

Sexual Exploitation During the Pandemic

A Snapshot: April 2021



Background

Over the last year, Polaris examined data from the U.S. National Human Trafficking Hotline to determine the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on human trafficking in the United States. Daily numbers of trafficking situations in various categories in the different pre-shelter-in-place periods were compared with the post-shelter-in-place period. In addition, differences in the demographics and other characteristics of situations as well as signalers were examined (see box below).

It is important to note the limitations of this analysis. First, this is an exploration of

correlation and not causation, meaning that the findings are not proof that the changes are caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Next, the Trafficking Hotline exists to assist victims and survivors of human trafficking, and data is gathered only for the purpose of providing that assistance; therefore, every caller is not asked the exact same questions, contributing to the possible measurement variation.

This brief is the second in a planned series presenting timely analysis and evidence to guide efforts to respond to emerging needs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Time Periods

- **Pre-shelter-in-place 2019: April 1st - September 30th, 2019**
- **Pre-shelter-in-place 2020: October 1, 2019 - March 31, 2020**
- **Post-shelter-in-place 2020: April 1st - September 30th, 2020**

The analysis compares a six-month post-shelter-in-place period to two deliberately chosen pre-shelter-in-place periods, based on the orders to stay home on March 15th in San Francisco, CA. By March 30th, most states that eventually enacted a shelter in place order had done so.

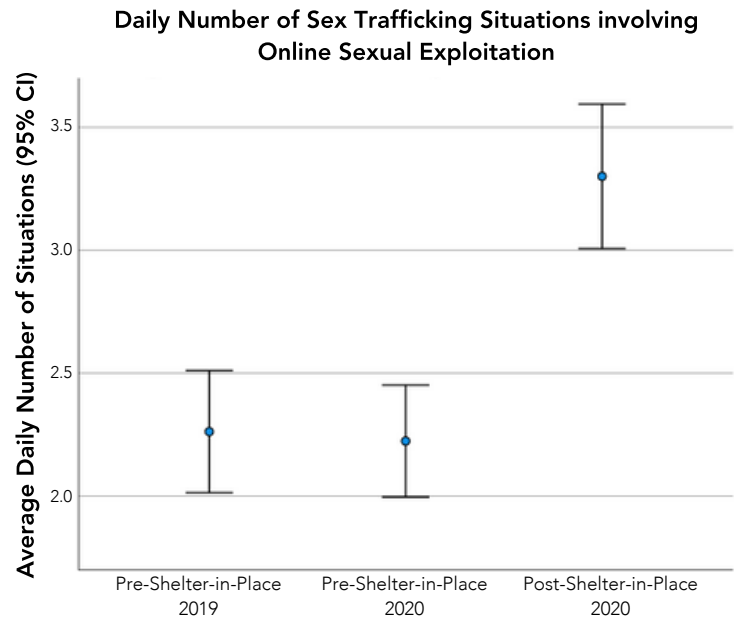
Independent sample t-tests were used to examine if differences between two time periods are likely to represent an actual difference rather than one that arose as a result of chance variations. In this analysis, significant findings were noted if differences against both time pre-shelter-in-place periods were significant at $p < 0.05$ levels (a standard level used in social science research, indicating a less than 5 percent probability that the difference is due to chance). Chi-square statistics were also used to examine for significant differences in the proportions of situations and signalers of trafficking of certain characteristics.

Findings

An examination of the number of daily situations of sex trafficking reported to the Trafficking Hotline indicates a possible shift in where likely sex trafficking involving online sexual exploitation was happening during the pandemic. This in turn highlights how traffickers quickly adapt to changing contexts and the challenges and opportunities this poses to those trying to reduce and prevent sex trafficking.

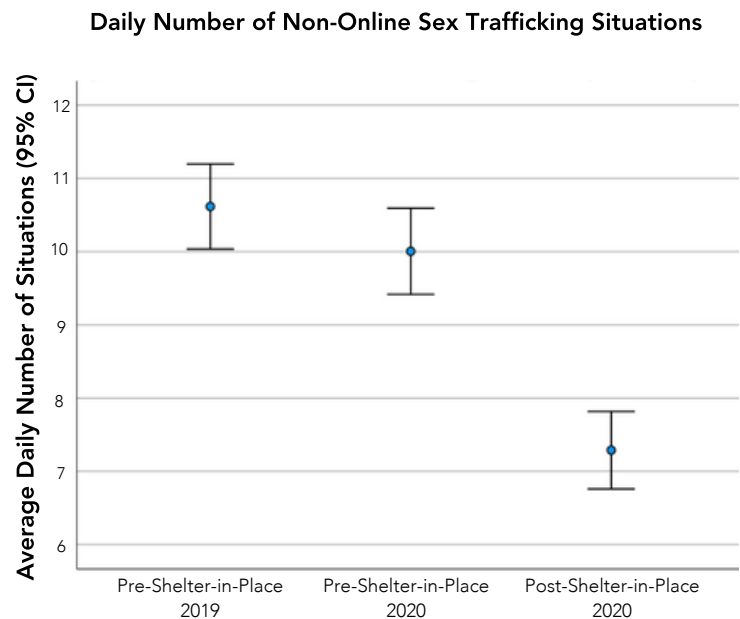
Specifically:

- During the post-shelter-in-place period, the number of online situations of sex trafficking reported to the hotline increased significantly by more than 45 percent.
- During that same period, traditional forms of commercial sex trafficking situations, such as street-based prostitution, went down by approximately 30 percent (Figures 1 and 2).



October 2019 through September 2020

Figure 1



October 2019 through September 2020

Figure 2



Sex trafficking situations involving **ONLINE EXPLOITATION** reported to the Trafficking Hotline increased from around 400 situations in both 6-month periods before the pandemic to **MORE THAN 600** during the first 6-months of the pandemic.

Why This Matters

Sex trafficking situations involving sexual exploitation on online platforms have very different profiles and implications for response. For instance, an examination of two years of data to the Trafficking Hotline shows, compared to non-online sex trafficking situations, online situations involved more minors (55% vs 24%) and more males (15 vs 7%). In addition, while a majority (70%) of the reports for non-online sex trafficking situations came from those with direct knowledge, only 50 percent of sex trafficking situations were reported by someone with direct knowledge of the situation (see Figure 3). Therefore, providing resources or referrals to victims on online platforms to facilitate their exit is a challenge. In addition, identifying the traffickers in online platforms can be especially difficult as the platforms provide them with the capabilities to hide their identities and locations. It then becomes critical for the institutions and platforms that may be unintentionally facilitating this exploitation to take part in disrupting it.

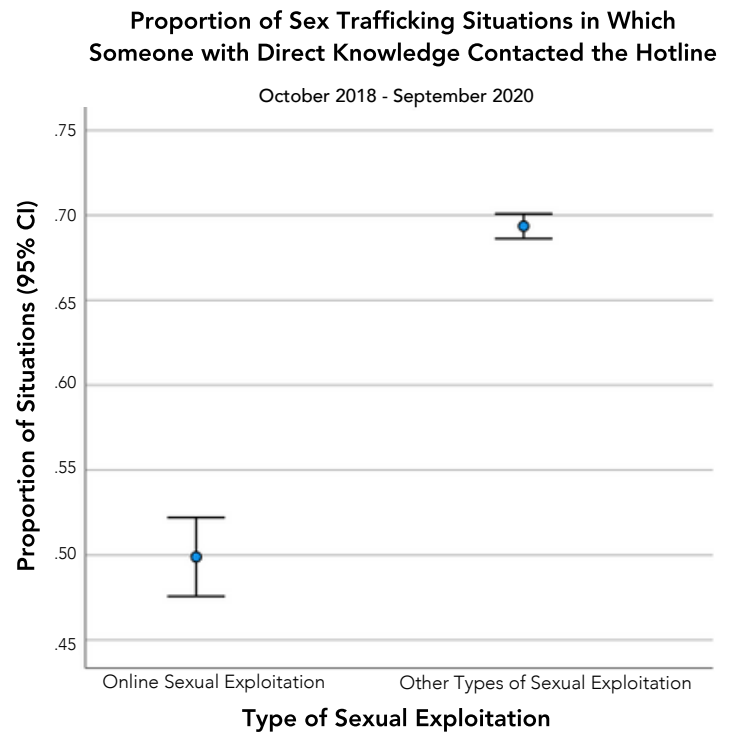


Figure 3



Call to Action

While increased use of online platforms for sexual exploitation may be related to COVID-19 restrictions, behavior change science cautions that the shift may persist in the future as both buyers and traffickers get used to it and perceive it as lower risk or easier access than in-person sexual services.¹

Financial services institutions can contribute greatly to ensure that such exploitation does not continue to thrive. Development of new financial typologies and red-flag indicators that allow the anti-money laundering (AML) community to effectively identify this activity and report it to appropriate authorities. Additionally, financial institutions which do select to bank adult entertainment platforms can play a critical role in enforcing effective standards pertaining to ID and age verification, monitoring, and response processes.

Online social media companies can also learn from these findings, with recommended

responses in three key areas:

- Instituting safeguards to block activity likely to connect with online sexual exploitation, including blocks on communication between minors and adults who have not been approved by a parent or guardian, restrictions on the use of video or image sharing through direct messages or private audiences for minors, and age verification for platforms that allow video or image sharing.
- Developing effective online sexual exploitation detection systems through analysis of communication and image or video sharing patterns, modeling potential profiles based on identified traffickers or consumers, and sharing of past perpetrator data across platforms and companies.
- Enacting victim-centered response protocols including referral to support services such as the National Human Trafficking Hotline, temporary functionality limitations related to video, image, or file sharing, and resource referral communication to likely victims and peers of victims within networks of identified potential online exploiters.

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¹ Centola, D., Becker, J., Brackbill, D., & Baronchelli, A. (2018). Experimental evidence for tipping points in social convention. *Science*, 360(6393), 1116-1119.

