

ALERT TOP STORY

As sex trafficking victims face coercion, rape in illicit parlors, little is done for justice

Trafficking cases can be complex, leading some jurisdictions to take shortcuts by arresting or disciplining the women for prostitution, which experts say is punishing the victims without solving the problem.

David Heath, Lee Enterprises Public Service Journalism

Apr 30, 2025



Authorities exit the former Vegas Buffet restaurant after raiding the business as part of a labor trafficking investigation in June 2018. Charges against the four people indicted in the case were dismissed Thursday.

Staff photo

— Jerry Larson, file

The sex trafficking trade at hundreds of illicit massage parlors in the U.S. is rife with horrors — including rape — suffered by women forced to work in storefronts outnumbering some fast-food chains.

A first-of-its-kind investigation by the Lee Enterprises Public Service Journalism Team found that most states are failing to protect these vulnerable women — often foreign nationals whose lives are controlled by their employers. Few law enforcement agencies punish the owners of these illegal businesses, let alone go after the organized crime networks that many in law enforcement say are supporting the businesses, the Lee probe found.

During one raid of a massage business in Waco, Texas, Deputy Joseph Scaramucchi, then of the McLennan County sheriff's office, found 90 days' worth of surveillance video of the massages. What Scaramucchi saw on the video was horrific.

"What was very, very shocking to me was actually the amount of forcible rape that occurred, where men were chasing the women around the room, flipping them over the beds, pinning them down, and actually forcibly raping them," he said.



This van was used to transport some of the 19 workers rescued from Vegas Buffet after a raid on June 1. Two operators of the business were arrested.

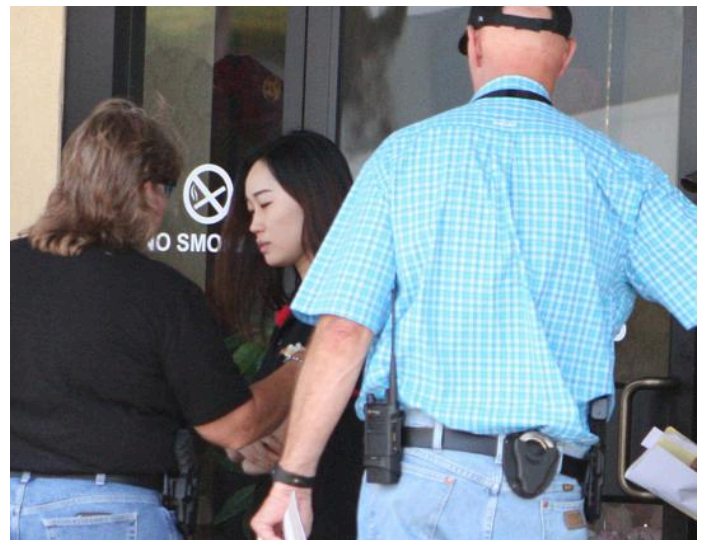
Staff photo — Jerry Larson, file

In all, he said he witnessed five rapes. Without the victims' cooperation, none of the cases were ultimately prosecuted.

Massage workers in Los Angeles and New York told academics other horror stories. One woman talked about the lack of protection when a customer assaulted her.

"The boss, a 60-year-old lady, saw it, shut the door, and left the massage parlor. ... The boss felt so scared because that guy has a gun," the woman said.

Another woman described how the owner forced her to perform acts against her will and then stole all her money.



McLennan County sheriff's deputies detain Yali Yang during a labor trafficking raid at Vegas Buffet on Friday. Authorities believe she and her husband were forcing undocumented immigrants to work at the restaurant to pay off debts to people who brought them to the country.

Staff photo — Kristin Hoppa

“He locked me in a hotel room and demanded me to provide sex service. All the money I made was confiscated [by] him. He only gave me a 3-pack of instant noodles a day. ... I was shut up in that hotel room for one week.”



McLennan County Sheriff Parnell McNamara, right, and Sgt. Joseph Scaramucci announce 17 solicitation of prostitution arrests in a recent sting operation Friday. Four of the people arrested are accused of soliciting minors.

Rod Aydelotte, Tribune-Herald

No protection

Despite the horrors these women face, few jurisdictions make protecting them a priority.

Former federal investigator Gilmer said one reason for this is that Asian women have been so sexualized in American culture. Asian women are often portrayed as submissive, exotic and hypersexualized, which fuels demand for illicit massage parlors and creates the impression that it's acceptable.

Another reason is that prosecuting owners of illicit massage parlors requires so much work.

Rochelle Keyhan used to try to do it while she worked in the district attorney's office in Philadelphia. Now she runs a nonprofit encouraging law enforcement authorities to do something about this problem. Still, she said, most jurisdictions aren't interested.

"DAs won't touch it, so it disincentivizes cops from investigating it because it's really labor-intensive compared to their other cases. And if it's not going to get prosecuted anyway, what's the point?" she said.

"A lot of these cases are too complex for most local prosecutors," says Farhad Talebi, a former prosecutor who oversaw human trafficking cases as Hawaii's deputy attorney general. "It takes too much time and effort to build a case against the top players, and they don't see it as worth it."

These cases are complex for many reasons. Chief among them is that neither the customers nor the women have much reason to cooperate with law enforcement.

Authorities in Lake County, Indiana, tried to do something after businesses started complaining about a stream of men coming in and out of neighboring massage parlors that didn't look like legitimate businesses, said county prosecutor Bernard Carter.



Police and town officials in Winfield, Indiana, closed down this massage parlor in November 2023 that prosecutors say was being used as a storefront for sex trafficking.

Marc Chase, NWI Times

"We get a lot of complaints from neighborhoods. People see the activity — men coming and going in pickup trucks, staying only a short time — but getting enough evidence to make a case is the challenge," said Carter, whose jurisdiction covers a large portion of Northwest Indiana, just south of Chicago

Lake County Deputy Prosecutor Infinity Westbrook said the men often have families and businesses and don't have their identities exposed. The women who work in these massage parlors are not American citizens and usually don't speak English. Often, the owners hold their passports.



Police and town officials in Winfield, Indiana, closed down this massage parlor in November 2023 that prosecutors say was being used as a storefront for sex trafficking.

Marc Chase, NWI Times

“They don't have passports. They don't have cars. They don't have money,” Westbrook said. “ They're living at this spa in deplorable conditions, but they think of it as they're here working and they're going to get to live in America.”

Lake County Chief Deputy Attorney Barbara McConnell said these women distrust authorities and depend on their bosses because of their tenuous immigration status.

“Sadly, in our last case ... two of them went right back to the individuals that ended up using them,” she said. “They do not see us as the ones that can help them. They're afraid of us. They don't trust us.”

Punishing the victims

Because the cases can be so complex, some jurisdictions are taking shortcuts by arresting or disciplining the women for prostitution, which experts say is punishing the victims without solving the problem.

“The issue is you're having agencies that are arresting the women,” said former deputy Joseph Scaramucci, who successfully closed down illicit massage parlors in Waco, Texas, by arresting the owners. “You could arrest them every day, different one every single day, and it's never going to stop the business. So why are we doing that? And there's really no answer for it.”

He even had a lieutenant from his police force who wanted to seize \$3,000 in cash from one woman at a parlor they raided.

“I remember, I had my phone out, I did the math real fast ... and I was like, she makes \$8 an hour. If you average it out, how the hell are you going to take this woman's money, you know? And ultimately, we didn't.”

"We did not arrest the low-hanging fruit. We arrested the owners. So we did full-on financial investigations, cyber investigations, and we found out who is ultimately making the money. And we climbed to the head of the snake and cut the head off."

That's not the approach many police departments take, however. Scaramucchi points to an arrest in April 2023 at the 5 Star Foot Massage in the suburbs of Houston. After an undercover investigation, a woman was arrested for prostitution and released on a \$100 bond, but the charges were later dismissed. A recent call revealed that the parlor continues to operate at the exact location.

The same thing happened last year in Chesterfield, Virginia. County police launched an undercover investigation that ultimately led to 21 arrests of Chinese workers at 13 massage parlors. But nearly all of the arrests were victims themselves.

Charges were either dropped or never even filed against 12 of them. Three cases are still pending, and the rest pleaded guilty to minor charges. Only one pleaded guilty to prostitution and she was fined \$100.

"Massage parlors are an atypical type of trafficking that we would normally see, especially in the commercial sex trafficking realm, in that they're very seldomly willing to come forward and talk with us," said Chesterfield County detective Jonathan Lombardo.

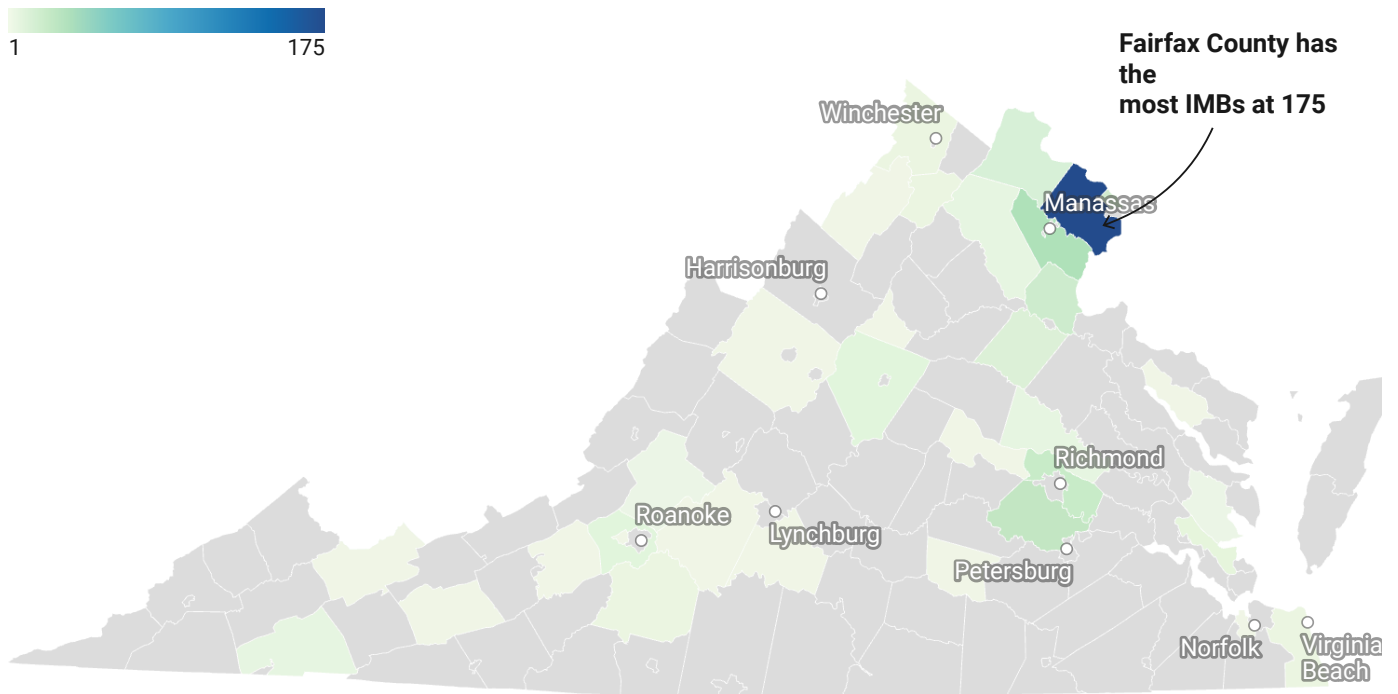


McLennan County Sheriff Parnell McNamara (left) and Detective Joseph Scaramucci (right) look over material before a press conference announcing their latest sex-buying sting.

Staff photo — Jerry Larson, file

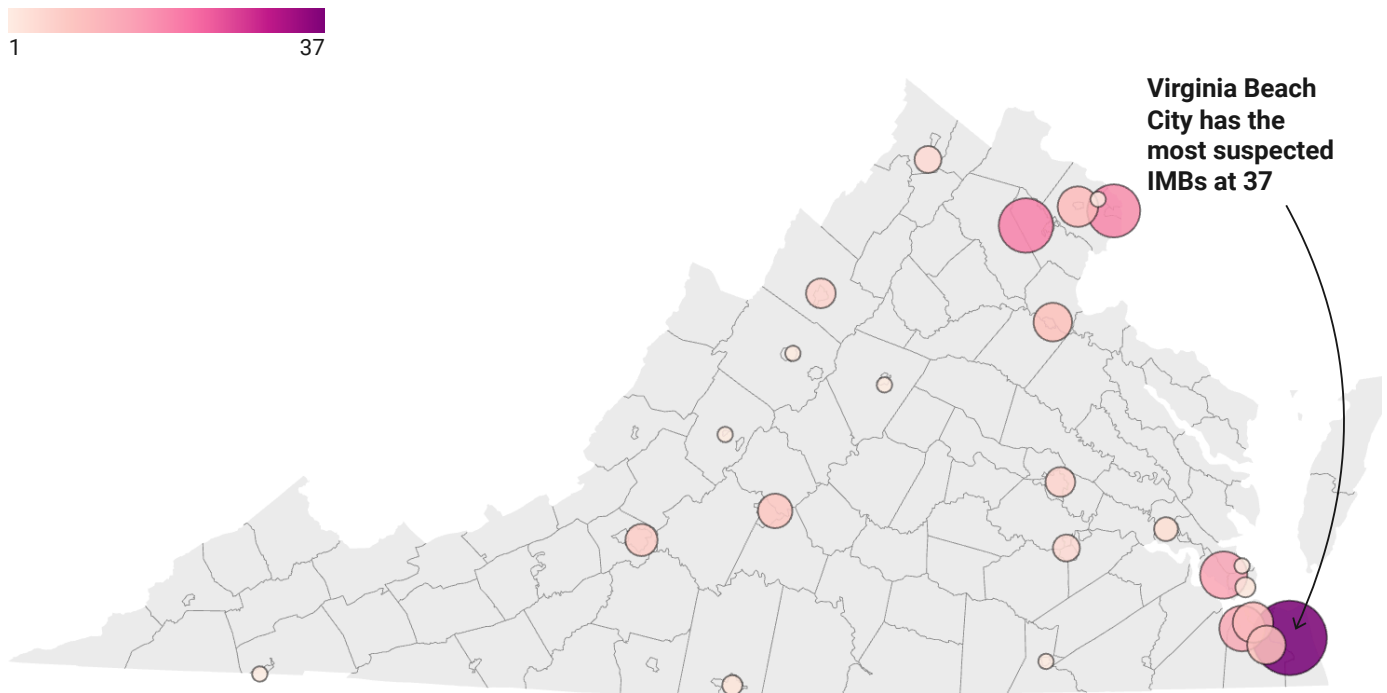
Illicit Massage Parlors in Virginia

The map below shows by county the number of massage parlors suspected of offering sex in Virginia. The data comes from The Network, a nonprofit that focuses exclusively on trying to tackle the problem of illicit massage parlors, which are linked to sex trafficking. It was derived from advertisements for erotic massages. In Virginia, Fairfax County most suspected IMBs at 175. *Note: Map does not include statistics for Virginia's city territories. See separate map for those totals.*



Illicit Massage Parlors in Virginia's cities

The map below shows by city the number of massage parlors suspected of offering sex in Virginia. The data comes from The Network, a nonprofit that focuses exclusively on trying to tackle the problem of illicit massage parlors, which are linked to sex trafficking. It was derived from advertisements for erotic massages. *Note: Map does not include statistics for Virginia's counties. See separate map for those totals.*



Map: Kia Gardner, Lee Enterprises • Source: [The Network](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

He said the options were to let the workers go or charge them, and he hoped they could get them help. The victims are referred for counseling to a program called Safe Harbor. Officials there say it's a complicated question whether arresting these women helps them.

"We really don't want the people that are getting essentially used and abused to be to get criminal records," said Anne Lee Dabney, who counsels these women in the Richmond area. "I mean, that's just not going to be helpful for them, right?"

After counseling, she said many of these women returned to Flushing, New York, or different spas and back into the control of a network of what the workers at Safe Harbor believe is organized crime.

"We have a resident therapeutic residential program for persons who've been trafficked. And so we have a house, We have a safe house, and we have a whole program, and we have never had someone from one of the spa stings say yes to that," said Cathy Easter, executive director of Safe Harbor.

Going after licensing

Another approach to shutting down illicit massage parlors is licensing. State license boards could visit massage parlors advertising on sketchy websites and shut them down if they do not adhere to state laws or regulations.

However, licensing boards are often ineffective at doling out discipline. Nearly all states allow boards to respond only to complaints rather than initiating investigations. And few states enable these boards to punish the business instead of the individual massage therapists. That means a company that is operating illegally can escape punishment, while the victims of sex trafficking may be forced to move to a new location.

It's a challenge to document how much attention boards are paying to illicit massage parlors because the records are often so sketchy. In some cases, states take action against massage therapists for not being licensed, but the records don't indicate whether they were involved in an illicit massage parlor.

State licensing boards are often criticized for lax enforcement. They tend to be made up of members of the profession they oversee. They also keep most of their investigations secret unless they take action, which happens for only a tiny fraction of the complaints.

A Lee Enterprises investigation found that many states hardly take any actions for any reason. For example, since 2019, Kentucky has only disciplined two massage therapists. Arkansas has taken action against only three. Hawaii has an estimated 154 illicit massage parlors but has only disciplined 23 massage therapists and only five for sexual misconduct. State after state took very few disciplinary actions.

In one case, a state audit was able to look behind the curtain at how ineffective its state licensing board was.

The Arizona state auditor found that its massage board sat on complaints for no apparent reason. Among the cases ignored were seven involving massage parlors allegedly engaged in prostitution. That report came from state police, who gave their information to the board in January 2020. Yet, the board failed even to investigate for more than two years. It didn't act until the state auditor raised concerns.

The board's excuse was that three massage therapists' licenses were about to expire. But that wasn't true. According to the state auditor, the first license didn't expire for 15 months. Once the audit exposed the problem, four other complaints were handled slowly. The audit also found that the board had failed to resolve 23 of 29 complaints reviewed at random, including some that involved inappropriate touching and sexual behavior.



Gov. Doug Ducey

Ross D. Franklin, Associated Press

Making matters worse, a year before the audit, Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey replaced all five board members in response to an Arizona Republic series revealing that the board failed to take action, even when customers complained of being sexually assaulted. Despite the shakeup, a recent 24-month follow-up found that the board has only implemented three of the auditor's 27 recommendations.

Lee Enterprises couldn't thoroughly analyze the Arizona board's recent actions because so many disciplinary records are missing from the official state website. Many documents tell you to contact the board's investigator, David Elson. But Elson never responded to requests to release the public records.

One example of how boards could target illicit massage parlors comes from Wilmington, Delaware. A state investigator for the Division of Professional Regulation, Tony Hernandez, made an appointment to get a massage at New Sky Spa on March 3, 2022. The division knew of reports that the spa was offering sexual services to men, and according to division records, Hernandez decided not to identify who he was.

"The investigator rang the doorbell, and a woman unlocked the door and let him in. She identified herself as "New Girl" and was attired in a top that exposed her abdomen and part of her breasts," according to Delaware's disciplinary records. "The investigator was accompanied by "New Girl" to a massage room where she touched him multiple times."

As soon as Hernandez left, three other division investigators announced they would inspect the premises. They reportedly saw a woman walk out of a massage room wearing a pink robe with nothing underneath from the waist down. They found evidence that people were living at the parlor.

The board determined that New Sky Spa had unlicensed employees, no client records, locked doors, covered windows, evidence of dormitory living, and a website listing late-night business hours. They permanently revoked the license of Ying Cui, who, according to records, owned the spa and another one. Police also arrested her, and she pleaded guilty to a felony count of promoting prostitution and criminal nuisance.

Yet, even the board in Delaware rarely takes action. Since 2019, the Delaware board has only disciplined 27 massage therapists. There are an estimated 45 illicit massage parlors currently in the state. Board spokesman Rony Baltazar declined to make anyone available for interviews. But he said the board can only respond to formal complaints.

Gold standard for enforcement?

Perhaps the gold standard for how to deal with illicit massage parlors is found in Denver. Police work with the prosecutor and policymakers to attack the problem from multiple angles.

Prosecutor Lara Mullin, who has spearheaded these efforts, realized when she first started prosecuting sex trafficking cases that traditional approaches that prosecuted women weren't working.

“Even back then, I thought, this just doesn't feel right. These women are not the ones benefiting from these enterprises, and most likely, they're being coerced, if not directly, then as part of a larger scheme.”

She decided to focus instead on going after the people exploiting these women. By following the money, tracking property ownership, and using grand jury indictments, her office has been able to dismantle trafficking rings.

One way to do that was to pass new laws requiring massage businesses to be licensed and to identify the owners. A tip from Aurora's licensing department helped Denver launch one of its most significant cases, leading to the indictment of seven Chinese nationals who were running an extensive network of illicit massage businesses and money laundering operations involving 67 bank accounts.

“We did about 130 grand jury subpoenas and warrants just to trace the money,” Mullin said. “These were incredibly sophisticated operations that were hiding in plain sight.”

The investigations have revealed a hidden world where women, primarily from China and Korea, work grueling hours, are shuffled between locations every 10 to 14 days, and live in the back rooms of businesses, surviving on tips.

She said rather than trying to prove sex trafficking, she focused instead on labor trafficking, which didn't require the women to admit to engaging in sex work.

“We started asking about labor—how many hours they worked, whether they could take breaks. It was through that lens that we saw the full scope of their exploitation.”

Building these cases is painstaking and takes about a year to complete. It involves meticulously tracking bank accounts, business ownership records, property deeds, and even energy consumption to connect illicit massage businesses with larger criminal enterprises. Some businesses were caught using sophisticated tactics, such as funneling money through marijuana grows.

“We’re talking about grand jury investigations that last for months, financial records that take forever to comb through, and surveillance that requires constant manpower,” she said.

However, she has secured 10-year prison sentences against major players.

The city has also adopted new strategies, including working with landlords and sending warning letters to property owners renting space to suspected illicit businesses. Authorities have also used fire and health codes to shut down illicit massage parlors.

“In many of these places, the women were living there, which is a violation of health and fire codes,” Mullin said. “By using those laws, we could shut businesses down faster without having to go through lengthy criminal investigations.” The goal is to disrupt the business model itself—making it too difficult, too costly, and too risky for traffickers to operate.”

The work is slow, frustrating, and resource-intensive, but in a country where more than 15,000 illicit massage parlors operate, it may be a real path to lasting change.

Up next: One police department looked to make a statement against human sex trafficking. But they mostly arrested the victims.