

America's Ugliest Crime

Charles J. Powell went undercover in three U.S. cities to investigate human trafficking—and his results were astounding.

☒ Somewhere in the southeastern United States a frightened young Asian woman we'll call Linn trembles with fear. Tonight for the first time she finds herself in a dimly lit room smelling of pine-scented disinfectant, stale rice and desperation. Faking a smile, Linn stands in a lineup among other women who are much like her, as a man she has never met selects which of them he will pay for sex. She is praying he will choose one of the other girls.

Linn did not choose to be a prostitute; she was brought to the U.S. by a criminal organization that promised her a job working as a maid for a wealthy American family. Yet upon her arrival in the United States, she was raped, beaten and told she would have to work in a brothel to pay the bill for her travel expenses to America—a bill she will never cease paying. Linn is now a sex slave and the latest victim of worldwide human trafficking.

According to the British National Archives, during the nearly 400 years of the transatlantic colonial slave trade (1519 to 1867), a total of 11 million Africans were captured and trafficked to the Americas. When that figure is compared to statistics from the United Nations and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), which report that 600,000 persons are now trafficked internationally each year, one can readily calculate that during the last two decades worldwide human trafficking totals surpass that of 400 years of colonial slavery by a million.

Twelve million people have been sold into slavery in just 20 years. According to other DOJ statistics, thousands of men, women and children are trafficked into the United States

illegally each year and sold as sex slaves to criminal organizations.

Human trafficking was defined in 2000 by the United Nations as “the recruitment, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion,” most often involving sexual exploitation or forced labor. Today the problem is bigger than most Americans could ever imagine, and for the most part, the church peacefully coexists with human trafficking right in its own backyard.

Recently I determined to investigate human trafficking in three major U.S. cities—Orlando, Fla.; Atlanta and Las Vegas. I began my strange American “odyssey” in Orlando, and for five days I used the investigative and undercover techniques I learned while working in the War on Drugs and as a police officer.

The results were astounding. By the end of the week, using the Internet, the Yellow Pages, free local rags and by driving around the city, I discovered 30 illegal brothels thought to be employing women trafficked illegally into the U.S. for the purposes of forced prostitution. All the brothels were within 15 miles of the church I used as a base of operations during my time in Orlando. Most of these establishments were disguised as somewhat legitimate massage parlors and spas, but to the trained eye they were easily outed as brothels.

To make matters worse, in almost every case in Orlando the business was obviously run by Asian organized crime. How could I be sure? When you walk into a massage parlor or spa where not a single person in the building speaks English, and you repeat the process day after day, hour after hour, there is only one possible explanation: organized crime.

A woman doesn't say, “I want to immigrate to America and become a prostitute” of her own free will. The criminal methods being employed are well established and easily

spotted.

My method was to enter the lobby of a suspected brothel posing as a tourist who had never previously visited such an establishment. I then asked questions about the services offered there, took a tour of the facilities, asked to meet all the girls working that day and made general conversation for as long as possible to allow myself time to look for the signs of human trafficking-related prostitution.

I continued making small talk until I thoroughly frustrated the massage parlor madam, who would eventually demand that I go with a girl to her room or leave the building. I always left, but not before I was able to determine with reasonable certainty whether or not to label the business a brothel staffed by illegally trafficked women.

A Nationwide Plague

The next city on my list was Atlanta, hailed for years as the capital of human trafficking in the United States. Experts offer many reasons for Atlanta's earning this dubious distinction. Some cite Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, the nation's busiest, as a factor, while others point to Atlanta's geography: The city is a nexus for multiple interstate highways from every direction.

Using the same methods I employed in Orlando, including the Internet, the telephone, free publications and personal visits to suspected brothels, my results were the same in Georgia as in Florida: I discovered numerous illegal brothels operating rather openly throughout the greater Atlanta metropolitan area. However, the criminal organizations I encountered were much more diverse.

According to U.S. government statistics, the local law enforcement officials of Atlanta and other, similar cities are forced to deal with criminal organizations that have roots in

Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America, as well as with domestic U.S. gangs, all actively trafficking in persons of varying ages for the purposes of prostitution, pornography and worse.

A popular television ad says, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas," so I made this city the final stop on my fact-finding investigation. The first evening I was there I walked three blocks to the Bellagio hotel and casino, searching for evidence of illegal brothels, prostitution and any possible connection to human trafficking. I had one simple rule for my walk: I would not ask for materials promoting prostitution, but if offered them for free on the sidewalk or at a newsstand, I would accept them.

As I walked, I encountered dozens of individuals handing out full-color, business-card-sized advertisements that featured women of different ages and nationalities offering sex for money. Most of these hawkers appeared to be illegal immigrants working day labor, handing out the cards for some entity not readily identified. In just three blocks, I was handed more than 100 of these cards!

I also found a news rack featuring free publications that offered women for sex who could be sent to a person's hotel room within 20 minutes. But in spite of the fact that prostitutes were readily available, I saw no overt connections to human trafficking.

So I hailed a taxi at the Bellagio, and within 10 minutes the driver had taken me off the Strip to an area of town where he showed me numerous massage parlors and spas that operated as fronts for full-service paid sex. There I discovered many businesses offering women from various countries who spoke little or no English. In Las Vegas, just as in Orlando and Atlanta, I found telltale signs of probable human trafficking in several of the establishments I visited that night.

Big cities are not the only places plagued by human trafficking. In rural Northeast Georgia at least four interstate highway “spas” that offered sex with Asian women opened in recent years, proving that human trafficking is not a problem known only to big cities. (These “spas” were eventually shut down by law enforcement.)

In the final analysis, human trafficking is now everywhere in the United States, whether its victims toil as sexual slaves, industrial sweatshop workers, domestic servants or agrislaves on farms. There are victims of modern-day human slavery near the places you live and go to church right here in the United States.

Right now, somewhere not too many miles from where you are reading this article, men, women and children are being forced to do the unthinkable ... against their will, against the law and against what God wants for their lives. It remains to be seen what the church will do to combat the enemy in the battle against modern-day slavery. So far, just down the street from your church, he seems to be winning the war—with little opposition from the body of Christ.

Linn is waiting ... and time is running out fast.

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