicates that the current licensing and enforcement policy is not a panacea for eliminating or reducing risk within the criminalized market. Support for survivors of trafficking should reflect this.