

# Atlanta: A Center for Commerce and Sex Trafficking- what's the relationship?

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# ATLANTA: A CENTER FOR COMMERCE AND SEX TRAFFICKING

## WHAT'S THE RELATIONSHIP?

### ABSTRACT

Atlanta is recognized nationally as a major hub for the sex trafficking industry. Around 100 juvenile girls, ranging between 12 to 14 years old, are trafficked every night in the streets of Atlanta. The sex trafficking industry is the second largest criminal enterprise and the second most lucrative crime in the world. Atlanta is at the top of the list when it comes to sex trafficking and has been nationally known as “America’s capital of sex trafficking.” This study examines the reasons why Atlanta continues to be a center for the commercial sexual exploitation industry. Law enforcement and public officials argue that 1) conventions, 2) the world’s busiest airport, and 3) the variety of adult entertainment are the primary reasons attracting pimps and Johns to the metro area. This research explores all three reasons but focuses on testing whether being a major convention city positively affects the sex trafficking industry in Atlanta. The research starts with exploring the nature and the extent of this industry, the targeted groups, current federal and state laws on trafficking, online platforms and their role in sex trafficking, and the reasons behind why Atlanta is a center for such evil activity.

To answer my research question, I run a multivariate linear regression using data from the daily adult advertisements posted on the “Female Escort Section” of Backpage.com from 2014 to 2016. I also use data from the top 25 conventions and events taking place in Atlanta in the same years. Based on the results from the descriptive analysis and the regression models, I conclude that there is no relationship between the presence of a major business convention/event and the number of daily ad postings on Backpage.com of allegedly 18- and 19-year-old sex

workers (who are likely victims of sex trafficking). It may be the case that conventions and events in general do not affect sex trafficking rates in Atlanta, but that specific types of conventions and events do.

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## INTRODUCTION

Atlanta is the heart of the south and one of the nation's fastest growing cities when it comes to economic development (Forbes, 2016). It is the third most populated metropolitan area in the nation according to the Census Bureau (Kahn, 2018) and the fourth primary convention destination in the nation (Cvent, 2017). It is a national center for commerce and the home of the world's busiest airport. However, Atlanta is also the hub for one of the world's most atrocious industries, sex trafficking.

For many years, Atlanta has been on the top of the list when it comes to sex trafficking. The city had "the largest underground commercial sex economy in 2007 at \$290 million" (Johnson & Dank, 2014). Since then, the city has remained a major trafficking and sex trade hub for pimps and pedophiles. Sex trafficking is the act of forcing individuals (adults and children) to engage in sexual activities with sex buyers, known as Johns, against their will using coercion and fraud for monetary gain and profit in return (Dank, 2014). Under federal law *18 U.S.C. § 1591*, any minor under the age of 18 years old is automatically classified as a victim of sex trafficking without the need to prove the presence of force, coercion, or fraud. Sex trafficking is the "second largest criminal enterprise after the drug trade," (Taylor, 2016) and "the second most lucrative crime in the world" (CNN, 2015).

This study examines the reasons why Atlanta continues to be a center for the commercial sexual exploitation industry. Law enforcement and public officials argue that 1) conventions, 2) the world's busiest airport, and 3) the variety of adult entertainment are the primary reasons attracting pimps and Johns to the metro area. This paper aims to test whether being a major convention city positively affects the sex trafficking industry in Atlanta. The research starts with

exploring the nature and the extent of this industry, the targeted groups, current federal and state laws on trafficking, and the reasons behind why Atlanta is a center for such evil activity.

## TERMINOLOGY

Language plays a large role in shaping the frame, nature, and extent of the sex trafficking industry. Comprehending the critical terms used in describing this criminal activity helps us to differentiate between the underground sector of the commercial sex trade and prostitution and prevent any misnomer. Below are the primary identification terms one needs to learn before getting to this research:

- Sex work: refers to both legal and illegal commercial sex activity whether or not it involves force, coercion, or fraud (Dank, et al., 2014).
- John: “Customer of prostitution.” A person who pays an amount or trades in valuables for a sexual act. They are also known as “Tricks” or “buyers.” (Smith & Coloma, 2013).
- Pimp: A person who facilitates sexual activities for financial gain and profit through prostituting persons. It “often—but not always—involves fraud, coercion, or force” as well as psychological manipulation tactics (Dank, et al., 2014).
- Escort service: The act of commissioning, hiring, or profiting a person or group of people by a business, an agency, or a person to accompany others at social events, entertainments activities, or other places. Escort services are legal unless they involve commercial sex activities.
- Branding: Assigning each victim with a tattoo or a carving as an indication of “ownership by a trafficker/pimp/gang” (Smith & Coloma, 2013).
- Bottom: term used to describe a female appointed by a trafficker to head and oversee other trafficked females by collecting money, booking hotel/motel rooms, posting ads, punishing victims, and reporting any violations to the trafficker. A bottom operates as the pimp’s “right hand” (Smith & Coloma, 2013).



- Commercial sexual exploitation of children: The act of selling children for the sex trade in return for economic benefits and profits. This act, in many cases, involves coercion, fraud, force, and psychological manipulation tactics that revoke the child's fundamental human rights.
- Sex trafficking: The act of forcing individuals (adults and children) to engage in sexual activities with sex buyers, known as Johns, against their will using coercion and fraud for monetary gain and profit in return. Under federal law *18 U.S.C. § 1591*, any minor under the age of 18 years old is automatically classified as a victim of sex trafficking without the need to prove the presence of force, coercion, or fraud. (Dank, 2014)
- Prostitution: Engaging in “sexual act, deviate sexual intercourse, or sexual contact” willingly while receiving financial benefits in return. (USLegal, n.a)
- Commercial sex: any sexual activities that result in economic benefits and profit obtained or provided by any individual. Sexual activities can include “a wide range of behaviors and venues, such as stripping, street prostitution, brothel prostitution, paid domination, and sexual massage, among others.” (Workers, n.a)
- Underground: a term used to refer to all types of unlawful commercial sex activities.

## BACKGROUND

Annika was 13 years old when she was forced into child prostitution in the streets of Atlanta (Taylor, 2016). It all started at the MARTA station when she was on her way back home after school. Annika met a girl at the station who offered her a ride home with a guy who had a silver BMW. Annika was lured to the luxurious car and was offered a drink. The girl (who appeared to be the bottom for the pimp) poured vodka for her in a Styrofoam cup. Annika took a sip and... “I‘ont remember nothing after that. I blacked out.” Hours later, Annika woke up naked in a motel room in Tennessee. She felt pain between her legs, in her back, and head. She looked up and “Prince,” who ultimately became her pimp, said, “You‘re mine now.” Today, she is 19 years old, a marijuana addict and a traveling prostitute with a two-year-old baby boy.<sup>1</sup>

Annika is only one of the thousands of trafficked victims in Atlanta who were forced into the prostitution industry unwillingly. According to the Center for Public Policy Studies, FBI reports show that there are around 200-300 juveniles trafficked in the streets of Atlanta each month, with at least 100 minor girls prostituted every night on average (CPPS, 2013). The same report showed that the average age of trafficked victims in Atlanta ranges between 12 and 14 years old, but there are many cases in which younger individuals were forced into the commercial sex market. Annika was 13 years old when she was manipulated and forced to enter the commercialized sex market against her will.

Atlanta receives a lot of recognition in the nation when it comes to businesses and economic development. However, not many are aware that it is also the hub for the sex trafficking industry. Many people believe that the underground industry of sexual exploitation

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<sup>1</sup> I did not personally interview this victim, nor any other cases of victims presented throughout this research. All case studies were retrieved from other scholars‘ research or news articles. Interviewers changed victims‘ names for confidentiality purposes.

exists only in developing countries like Malaysia. But many do not know that it is widely spread out here in the United States, and Atlanta is known to be “America’s Capital of Sex Trafficking” (Dank, Khan, et al. 2014). Why is Atlanta at the top of the list?

To be able to answer this question, one must first understand the nature and extent of the trafficking industry. Sex trafficking is the “second largest criminal enterprise after the drug trade,” (Taylor, 2016) and “the second most lucrative crime in the world” (CNN, 2015). In the United States alone, an average of 80% of sex workers was below the age of eighteen when they first exchanged sex for money (Birckhead, 2011). In Atlanta, an average of 12,400 men pay for sex with a minor each month, and about 7,200 men end up trafficking a female for the sex trade (The Schapiro Group, 2009). Around 65% of trafficking cases take place around the suburbs of the Atlanta metropolitan area, and only 9% of the reported cases take place at the airport (The Schapiro Group, 2009). The industry is also creating a massive profit for pimps with an average of \$33,000 a week in the streets of Atlanta (Taylor, 2016).

### **Who Is Trafficked?**

Unfortunately, many view Annika as a juvenile delinquent who is willingly engaging in child prostitution, but that is mistaken. The reality behind these types of cases is way crueler than it appears to many: basically modern-day slavery. It is essential to provide a precise lens for the reader to understand the truth behind this industry, the young girls trafficked, and the possible interventions for the problem at hand. And it is critical to recognize who those children were before becoming enslaved in the commercial sexual exploitation industry.

One must understand the risk factors for becoming a victim of sex trafficking. Pimps know exactly who to target when looking for a new prey; they know what traits to track and what

techniques to use to enhance those characteristics. These are known as risk factors, the “circumstances or personality components that contribute to a child being prone to sexual misconduct” (Richardson & Boxill, 2007). Such factors include: dysfunctional environment at homes, negligence from guardians or parents, poverty, homelessness, isolation, lack of personal safety, running away from home, and in many cases, sexual abuse at a very young age. Multiple studies showed that an estimate of 70-90% of sexually exploited children were sexually abused at a young age (Yew, 2011). Runaway children, minors “who have run away from a parent, guardian or state care facility” (NCMEC, 2018), are considered at the highest risk of entering the commercial sexual exploitation industry. According to End Slavery Georgia, around 90% of runaway children end up in the commercial sex trade, and an average of 30% of those children are trafficked within 48 hours of running away (EndSlaveryGA, 2016). These factors can result in either the person engaging in “survival sex” or being manipulated by pimps into the commercialized sexual industry.<sup>2</sup> However, these two outcomes overlap in many cases because survival sex cases can initially start as sex trafficking incidents.

Understanding the vulnerability factors is essential but not enough. One must also understand the methods of recruitment to comprehend the sex trafficking industry fully. Sex trafficking cases can start with parents selling their children to the sex trade, violence, force, kidnapping, seduction, and coercion (Yew, 2011). Another way of luring individuals into forced commercial sex is false advertisements of “modeling,” “acting,” or “dancing” (Yew, 2011). However, one of the most common ways traffickers recruit victims is what is called the “*Lover Boy method*.” Using this method, traffickers invest the time to build a relationship with the

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<sup>2</sup> “Survival sex” is engaging in the sex trade industry to support oneself and meet one’s basic needs for survival. Covenant House defines it as “individuals over the age of 18 who have traded sex acts (including prostitution, stripping, pornography, etc.) to meet the basic needs of survival (i.e., food, shelter, etc.) without the overt force, fraud or coercion of a trafficker, but who felt that their circumstances left little or no other option.” (Bigelsen, 2013)

victim who displays risk factors and act as their boyfriend. The pimp “convinces [the victim] to trust him and demands conditional love. For example, ‘if you love me, you’ll do this’” (Eliberare, 2015). When the victims get attached to this false relationship, the pimp then forces them into the commercial sex market. To keep the victim trapped, the pimp uses addictive substances like drugs and alcohol, physical harm, psychological abuse, and threatening using firearms. A study conducted by Arizona State University on the sex trafficking of minors in the United States showed that around 36.7% of minor victims were forced into commercial sex using harm and psychological abuse (Roe-Sepowitz, et al., 2017). The study also showed that approximately 26.7% of victims were forced using physical assault with a weapon, 20.7% using addictive substances (mostly drugs), and about 11.1% of the victims were threatened using firearms (Roe-Sepowitz, et al., 2017).

## **Sex Trafficking Laws and Policies**

The fight against the human trafficking industry has gone on for years, and it is still on. Our governments, lawmakers, and law enforcement (at both the federal and state levels) are fighting to end this modern form of slavery. It is essential to understand the laws that govern commercial sex, and the legislative initiatives to target pimps and Johns in the sex trafficking industry.

### *Federal level*

Federal law defines the act of trafficking, traffickers, victims, and punishments of human trafficking under 22 U.S. Code Chapter 78, also known as The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000. Sex trafficking under 22 *U.S.C.* § 7102 means “the recruitment, harboring,

transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting 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 induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age” (22 U.S.C. § 7102, 2000). The Justice for Victims of Trafficking Act (JVTA) of 2015 was passed to amend and improve federal initiatives to combat human trafficking. The act amended the TVPA of 2000. The amendment now allows victims of trafficking who are U.S citizens or permanent residents to receive benefits and services without the need to obtain an “official certification from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) of their status as victims” (USCongress, 2015). The act also created a survivor-led U.S. Advisory Council on Human Trafficking and established funds and grants for victims’ assistance programs. There are other federal statutes on trafficking such as the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2003 which gives victims of trafficking the right to sue their traffickers. The Mann Act of 1910 criminalizes the act of transporting victims across state lines or outside the country for commercial sex. And lastly, the Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today (PROTECT) Act of 2003 specifies penalties imposed on individuals engaging in sex tourism with children.

The most recent action took by the federal government against human trafficking is called the FOSTA-SESTA bill. It is a combination of a House bill called the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, and a Senate bill called Stop Enabling Sex-Trafficking Act. In an effort to curb online sex work, President Trump signed the bill into law on April 11, 2018. The bill also targets Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, which states: “No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider” (Romano, 2018). In other words, online

platforms cannot be held liable for what internet users post on their websites. Now the FOSTA-SESTA bill creates an exception to Section 230, stating that “website publishers would be responsible if third parties are found to be posting ads for prostitution — including consensual sex work — on their platforms” (Romano, 2018).

### *Georgia level*

The definition of sex trafficking in federal statutes is no different at the state level (Official Code of Georgia Annotated). Under Georgia law, the punishment is more specific, however. A person who commits the offense of trafficking persons for “sexual servitude<sup>3</sup> shall be guilty of a felony, and upon conviction thereof, shall be punished by imprisonment for not less than ten nor more than 20 years” (O.C.G.A. 16-5-46, 2010). The penalties can range from 20 to 25 years of imprisonment and a fine of up to \$100,000 if the trafficked victim is under the age of 18 years old.

Georgia also created laws that protect victims of trafficking and provide them with the needed services and benefits. For instance, Georgia Code Title 15-11.32 “allows the court to vacate a child's criminal record where the crime resulted from their sexual exploitation” (FindLaw, n.a). Also, Georgia Code Title 16-5.47 “requires adult entertainment, emergency rooms, farm labor contractors, rest stops, hotels, massage parlors, and other businesses to post a notice informing about trafficking resources” (FindLaw, n.a). In compliance with this act, Hartsfield-Jackson Airport set up hundreds of warning and awareness signs throughout the airport to raise awareness and control child sex trafficking in Atlanta. Airport employees also underwent training sessions on spotting victims of trafficking.

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<sup>3</sup>Sexual servitude is defined under Code Section 16-12-100 as “any sexually explicit conduct” exchanged, promised, or received directly or indirectly for anything of value by any person. The conduct must be “induced or obtained by coercion or deception or ... induced or obtained from a person under the age of 18 years” (O.C.G.A. 16-5-46, 2010).

Other laws, such as Georgia Code Title 35-1.16, were passed to require law enforcement to obtain the necessary training in investigating crimes of human trafficking and identifying victims of trafficking. Senate Bill 8 (effective date January 2015) allows the state to collect an annual fee of \$5,00 from adult establishments in Georgia that goes to trafficking victims' assistance programs. The bill combined with SB7 would also "establish a new Safe Harbor for Sexually Exploited Children Fund" (Redmon, 2016) by forcing convicted human traffickers to pay a \$2,500 fine to pay for healthcare, housing, and other services for victims of trafficking.

Besides the passage of laws, the Georgia Department of Investigation created a special task force in 2003, in compliance with the U.S Department of Justice – Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, called the Georgia Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force (ICAC). The task force includes 230 law enforcement agencies in Georgia as well as prosecutorial entities. The task force was established to combat child prostitution by focusing on children who are trafficked using online platforms.

The creation of the Georgia ICAC helped in investigating online commercial sex and arresting suspected traffickers. In 2017, the ICAC made 350 arrests of traffickers of minors using online platforms, including Backpage.com (GBI, 2018). Although many online ads are prostitution, which entirely differs from sex trafficking, according to Tory Kennedy, a sergeant at the ICAC, many ads posted on these online platforms are trafficking ads in which words like "fresh" and "petite" indicate that the victim is underage (CNN, 2015). Sergeant Kennedy and his team identify ads that look suspicious (for example, that include pictures of young girls) and set up what is called "Date with the Girls." "Once the money is exchanged [they] move to get the pimps and the victims from the agreed location" (CNN, 2015). In many instances, what helps law enforcement identify victims of trafficking in online ads is the branding of the victims.



Pimps use tattoos to “control [the girls], and let other pimps know that, 'Hey, this individual belongs to me,'" (Sidner, 2017).

### **Online Platforms and their Role in the Sex Trafficking Industry**

The trafficking industry is known to be an underground activity, but traffickers and pedophiles found a way to keep this industry functioning for years while generating profits. From 2010-2015, there was an estimated 846% increase in suspected child sex trafficking cases reported to the National Center for Missing Children, which the organization found to be “directly correlated to the increased use of the Internet to sell children for sex” (Portma, et al., 2017). Online advertising contributed heavily to the increased commercial sex activity of children in the United States, and it still plays a massive role in making the trafficking of minors easier and less risky for pimps and Johns.

Platforms like Backpage and Craigslist were the perfect solution for traffickers to prostitute victims. Around 67.3% of the 1,416 persons arrested in the U.S for sex trafficking of minors between 2010 and 2015 (reported by the FBI) “used technology (email, online ads, smartphones) in [their] trafficking activities” (Roe-Sepowitz, et al., 2017). The FBI reports also showed that 592 of the cases, around 41.8%, used Backpage.com to sell minors for the sex trade (Roe-Sepowitz, et al., 2017). In 2017, the Senate Permanent Subcommittee conducted a thorough investigation on online sex trafficking focusing on Backpage.com (Portma, et al., 2017).<sup>4</sup> The report showed that Backpage was “involved in 73% of all child trafficking reports that the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC)” dealt with (Portma, et al., 2017).

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<sup>4</sup> On January 12, 2017, the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (PSI) of the US Senate released an investigation report on Backpage.com and its involvement in facilitating prostitution and child sex trafficking. The PSI called Backpage executives to testify at a Senate subcommittee hearing. On the same day, the website shut down its “Adult Services” section and ads were basically moved to dating sections.

These numbers not only show the increased commercial sexual activities online, but also the significant role of Backpage.com in the sex trafficking industry.

For pimps and Johns, Backpage became “the second most popular online classified site in the U.S behind Craigslist” (Ruelas & Cassidy, 2018). They would post daily advertisements under the “Escort Services” section (later “Dating section”) on Backpage, and “Personals” on Craigslist. When Craigslist restricted its erotic services section in 2012, ad revenue on Backpage increased by 50% (Ruelas & Cassidy, 2018). Backpage founders were aware of the criminal activity taking place on their website and they “knowingly concealed evidence of criminality by systematically editing its ‘adult’ ads” (Portma, et al., 2017).

### **Business Conventions and Events and the Sex Trafficking Industry**

Public officials and lawmakers have started many initiatives to end this modern-day slavery: the creation of the GA ICAC Task Force, awareness signs at the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport, airport employee training, and appointing a Cabinet-level official in the City of Atlanta to support the efforts.<sup>5</sup> However, the struggle to control both demand and supply continues. Why is the demand high in Atlanta? Why do suppliers find this city a perfect destination to sell children and target preys? This study aims to explore these questions and test the arguments of scholars and public officials about why Atlanta is “America’s Capital of Sex Trafficking.”

First, this research explored why Atlanta is a major hub for the sex trafficking industry. Reasons include: having the world’s busiest airport, being the No. 4 convention city nationwide,

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<sup>5</sup> On January 28, 2018, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms held a press conference joining federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies at the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport to share the city’s initiatives to combat the sex trafficking industry in Atlanta. The initiatives included public service announcements, training for youth and airport employees, media campaigns, and the distribution of T-shirts and wristbands at the airport. Mayor Bottoms added that she will “appoint a Cabinet-level official to aid the City’s efforts to combat this form of modern-day slavery” (Robertson, 2018).

and having a variety of adult entertainment destinations. As Special Agent Brian Johnston of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation described it, “the same reasons we enjoy living and working and being in this area, are the same reasons that attract both the demand and supply side of human trafficking” (Poza, 2017).

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport is a key a player in this criminal activity. The airport is the world’s busiest, most efficient, and most traveled airport. Each year, more than 101 million passengers commute via the ATL airport “with nonstop service to more than 150 U.S. destinations and nearly 70 international destinations in more than 45 countries” (ADW, 2017). Although only 9% of reported sex trafficking cases take place at the airport (The Schapiro Group, 2009), traffickers and sex buyers use the airport as a tool to gain profit and fulfill their sexual desires.

The variety of adult entertainment establishments and clubs in Atlanta also have a considerable impact on sex trafficking rates. As discussed previously, the risk factors that get girls trapped in this industry include poverty, homelessness, and dysfunctional homes. When looking for independence and financial security, girls may turn to stripping and dancing, which are part of a prevalent culture in Atlanta. However, what these girls do not usually know when looking to be “independent chicks” (CNN, 2015) is that traffickers and Johns dominate these adult establishments. Once they see a vulnerable girl, they traffic her from one customer to another, and she becomes trapped. In order to control the victims, facilitators of trafficking in strip clubs employ methods to keep the victims from running away. Such methods are “ set[ing] up arrangements for commercial sex with customers, vendors who may knowingly or unknowingly provide space, services or products for the business to maintain the front of a legitimate business, licensing or inspection personnel who are aware of the illegal commercial

sex aspect of the business, and sources of advertising for business, such as online websites” (Polaris, n.a).

Although both the airport and the adult establishments are argued to have a considerable impact on sex trafficking, both effects are hard to measure. The underground nature of this industry makes it tough to get data on trafficked girls in strip clubs and bars. Thus, measuring the real effect will be tough, if not impossible. Also, it is challenging to measure the impact of the airport on the increasing rates of sex trafficking in Atlanta because, as noted above, only 9% of incidents take place at the airport (The Schapiro Group, 2009). Other cases that occur there are unreported and very hard to expose. According to Dalia Racine, the DeKalb County Assisting District Attorney, “Exploiters come from anywhere. One John can get into a computer anonymously, say he is coming to have sex with this child. He will fly in on a 3 o’clock flight, meet with the child at 6, and be gone on the 8 o’clock. How are we ever find them? How are we ever know who they are?” (CNN, 2015). And for the purposes of this research project, from a methodological standpoint, we cannot measure whether there is a statistically significant relationship between the presence of the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport and the commercial sexual exploitation industry because the airport is a constant. If we wanted to measure the impact of the airport, we would have to conduct a comparative analysis with other cities.

Thus, to test the reasons behind Atlanta being a major trafficking hub, I chose to measure whether conventions and events held in Atlanta affect the sex trafficking industry by using data on the top 25 conventions in the city of Atlanta and the daily “adult” ad postings on Backpage.com.in the years 2014-2016.

Ranking as one of the top convention cities nationwide is another key reason public officials and scholars argue contributes to the high rates of sex trafficking in Atlanta. In 2016,

there were 700 business conventions, meetings, and events hosted and booked in Atlanta (ACVB, 2018). The annual estimated number of attendees that business conventions and events bring to the city is around 59,513 per convention.<sup>6</sup> Major events held in the city include: SEC Football Championship, Dragon Con, Cheersport, National Safety Council, AmericasMart Atlanta International Gift and Home Furnishings Market, and others. U.S. Attorney Byung J. “BJay” Pak is aware of the threat these conventions/events pose to the city when it comes to trafficking rates. He said, “Sex traffickers are despicable people, and they use events like the National Championship game to ply their trade.” (USDJ, 2018). He added, “These types of events draw large crowds of revelers, and sex traffickers often seek to exploit these types of opportunities” (USDJ, 2018). The connection between business conventions/events and sex trafficking is the following: conventions bring in people with time and means, which results in increased demand for escort services, "Convention-goers have a lot of money and a lot of time. And events in Atlanta can mean escorts that charge over \$1000 per hour" (Lewis, 2014). The theory is that:

substantial surplus of men ... may have a stronger impact on prostitution than if these men resided there more permanently. The proposed reason is that while residing men participate in the marriage and the sex markets, men in transit are only in the latter. Hence, returns in the sex market rise disproportionately and induce a greater supply response than if these men had been in both markets (Edlund & Korn, 2002).

In short, the more men coming to the city, the more demand for prostitution services is increased because men in transit are not seeking wives, but temporary sexual pleasure. This can be filled by traveling to a different city that provides these types of services, like Atlanta, especially if the convention/events are very male-oriented. These escort services can also include child prostitution.

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<sup>6</sup> The average number of attendees for the top 25 conventions in Atlanta in each of the years analyzed: 2014, 2015, and 2016.

## **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

For this project, in addition to the quantitative analysis presented below, I conducted a literature review of reports, news articles, case studies, and research studies about sex trafficking. I also analyzed current and old laws/policies concerning prostitution, online platforms, and sexual exploitation. The collection of facts and data took place over a seven-month period.

### **Limitations**

The data collection for the project was challenging due to the hidden nature of this industry, protocols in place to protect the confidentiality of trafficking survivors, and the sensitivity of commercialized sexual exploitation. Because of that, it was challenging to obtain usable statistical data from public agencies, police departments, and trafficking survivors. No information presented here includes in-person interviews with victims, nor reports on their legal and health status.

### **Datasets**

To answer my research question, I used data from the daily adult advertisements posted on Backpage.com in the years 2014, 2015, and 2016, using a dataset provided by Sam Henly.<sup>7</sup> Most of the postings included details about the sex workers' ads and reviews of sex workers by clients. The data were collected primarily from the "Female Escort Section" on Backpage for major American and Canadian cities. The variables used in this study include the following:

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel Henly, Empirical Microeconomist and Data Scientist at the University of Washington, collected these data on a daily basis from Backpage.com during a three-year period.

- *msa\_id*: is the Census Bureau's metropolitan or micropolitan statistical area numerical code and name. In this case, I selected only code 1026, for Atlanta.
- *date*: is the date on which the ads were observed (year, month, and day). Dates start from January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014 and end on December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016.
- *ad\_count*: is the number of ads observed on a given day in the metro area.
- *frac\_teenage*: is the fraction of new ads in the metro area that purport to be for people 18 or 19 years old. It is plausible that these posts really refer to a poster who is underage.

I acknowledge that data collected from Backpage represent mainly prostitution ads, which is different from sex trafficking cases that the research is focused on. To address this limitation, I used the *frac\_teenage* variable as my indicator for sex trafficking ads. Under federal law 18 U.S.C. § 1591, a minor is automatically classified as a victim of sex trafficking regardless of whether force, coercion, fraud or any combination of three, are present. This is not a perfect variable. It only highlights the ads that were *possibly* trafficked minors, because the poster identified the advertised sex worker to be 18 or 19 years old (the minimum allowable age on the platform). However, according to the investigation report by the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (PSI), the website has shown this technique, among others, to “its customers on how to post ‘clean’ ads for illegal transactions” (Portma, et al., 2017). For instance, the website “reprogrammed its electronic filters to reject an ad” that used words suggesting sex trafficking, and it sent the user an error message regarding “the problematic word choice” and helped them post a sanitized version (Portma, et al., 2017).

Although I did not do so here, future research could also look at keywords in the ads that may indicate sex trafficking. According to the same investigation report by the PSI on Backpage involvement in facilitating sex trafficking ads, some words were used to indicate the sex trade of

minors on the website. These “phrases of nuance” were “Amber Alert” or “Cheerleaders” (Ruelas & Cassidy, 2018). “Fresh” or “petite” are other terms that have been identified (CNN, 2015).

To test my hypothesis, I had to find data on the conventions that took place in Atlanta in the years 2014, 2015, and 2016. I used information from the Atlanta Business Chronicle, which included the top 25 annual conventions and events that took place in Atlanta. The data included the name of the event/convention, the date of the convention, its attendance, its estimated economic impact, and its location.

### **Model Specification**

Using the statistical analysis software SPSS, I used the collected data to run a statistical analysis using two models. The ads count multiplied by the frequency of teenagers variable (which gives us the number of ads plausibly about minors for each day) was my indicator of sex trafficking advertisements on Backpage, and I used that as my dependent variable. Since the variable is a continuous variable that goes from a minimum of zero to a maximum of 1079 ads, I chose to run multivariate linear regression analysis using two models. The key independent variable in both models was the presence of major conventions/events. I used this variable as a dichotomous variable where 1= conventions/events took place on the specified day, and 0= no conventions/events took place on the specified day.

The two regression models used to measure the effect of conventions and events held in Atlanta on the sex trafficking industry were as follow:



*Model 1: Estimating the effect with daily dummies*

$$E(\text{Ads x Freq\_teenage}) = a + \beta_1(\text{Conventions and Events}) + \beta_2(\text{Monday}) + \beta_3(\text{Tuesday}) \\ + \beta_4(\text{Wednesday}) + \beta_5(\text{Thursday}) + \beta_6(\text{Friday}) + \beta_7(\text{Saturday}) + \varepsilon_i.$$

In model 1, I controlled for days of the week because traffickers and pimps do not use Backpage for commercial sex equally on each day of the week, whether there is a convention or not. For example, most of us would probably not be surprised to see more ads on Backpage on Fridays than on Tuesdays. Adding the controls allows me to test for the effect of conventions/events while holding day of the week constant.

*Model 2: Estimating the effect with weekend dummy*

$$E(\text{Ads x Freq\_teenage}) = a + \beta_1(\text{Conventions and Events}) + \beta_2(\text{WeekendDummy}) + \varepsilon_i$$

In model 2, I controlled for weekends only. I used the weekend as a dummy variable in which 1= Friday or a Saturday, 0=other days of the week. I used Fridays and Saturdays as my weekend days because the assumption is that it triggers an increase in demand for escort services for leisure time, which may also be compounded by end-of-week paychecks.

## FINDINGS

This section reviews the findings from both the descriptive statistics and the regression models. First, it summarizes the descriptive statistics about daily numbers of adult advertisements posted on Backpage in 2014, 2015, and 2016. Following that, the multivariate regression results are summarized for both models.

### Descriptive Statistics

Figure 1 shows the daily number of adult advertisements posted each day on Backpage in 2016 (grey bars). The figure also indicates the presence of a business convention or an event through thick black lines. The “spikes” in the black line indicate a business convention or an event held on that day. Whenever the line is flat at the bottom of the figure, there was no convention/event on that day. Based on the figure, there does not appear to be significant increases in ad postings when there is a convention or event held in Atlanta in 2016. However, some specific conventions saw increases in ads. For instance, in mid-February, there was a 54% increase in ad postings during the Cheersport event. There was also a 45.7% increase in ads when DragonCon was held in September, and a 43.6% increase with the SEC Football Championship in December.

Figure 2 shows the same information as figure 1, but for the year 2015. Again, there does not appear to be significant increases in ad postings when a major convention/event is held in Atlanta in 2015. However, increases can be seen when looking closely at the effect of specific conventions/events. For instance, there was a large jump in ad postings (from 41 ads in July 1st

to 1,026 ads on July 15th) during the AmericaMart International Gift and Home Market, and a 259.3% increase in late May when Momo Con took place.

Figure 3 shows the same information, but for the year 2014. The results are similar. There does not appear to be significant increases in ad postings when there is a convention or event held in Atlanta in 2014. Thus, the spikes in ad postings do not appear to have a systematic relationship with any specific conference/event. However, there is an increase of about 73% in mid-February during the Cheersport event. Another increase of about 49% is seen in December during the SEC Football Championship.

The other events that took place during these years were beauty shows, hair shows, and furnishing and gifts markets. These events brought mostly female attendees to the city. According to the Center for Public Policy Studies, 89% of traffickers are men and around 12,400 men pay for sex with a woman or a girl each month in Georgia. Thus, the proportion of female involving in the sex trafficking industry is slightly small (CPPS, 2013).

Figure 4 represents the dependent variable I used in my regression models (the number of Backpage ads advertising an 18- or 19-year-old specifically). As noted above, these sex workers are more likely to be minors, and as such may be victims of sex trafficking.

## **Multivariate Results**

Table 1 summarizes the results from the multivariate linear regression. As discussed above, I am testing whether business conventions and events affect daily Backpage ad postings of sex workers who are 18 or 19 years old. The results show that none of the independent variables are statistically significant. Both models indicate that conventions/events have no relationship with the daily ad postings on Backpage. Thus, I fail to reject the null hypothesis that

there is no association between the presence of a convention/event and the number of ads of 18- and 19-year-old sex workers (plausibly sex trafficking victims) posted on Backpage. The control variables are also not significant predictors of Backpage ad numbers.

## CONCLUSION

This research was meant to measure the nature and extent of the sex trafficking industry in Atlanta. It first analyzed the reasons that made Atlanta “America’s Capital of Sex Trafficking,” which are the world’s busiest airport, being the 4<sup>th</sup> convention city nationwide, and the variety of adult establishments in the area. The study then explored the possibilities of testing the real effect of these three factors on the commercial sexual exploitation industry in Atlanta, and focused on the presence of major business conventions and events in Atlanta annually.

Based on the results from the descriptive analysis and the regression models, the study concluded that there is no relationship between the presence of a major business convention/event and the number of daily ad postings on Backpage.com of allegedly 18- and 19-year-old sex workers (who are likely victims of sex trafficking). Thus, conventions and events overall do not seem to impact the sex trafficking industry in Atlanta based on these results. However, there are possible explanations for this conclusion.

First, most of the events examined were beauty shows, hair shows, or markets (i.e., Bronner Bros. International Beauty Show, Bronner Bros. Mid-Summer International Hair Show, AmericaMart Atlanta International Gift and Home Furnishings Market). These types of conventions tend to be female-oriented, and attract more than 20,000 attendees per event. As such, it is plausible that attendees were mostly female and were thus less likely to contribute to the sex trafficking industry. Second, other events analyzed were sporting and comic/gaming

events. These type of events had the highest attendance in all three years and were associated with increases in ad posting in the descriptive statistics results. For instance, Cheersport was associated with an increase in ad postings of 54% in 2016 and 73% in 2014, and the SEC Football Championship with a 43.6% increase in 2016 and 49% in 2014. These increases, especially during the SEC Football Championship, had been predicted by lawmakers. This year, the U.S. Attorney's Office of the Northern District of Georgia issued a warning letter for immediate release on the website of the United State Department of Justice title "Sex traffickers will target Atlanta during National Championship game weekend" (USDJ, 2018). Thus, it is plausible that conventions and events in general show no effect on the sex trafficking rates in Atlanta, but that specific types of conventions and events do. Future research should focus on disaggregating conventions by type.

Figure 1: Daily Backpage ads, business conventions, and events in 2016

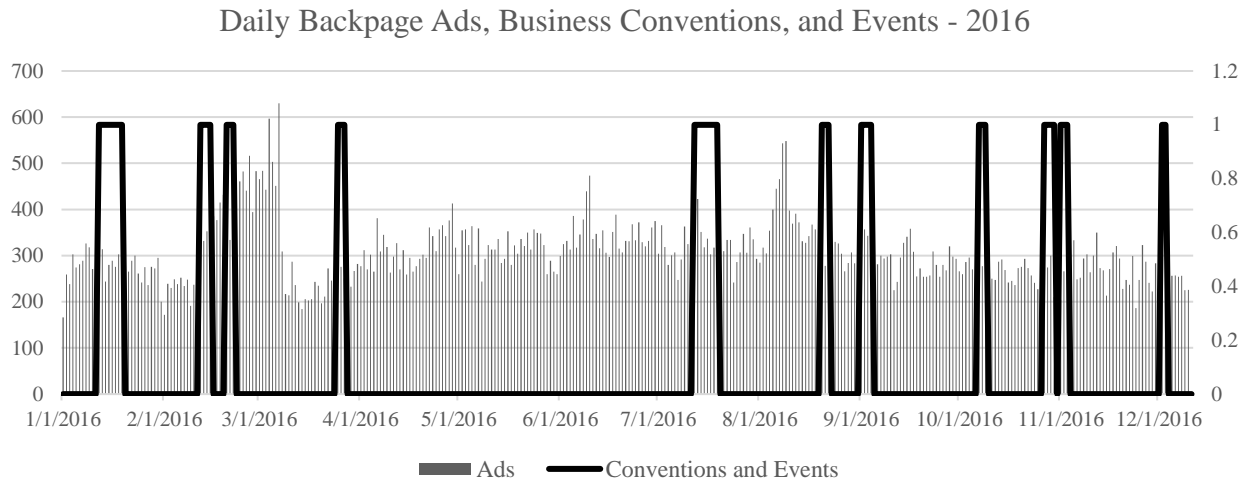


Figure 2: Daily Backpage ads, business conventions, and events in 2015

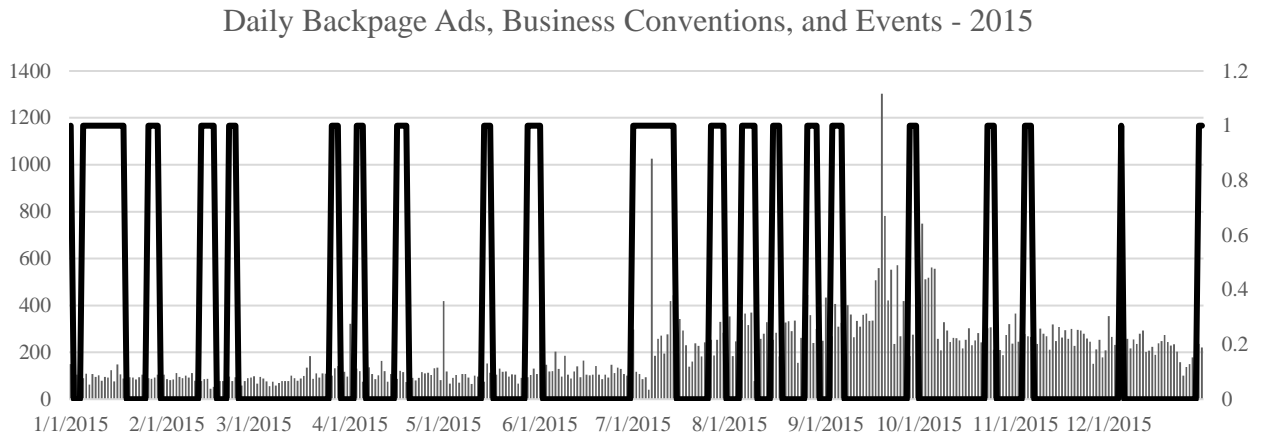


Figure 3: Daily Backpage ads, business conventions, and events in 2014

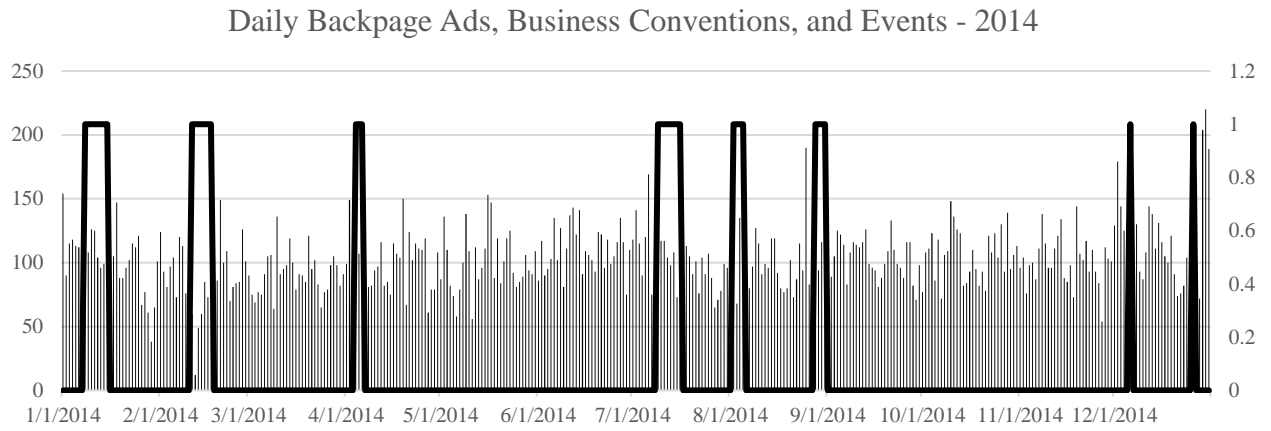




Figure 4: Daily Backpage ad postings of 18- or 19-year-old sex workers for 2014-2016

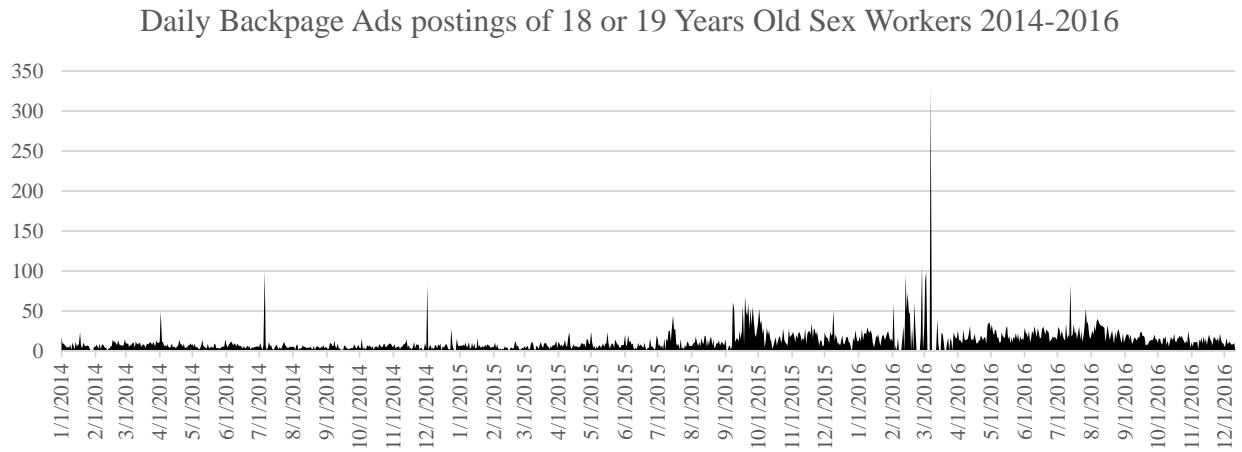


Table 1: Multivariate linear regressions to test the effect of business convention and events on the sex trafficking industry in Atlanta

Dependent Variable: (Age x Freq\_teenage)

	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	12.317*** (1.264)	12.677*** (0.586)
Convention and Events	-0.762 (1.282)	-0.763 (1.277)
Monday (ref: Sunday)	1.395 (1.758)	
Tuesday (ref: Sunday)	0.434 (1.759)	
Wednesday (ref: Sunday)	0.052 (1.754)	
Thursday (ref: Sunday)	-0.073 (1.754)	
Friday (ref: Sunday)	-0.484 (1.751)	
Saturday (ref: Sunday)	0.797 (1.754)	
Weekend Dummy		-0.206 (1.037)
N	1079	1079
R-sq	.002	.000

Notes: Observations are daily counts of ad postings on Backpage.com’s “erotic services” in metro Atlanta. Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* indicates statistical significance at the 1% level; \*\* at the 5% level; \* at the 10% level.

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