

# Stop Trafficking!

# Awareness Advocacy Action

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FOCUS: This month's newsletter focuses on human trafficking in the massage parlor industry.

*In 2019, Robert Kraft, the owner of the New England Patriots football team, was arrested with first-degree misdemeanor prostitution charges at the Orchids of Asia Day Spa in Florida for soliciting prostitution. Orchids of Asia was one of 10 businesses targeted in Florida by prosecutors and various law enforcement agencies to find victims of human trafficking. However, prosecutors in Florida later dropped charges against New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft after a state appeals court ruled that footage of Kraft from a police-installed video camera inside the Orchids of Asia spa had been obtained using unconstitutional methods and would be inadmissible at trial.*



LMPark Photos, Shutterstock.com

*The two women Kraft was accused of patronizing have pleaded guilty to prostitution-related charges. They must pay thousands of dollars in fines, court fees, and cash forfeitures and face months of probation.*

## The massage parlor industry in the United States is estimated to be a 2.5 billion-dollar industry annually,

with an estimated 9,000 illicit massage parlors throughout the United States. In addition to offering legally sanctioned massages, illegal massage parlors provide sex acts to customers for an extra charge. The term “happy ending” is often used for the type of service they provide to the clients and typically refers to manual erotic stimulation or oral sex performed at the end of the massage. Many women employed in illicit massage parlors are victims of human trafficking, coerced with false promises and threatened with violence. Most feel trapped, do not understand how they got caught in the situation, and do not feel like they have any way out.

Massage parlors are not subject to strict government regulations like trained massage therapists at medical facilities that involve physical touch work as part of diagnosis or treatment. Moreover, massage parlors can operate without strict zoning rules in some areas, leaving them as possible fronts for sex work and other black-market activities such as money laundering.

Experts say that in some areas of the country, there has been a change in how police and prosecutors view cases of prostitution occurring in massage parlors. The focus has shifted from sex workers to traffickers reaping the proceeds. But, unfortunately, this has not been universally adopted.

## Who Are the Victims of Illicit Massage Parlors?

The victims of human trafficking within the illicit massage parlor business are typically women between the ages of 35 and 55, flown in from abroad or recent immigrants to the country. Many are from South Korea or China. They usually speak little English, have children, and are desperate to support their families or pay off existing debts to family members, loan sharks, labor traffickers, and lawyers who help them file phony asylum claims. The tools traffickers use to exploit victims are such that the victims themselves often do not know that what is happening to them is against the law.

Recruited through acquaintances or ads promising a high income, when these women realize they are being sexually exploited, it's too late to back out, as they are already trapped by the “debt” for travel expenses, room and board. Their passports are taken, and their illegal immigration status keeps them further in the shadows. They are rotated every week or two between spas operated by the same owners.

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Not all illicit masseuses are “owned” by human traffickers. Some enter this arrangement of their own free will. Any minor under the age of 18 found working in any sexual capacity for any establishment or handler is automatically considered a child sex trafficking victim in the eyes of the law.

*Most massage businesses in the United States are not illicit. However, the murder last year of eight people at three Asian massage businesses in Georgia has forced us to recognize that the intersection of racism and sexism often converges with violence. Many women of color, particularly immigrant women, must often be forced to take low-paying and dangerous jobs as they attempt to build a better life for themselves and their families.*

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*Massage parlor trafficking is happening in plain sight, in businesses that operate as if they are legal massage or bodywork establishments.*

*“It persists because we choose to ignore it — as something harmless, as something inevitable, or both: at best, a victimless crime. At worst, a public nuisance.” (Alexa Schaeffer, Community Organizer, Polaris)*



## How To Spot an Illicit Massage Parlor

Illicit massage parlors operate in plain sight. On the outside, illicit massage parlors typically have all windows covered or blacked out. They may have a neon sign at the entrance or in the windows. The doors are usually locked. A person is buzzed in to enter the business.

If you go inside, there are also signs that you are in an illicit massage parlor. The first indicator is that the spa will refuse to admit women. The rates listed for massages are lower than average. The masseuses speak little to no English, wear little clothing, and are not allowed to handle money. They live in the same location, which may be the massage parlor itself. New masseuses show up weekly, and there is a very high turnover. Click [here](#) to learn more.

In 2017, an undocumented Honduran immigrant named Maya Morena started working at an Asian massage parlor in Flushing, New York after responding to an ad on Craigslist. Morena got into sex work to help pay for college.

Morena reports that the typical arrangement for a massage worker is this: If customers pay \$60 for a massage, the house keeps \$30. Most of the time, “the worker keeps whatever she charges for the sexual extras, for which she sets the price. But, of course, not all massage workers at the local parlor provide sexual services — many regular customers would never know that some clients in the next room are paying for sex.

“It’s like working a dead-end job, if given the resources, eventually, you’ll leave.” Morena states that if more people had access to higher education, healthcare, and housing, people in difficult situations would not go into sex work in the first place.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

# Police Response to Sex Trafficking in Massage Parlors Varies

USA Today News reported on a 2019 investigation into sex trafficking in massage parlors and the response of police throughout the country. Police across the nation have touted sex spa stings for years as evidence that they are cracking down on the crime of human trafficking. However, law enforcement's tough-on-crime rhetoric does not hold up throughout the country. In many cases, charges are dropped or pleaded down. As a result, spas often popped up in the exact or new locations. And the higher-ups who profit from trafficking are usually never even identified.



In 2016, one of the most significant sex trafficking rings ever dismantled by the federal government took place in Minnesota. The sting operation began with a tip from law enforcement in Arizona about women rotating through apartment complexes. As a result, hundreds of women from Thailand were trafficked to the United States to work in spas in the United States, while tens of millions of dollars were laundered back to Thailand.

The U.S. Attorney's Office led the multi-agency effort for the District of Minnesota instead of the police. It relied on federal agents who specialized in financial and immigration crimes. Law enforcement went after organized crime from the start, charging higher-level members of the organization instead of women working in the spas. In addition, they partnered with the Thai Community Development Center, which helped build trust with victims. That trust, Minnesota prosecutors said, can be undermined if the women are charged with prostitution. Without the help of victims, it's harder to meet the law's standard of proving force, fraud, or coercion.

Thirty-six people have been convicted or pleaded guilty to their roles in the organization. Sixteen were convicted of sex trafficking conspiracy — five identified by law enforcement as higher-ups in the organization were convicted in a jury trial after only one day of deliberations.

Unfortunately, what happened in Minnesota is the exception, not the rule.

In Florida — which ranks third after California and Texas for human trafficking reports — stings have been carried out against dozens of massage parlors. Those raids rarely led to trafficking charges. In a review of nearly 500 people charged with human trafficking from 2008 to 2017 in Florida, only 15% were convicted of trafficking. Most perpetrators saw their charges reduced, changed, or dropped entirely. None of the three people charged in spa cases ended up with a conviction for trafficking.

Police conducted undercover operations inside 24 spas in Broward County, Florida, during the summers of 2016 and 2017 in Operation Red Light. No one went to prison. This included two spa officials who acknowledged they tried to bribe the police.

In Southwest Florida, the state Department of Law Enforcement led Operation Spa LLC, an investigation that resulted in raids of 13 spas from Naples to Tallahassee in June 2017. Even though the state's investigative summary noted numerous signs of trafficking, no one faced that charge.

Meanwhile, a raid of four spas in Miami Beach, one of which shared an alley with a private school, led to one charge of human trafficking. However, the state attorney offered the trafficker a deal to plead guilty to profiting from prostitution. Instead, the trafficker was sentenced to probation and court costs. Click [here](#) to learn more.

*In 2021, 36 people in Minnesota were convicted for their roles in a Thai sex trafficking ring that shuttled hundreds of women from Bangkok to cities across the United States, including Phoenix, Las Vegas, Atlanta, and Minneapolis. The trafficking victims were often from impoverished backgrounds and spoke little or no English. They were coerced to participate in the criminal scheme through misleading promises of a better life in the United States and the ability to provide money to their families in Thailand.*

The women, referred to as “flowers” by the criminal organizations, were forced to work at massage parlors with no choice about where, when, and with whom they performed sex acts until they paid off their debts. Evidence in the case showed that they were permitted to move around outside the parlors only with so-called runners working for the organization.

The organization also engaged in widespread visa fraud to facilitate the international transportation of the victims. Traffickers assisted the victims in obtaining fraudulent visas and travel documents by funding false bank accounts, creating fictitious backgrounds and occupations, and instructing the victims to enter into fraudulent marriages to increase the likelihood that their





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visa applications would be approved. Traffickers also coached the victims on what to say during their visa interviews. While working to obtain visa documents, traffickers gathered personal information from the victims, including the location of the victims' families in Thailand. This information was later used to threaten victims who sought to flee the organization in the United States.

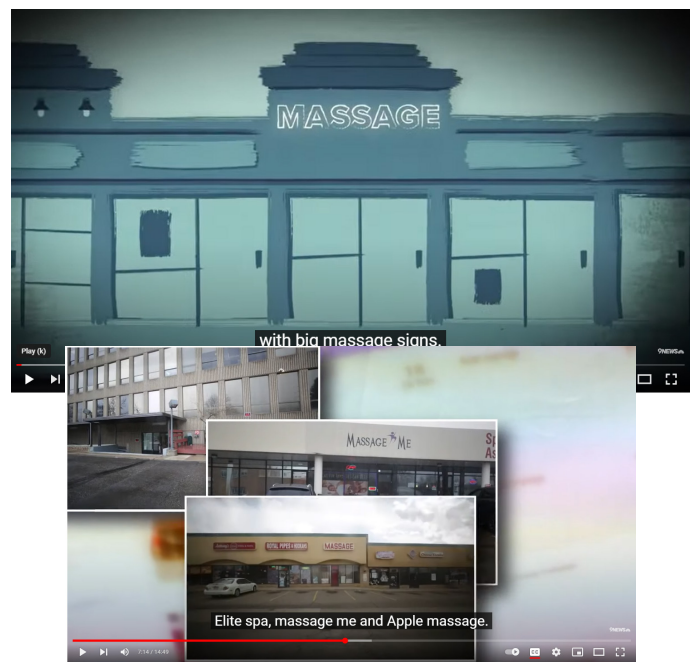
The organization dealt primarily with cash and engaged in rampant and sophisticated money laundering to promote and conceal illegal profits. The organization used "funnel accounts" to launder and route cash from cities across the United States to the money launderers in Los Angeles. To date, investigators have recovered \$1.5 million in cash and \$15 million in money judgments secured through plea agreements. During the extensive investigation, law enforcement traced millions of dollars to the organization. Indeed, at trial, there was testimony that more than \$40 million was sent to Thailand by one money launderer alone. Click [here](#) to learn more.

She was 49, a recent immigrant, and deeply in debt to a loan shark back home in China when she answered an employment ad that promised thousands of dollars a month but offered no job description. She realized too late that she had been tricked into working at a massage parlor in Flushing, Queens, where she was expected to sexually service up to a dozen men a day besides kneading backs.

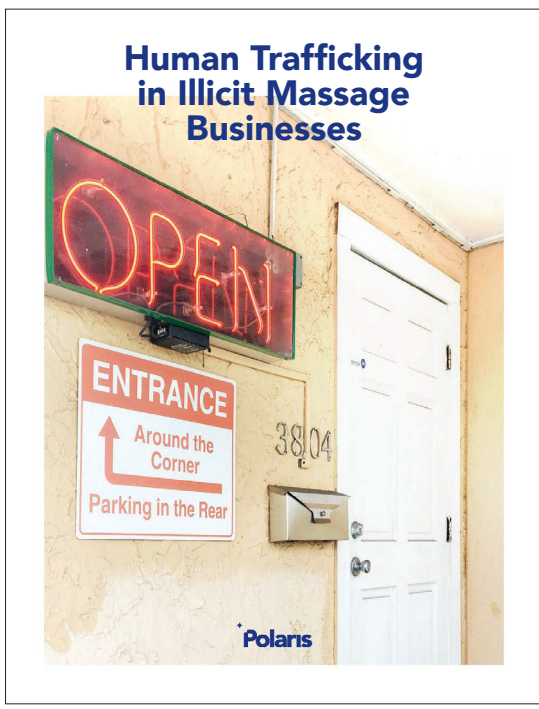
Some clients were violent. The boss charged her \$10 a day to sleep on a sofa at the parlor. Rats nibbled on her food. "The customers were terrible," said the woman, who, ashamed of the stigma of her former profession, asked that her name not be used. "After you perform a service, they would find an excuse to take the money away." Click [here](#) to learn more.



# Action



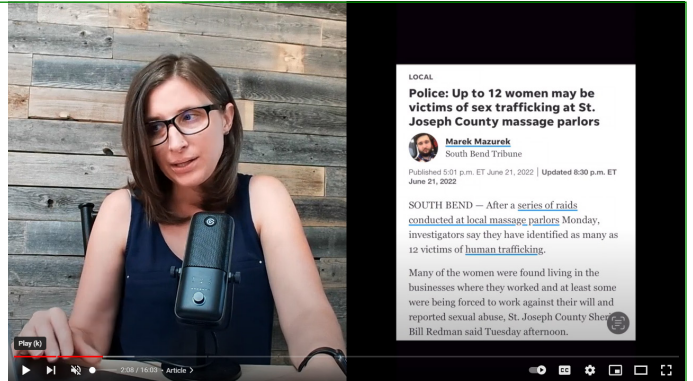
Please click [here](#) to view Undercover investigation: Human trafficking and the struggle to shut down illicit massage parlors.



Please click [here](#) to access a 2018 resource by Polaris on Human Trafficking in Illicit Massage Business.

## How can you tell if a massage parlor is trafficking victims?

Please click [here](#) to view this 2022 you tube on human trafficking in massage parlors.



## How Can You Tell if a Massage Business is a Front for Human Trafficking?

Instead of offering the normal therapeutic massage services, the report details how the illegitimate parlors offer a variety of sexual favors, for a price—everything up to full on intercourse is offered.



## What Can You Do?

What can you do if you suspect a massage parlor is a front for human trafficking? Concerned community members can play an essential role in ending massage parlor trafficking, but it must be done carefully.

If you suspect a location is an illicit massage parlor, you should call in a tip to the National Human Trafficking Hotline (1-888-373-7888).

Calling the police and urging them to “shut down” a business that looks illicit may not have the intended effect. Most of these businesses are part of organized crime networks; if one location is closed, traffickers will shift the women to another. Moreover, such police operations can often result in trafficking victims being arrested and booked on prostitution charges.

You should also avoid entering massage parlors you think may be illicit massage businesses.

Attempting to talk with potential victims or taking actions designed to draw attention to a particular business, for example, protesting outside the business, could damage victims. Attempting to talk with potential victims can alert traffickers, who often monitor women with a camera. Drawing attention to the business can lead the traffickers to pick up and move their entire operation before victims can be identified and provided with services.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## The women trafficked in massage parlors are mostly:

- Recently arrived from China or South Korea
- Speak little or no English
- Are mothers in their mid-30s to late 50s
- Are under extreme financial pressure

- Have no more than a high school education
- Are recruited from fraudulent ads that hide the sexual nature of the job
- Are paid less than minimum wage



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