



How to Spot a Sex Trafficking Victim at a Hotel

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Happens in five star hotels as well as slummy ones

As it has become clear over the last few years that sex trafficking takes place on every continent (O.K., maybe not Antarctica), approaches to defining it and ending it have changed. While there are ghastly situations in which young [girls' virginity is sold off by their debt-stricken parents in Cambodia](#), the reality is that western countries are by no means immune to the trade. [Runaways](#), [girls who have fallen for the wrong guy](#) and [naive women who have traveled from another country on the promise of a legitimate job](#) can get trapped in prostitution rings anywhere.

One front in this battle has been the hotel industry. Traffickers like to use hotels to ply their trade, since they can get in and make some money and then move on before they attract too much attention. Neighbors tend to take a dim view of brothels and report them to the authorities. "It happens in hotels that are five star hotels and it happens in the sleaziest, slummiest rent by the hour hotels," says Tammy Lee Stanoch, VP of corporate affairs for Carlson.

Perhaps because of this, some hoteliers were early activists in the anti-trafficking cause, including Marilyn Carlson Nelson, the former chairman of the chain (which owns a bunch of hotels including the Park Plaza, Country Inns and Suites and all the different types of Radisson). Initially, this was against the advice of their legal teams, who were leery of highlighting any illegal activity that was taking place within the hotels' walls, but now many hotel chains, including Hilton, have signed on to the [ECPAT Code of Conduct](#). "These women and children are being victimized in hotels, and whether they're our hotels or our competitors, we're going to take a stance on it," says Stanoch. "Hotels need to be part of the solution because unfortunately that's where many of these crimes happen."

Many hotels now train their employees to watch for red flags, and the people at Carlson agreed to share some of what they've learned.

One of the key times is at check in. Paying with cash is obviously a cause for concern, especially if the reservation was originally made with a credit card. When an older man or woman checks in with younger women who don't appear to be his or her children—they speak a different language, they're distant from him, they look dazed or afraid, or if they're made up to look older than they really are—that often means the women are not there willingly. A bunch of guys checking in with two young Latvian women alarmed [this hotel employee](#), who went called the cops on them and broke up a trafficking ring. And then there's the luggage clue; legitimate travelers usually bring a bunch of bags with them.

For hotels, the next line of defense after a vigilant front desk clerk is the in-house security team. Sometimes traffickers will check in to the room and only much later smuggle the girls and the johns into the hotel through a side door. "Very few women are being paraded by the front desk," says Stanoch. Hotels have put in very sophisticated camera equipment, but that doesn't mean they catch everything. Rooms which are being used by traffickers typically have a lot of men coming and going, and sometimes have men congregating outside the door, in the lobby or in the parking lot.

FBI San Antonio Special Agent Michelle Lee told local media after an undercover sting in June that traffickers often use two rooms. "One room is the working hotel room and the other room is where everyone else usually stays and they have just a few, very limited belongings." Stanoch notes that the hotel staff moves pretty fast, once their suspicions have been raised. "This isn't something we wait on," says Stanoch, about how bringing in law enforcement. "It all happens very quickly."

The hotel housekeepers are key players here too, since traffickers tend to decline cleaning services for days on end. They're also less likely to tidy up, so the housekeeping staff may find large amounts of condoms and lubricant when they do get in to the room. (Stanoch says people who are having consensual sex generally tend to be neater with their paraphernalia. Who knew?) Cleaners are also trained to watch out for a large number of computers or cell phones in a room. And then there's porn. If one room is watching an unusual amount of porn on their hotel TV, that can trigger suspicions especially if it happens in tandem with other signs of trafficking. Not always, of course. "We are very sensitive to our guest's privacy," says Stanoch. "If something

is suspicious in the guest room, in addition to indicators like a room that has been paid for in cash or multiple men coming and going, this may be cause for concern.”

Checking on the contents of another traveler’s room (or their TV habits) is of course frowned upon for regular guests, but there are things any traveler can watch out for: if you’re checking in or in the lobby, do the women being checked in have their own credit cards and forms of identification? Do they look to be in good health? Do they seem disoriented or disheveled? Are their “boyfriends” significantly older? Do the men seem to be preventing the women from moving about freely? There have even been reports of some women having tattoos that mark ownership.

If you’re on the same floor as a room which seems to have a lot of men hanging around outside, or a constant stream of visitors, you might want to let the hotel authorities know. Each of these symptoms on its own could have a perfectly plausible explanation, but if more than one or two of these warning flags are waving, then it might be time to tell hotel management of your concerns.

The Polaris Project, which works to combat slavery of all kinds (more people are enslaved by forced labor than the sex trade) has just released [this awesome map](#), which identifies the local trafficking-fighting agencies all over the world. But Carol Smolenski, executive director of ECPAT USA, suggests that hotel security is your first line of attack. “It does get more complicated overseas because it depends on the nationality of the perpetrator and what country you are in,” says Smolenski. “We still recommend that if people are in a hotel when they notice something wrong, they should report it to the hotel management.” And if you’re in the United States, it be worthwhile to keep this number handy, too, 1-888-373-7888, the National Human Trafficking Hotline.

Have the new guidelines many any difference? Carlson didn’t provide any numbers and some observers are dubious, but Stanoch is persuaded they have. “Since we’ve started this training, I’d say the incidence of trafficking has dropped dramatically.” Now activists want to move further upstream, fighting trafficking at the source, by supporting organizations that offer vulnerable women training and job skills.

Correction: The original version of this story misstated the title of Ms. Stanoch. She is VP of corporate affairs, not external affairs.