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The 'adult' section might be closed but Miami sex workers still on the job



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A photo illustration from an ad on Backpage.com, with its caption superimposed. The caption, which is misspelled, translates from Spanish into "come play with me." Backpage.com

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For a quick sexual rendezvous inside a Miami hotel room, Abigail charges men \$80. A full hour runs up to \$200.

On a busy day, the 25-year-old with a Southern drawl can pull in \$1,500. Business is so good, she says, that she can afford to invest in breast enhancements while still providing money for her two children back home in Atlanta.

She credits much of her success to a website that has long had a jaded reputation: Backpage.com.

Despite intense police and government scrutiny of the website — which last month led Backpage's operators to shutter its notorious "adult" section while complaining about government censorship — the reality is that not much has changed. The world's oldest profession continues to openly ply its trade in South Florida and elsewhere.

The classified website Backpage.com, long under law-enforcement scrutiny, in January shut down its "adult" content section. However, the site is still believed to be a hub for prostitution and human trafficking Backpage.com

And while the site's founders face criminal charges in California, there's also a debate emerging in the law enforcement community over whether the legal crackdown is the smart way to root out the site's worst users. Some investigators and advocacy groups concerned about human sexual trafficking suggest working with the website would be a better way to target abusive ringleaders and protect underage girls and immigrants tricked or forced into prostitution.

A scan of Miami's Backpage.com site quickly uncovers dozens of women and men like Abigail, who have simply hung their sex business shingle in new places on the site. Now, with the "adult" category gone, she posts ads on the "women seeking men" dating section.

And she posts a lot.

Every half-an-hour, Abigail uses her smartphone to upload photos of her scantily clad self, promising pleasure with a beautiful blonde. Each post cost \$1 but she views it as an essential marketing expense, ensuring that her photos shoot to the top of the page — vital to capturing attention on a site flooded with girls.

"Backpage is how I started out," said Abigail, who asked that she be identified only by one of her pseudonyms. "Nothing has slowed down."

The shuffling on Backpage is being watched closely in Miami-Dade, where prosecutors have been aggressive about going after pimps and traffickers, while trying to provide rehabilitation services to girls who have been coerced into selling their bodies.

Scouring Backpage for victims, particularly underage runaways, has been a chief tool for Miami-Dade's Human Trafficking Unit, leading to scores of arrests in recent years. Just over half of adult victims in recent Miami-Dade cases, and 40 percent of minor victims, were advertised on Backpage.com, according to prosecutors.

State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle dismissed Backpage's widely publicized closing of its adult section closing as nothing more than a "shell game."

"They've all moved to the dating section," Fernandez Rundle said. "The same victims are being found there."

Earlier this month, on the heels of a U.S. Senate report that blasted the site for facilitating criminal activity, Backpage shut down the adult content portion of its website. The Senate investigation concluded that Backpage knowingly profited from prostitution and the sexual trafficking of minors, increasing its revenue from \$5.3 million in 2008 to \$135 million in 2014.

The Senate investigation found the website edited out phrases such as "Lolita" and "Amber Alert" from ads, code words for minors that might attract law-enforcement attention.

Now, Backpage visitors who click on the "escorts," "strippers" and "body rubs" portions of the website are greeted by a page with a blaring red headline that reads, "Censored."

"The government has unconstitutionally censored this content," the notice reads, directing users to several organizations, including one dedicated to rescuing kids from prostitution. It also says, "Protect internet free speech."

Classified websites such as Backpage and Craigslist, which allow users to hawk everything from real estate to used cars, have long been targeted by police for facilitating the sex trade.

For prostitutes and human traffickers, the site of choice used to be San Francisco-based Craigslist, which shut down its "adult services" ads in 2010 while under scrutiny from attorney generals across the country. That doesn't seem to have erased prostitution ads from the site, however. Last fall, prosecutors accused a Miami preacher of trafficking young boys through Craigslist, as well as Backpage; he is awaiting trial.

But Dallas-based Backpage, founded in 2004 as an off-shoot of classified sections for alternative weekly newspapers, remains one of the most popular websites for hooking up prostitutes with johns, according to law enforcement.

In Miami-Dade, posts on the website have resulted in many high-profile human trafficking cases. In recent years, those charged include a local Spanish-language singer, a man who forced a runaway teen to tattoo his street name on her eyelids and a businessman who lured girls from Kazakhstan with the false promise of working at a yoga studio.

The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children estimates that 73 percent of all its child trafficking report stem from Backpage.

In Cook County, Illinois, Sheriff Thomas Dart waged a public campaign against Backpage in 2015, posting a letter to credit-card companies asking they stop accepting financial transactions from the site. Visa, Mastercard and American Express all voluntarily stopped accepting business from Backpage. The website sued, arguing Dart was infringing on its right to free speech — and won.

A federal appeals court upheld the ruling ordering Dart to stop publicly pressing the issue. The U.S. Supreme Court in December refused to take up the issue.

Last year, California's Attorney General filed pimping-relating charges against Backpage CEO Carl Ferrer, and founders Michael Lacey and James Larkin. A state court judge threw out the case, echoing the site's longtime position: that Backpage was protected when publishing speech posted by other people.

In December, California filed new charges against the men, this time charging them with money laundering. The trial is still pending. Backpage's attorneys could not be reached for comment.

The approach by some law enforcement hasn't gone over well with everyone, including even some advocates for victims of human trafficking.

"It's a symbolic crusade," said Kimberly Mehlman-Orozco, an author and criminology professor at George Mason University who serves an expert witness in human-trafficking cases. "They're trying to get some accolades and look like the heroes. It's having a negative effect on the ability for law enforcement to rescue victims and prosecute offenders. The best we can do is facilitate the capabilities of police to investigate."

At least until recently, Backpage was generally fast to respond to government subpoenas and request for customer information, even the credit-card info used by those posting to the adult section, according to Florida police agencies.

That's what landed Michael Chamah behind bars for pimping a 16-year-old runaway on South Beach in 2013.

Subpoenas revealed that someone posted the ads for the girl using a pre-paid Visa card. Digging further, investigators found that Chamah used the same card to rent a scooter — the same one he used to drop off the teen for a rendezvous with an undercover Miami Beach detective posing as a john. Confronted with the financial records, Chamah pleaded guilty last fall and is now behind bars.

"It would be a mistake for investigators or prosecutors to assume that trafficking will decrease because of the shutdown of Backpage's escort ads," said Jane Anderson, a former Miami-Dade assistant state attorney who now works for AEquitas, an anti-human trafficking resource organization for prosecutors.

"In fact, investigators and prosecutors must now be even more proactive and resourceful to uncover trafficking that is occurring on lesser known websites, including other areas of Backpage."

For advocates for the commercial sex trade, many who believe it should be legalized nationwide, Backpage allows "consensual" adult prostitutes more independence from potentially dangerous pimps and clients.

“It’s a screening tool. It’s a safe place for people to meet and negotiate,” Billie Jo McIntire, a former sex-trafficking victim who now runs Colorado’s Social Wellness Advocacy Network. “If they don’t have that environment, it pushes them out on the streets.”

Prostitutes and escorts have certainly adjusted to the changes at Backpage. On post after post, they offer their services in less-than-subtle ways.

One girl named Brown Sugar notes: “I’m down for whatever. I’m into all fetishes.” One woman notes her 34DD chest size and “sensual massages.” A “well endowed” busty transgender poster, with photos in various bikinis, invites users to a good time in a “private place.”

Abigail started prostituting after her ex-husband convinced her to start selling herself on Backpage about a year ago in Georgia. Abigail forays into Miami every so often, living out of a hotel, posting ads that warn “no pimps” need call — she used to have a pimp, who convinced her she was in love but took most all of her earnings.

When Visa and Mastercard stopped processing Backpage pages last year, the site started accepting the virtual currency known as Bitcoin. Now, Abigail buys prepaid gift cards at Walgreens and uses it to purchase Bitcoin through a website promoted by Backpage.

“It’s common sense if you ask me,” Abigail said. “Somebody showed me how to do it once, and I got the hang of it.”

There’s still danger. Abigail claims she’s been raped once and robbed twice in Miami. But she insists the website allows her to be more discerning whom she accepts as clients. While she is not thrilled with the realities of the daily sex with strangers, the trade simply pays too well to walk away from, she said.

“I obviously love the money. It honestly has become an addiction.”

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