



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on April 7, 2018

Human Trafficking Website, Backpage, Seized by Federal Agents

The Backpage website — notorious for prostitution and human trafficking — was seized Friday by federal authorities. This action was taken “as part of an enforcement action by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, and the Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigation Division, with analytical assistance from the Joint Regional Intelligence Center,” according to a notice appearing where the website used to display ads.



Authorities have been tight-lipped about the reasons for the seizure, saying only that more information would be made available in the coming days. But along with the seizure, news [reports](#) from Arizona — where the company is based — say that the home of one of the founders of the site was also raided by the FBI. Considering the nature of the ads on Backpage and the fact that the company has recently been the subject of multiple investigations related to human trafficking and child exploitation, it is likely that that is the reason for the seizure.

Backpage has a long and checkered past. It began as the back page of a newspaper called the *Phoenix New Times* and was filled with classified ads. In 2004, the founders of the paper, Michael Lacey and Jim Larkin, launched the Backpage website to compete with Craigslist. As Backpage was the most profitable part of the *New Times*, Lacey and Larkin retained ownership of that part of the business when they sold the paper in 2012.

Most ads were free to list, but some ads — particular those in the “adult services” section — were charged a fee. The site quickly became dominated by such ads — a majority of which were thinly-veiled offerings of prostitution. In January 2017, Backpage closed the “Adult Services” section, but those ads were simply moved over to the “Dating” section and business-as-usual continued.

While there are those in our sex-marinated society who would argue that “transactional sex” (a euphemism aimed at sanitizing the practice of buying and selling sex) should not be against the law as long as it is between consenting adults, there is a major component of the trade that is ignored by that argument.

That component is that the “consent” is often not really consent. First there is the fact that almost all prostitution is based on exploiting the weakness and financial needs of a woman who — if she felt she had other options — would not “consent” to — as the British pop band, Tears for Fears, described it in their 1989 hit song [Woman in Chains](#) — a “transaction” in which she “[sells the only thing she owns.](#)” When a man “rents” a woman to use as a sexual object, the “consent” touted by those who either profit from the sex trade industry or act as consumers of that industry is greatly diminished. When a woman’s ability to consent to sex is diminished by alcohol, drugs, or other things, the sex that takes place is often called rape. This should not be treated differently.



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Human persons are not objects and should never be treated as such, even if their circumstances lead them to a place where they feel they have no other option than to sell themselves as such.

But way beyond that, many of the women in the sex trade industry are victims of human trafficking. Many of them are not women at all, but young girls. And as the National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE) [points out](#), many of those young girls — after being enslaved by pimps — were sold on Backpage. On NCOSE’s “Dirty Dozen” list, Lacey, Larkin, and Backpage CEO Carl Ferrer are described as “top pimps” who have made millions of dollars with a website that one young victim described as a place where she had been ordered online “like a pizza.”

The NCOSE page exposing Backpage as “a virtual auction block where sex buyers can shop for human beings for sex from the privacy of their home, office, hotel room, or cell phone” says:

Backpage.com brings the seedy street corners of America’s red-light districts to home computers.

A classified advertising website known as “the hub” for prostitution advertising, Backpage.com serves as a virtual auction block where sex buyers can shop for human beings for sex from the privacy of their home, office, hotel room, or cell phone. Many of those bought and sold via the website are sexually trafficked women and children.

Reports show that Backpage facilitates this activity by editing ads to conceal the illegality of underlying criminal activity.

The page also cites a statistic from the National Center on Missing and Exploited Children that shows that 73 percent of all child sex trafficking cases it has handled involved children being sold on Backpage. That statistic comes from [testimony](#) given to the U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, Homeland Security, and Investigations by Mary Graw Leary, professor of law at Catholic University of America, Columbus School of Law .

Another study (though not cited by NCOSE) from 2014 shows that roughly 70 percent of children survivors of human trafficking were sold at one time or another on Backpage.

As proof of these claims, the NCOSE page exposing Backpage has a button with the caption, “Personal Accounts: Sold on Backpage.” Clicking that button leads to the stories of survivors of Backpage’s “adult services” business model. One story features a young woman who is identified only as “Alissa” — the street name she was sold under. Alissa is now a 24-year-old college senior planning to become a lawyer. But between 16 and 17 years old, she was the captive slave of pimps who — as mentioned above — was kept in a Manhattan building “where she had repeatedly been ordered online as if she were a pizza.” The account — which is linked from a *New York Times* article tells of a scar the young woman will always bear. That scar was inflicted by a pimp when he gouged her cheek with a potato peeler as a warning not to escape. “Like cattle owners brand their cattle,” she said, fingering her cheek, “he wanted to brand me in a way that I would never forget.”

Alissa’s pimps used Backpage to sell her to those who abused her. Her pimps are now in jail, and her anger is focused on companies, such as Backpage, which willingly facilitated her enslavement. In the article, she asks, “You can’t buy a child at Wal-Mart, can you?” and then answers her own question, saying, “No, but you can go to Backpage and buy me.”

That is one of the tamer stories. The horrors some young girls (many of them barely post-pubescent) face are hard to read. One 15-year-old girl’s story is particularly horrible because it is so normal as to represent the status quo. The story — linked from a CNN [blog post](#) — tells of the girl, who had a



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“secret, online ‘friend’ who convinced her to run away with him. That’s when the story changed from a romance story to a horror story:

The child ran away with him. In less than a week, her “friend,” a known pimp, had posted pictures of her online in Backpage.com’s adult section selling the child for sex.

“He took her and beat her into submission, raping her, and then held her in prostitution,” says Dawn, who asked we change her name to protect the family. She learned details of her daughter’s ordeal by reading the criminal complaint filed against the man, who has pleaded not guilty.

The case is being prosecuted by the office of Hennepin County Attorney Mike Freeman, who says he has several cases against men prostituting girls as young as 15.

“These pimps are pretty adroit, manipulative people ... they may take them out for an evening and at the end of the evening is sex with the pimp and subsequently these girls are in the business of prostitution.”

And the market-of-choice for these adroit pimps who enslave women and children and forcibly sell them as sexual objects was Backpage. The site’s operators routinely edited the ads to keep the language just below the threshold of illegal appearance while using code words to assist the sale of girls they knew were children. One of those code words was both dark and telling: “Amber Alert.”

Before being shuttered by authorities, Backpage enjoyed a ranking as the second largest online marketplace, with Craigslist leading the pack. Craigslist was once nearly as bad as Backpage, but removed its “Adult Services” section (which had previously been “Erotic Services”). Like Backpage, Craigslist simply moved those ads to its “dating” section, called “Casual Encounters.”

As TheNextWeb [reported](#):

Casual Encounters was also removed. But hold the applause. The shutdown wasn’t so much a conscionable decision to do what’s right, as forced action by Congress due to the newly passed — the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act.

As evidence that Craigslist did not act out of a properly re-calibrated moral compass, the article includes the notice that Craigslist ran to explain the missing “Casual Encounters” page. That notice stated:

US Congress just passed HR 1865, “FOSTA”, seeking to subject websites to criminal and civil liability when third parties (users) misuse online personals unlawfully.

Any tool or service can be misused. We can’t take such risk without jeopardizing all of our other services, so we are regrettably taking craigslist personals offline. Hopefully we can bring them back some day.

To the millions of spouses, partners, and couples who met through craigslist, we wish you every happiness.

Of course, the notice — while wishing “every happiness” to the alleged “millions” of people in successful relationships started as a result of the site — does not say anything to those whose lives were ruined — or ended — as a result of the human trafficking the site abetted. But then, “We are sorry for your mental and physical scars” and “May your souls rest in peace” doesn’t ring with the same PR spin as “We wish you every happiness.”

The seizure of Backpage will likely serve to keep Craigslist’s plans to bring its “Casual Encounters”



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(human trafficking) section “back some day” at bay.

The seizure included all of the company’s servers and equipment. As Cindy McCain, wife of Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.), told AZCentral, federal authorities “confiscated everything and shut the website down.” Also, charges have been brought against Backpage cofounder Michael Lacey.

This is a developing story and The New American will continue to keep our readers updated as it progresses.



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