

KNOW THE FACTS:

Human Trafficking Under the Guise of Massage Therapy

Human trafficking under the guise of massage therapy is an illegal industry that conceals prostitution by claiming to offer legitimate services like massage, acupuncture, and/or spa services. These brothels are amongst the most difficult to identify because they behave like legitimate business, operating within normal government and regulatory infrastructures. However, these brothels may be clearly distinguished from legitimate massage businesses as they provide commercial sex to customers whereas legitimate massage never does.

Facts about Fake Massage Establishments

- There are more than 5,000 assumed brothels disguised as businesses nationwide; there are over 50 in Chicago alone.
- These establishments claim to offer legitimate massage services, but rarely have licensed massage therapists. Instead, they primarily provide men with commercial sex.
- Brothels posing as massage establishments are frequently found operating in strip malls, office buildings, and even residential homes in urban, suburban, and rural areas. This type of exploitation occurs in all 50 US states.¹
- Johns will pay a house fee, ranging from \$60-90 per half hour plus tips for “extra services”. These potential tips are the women’s sole source of income, if allowed to keep them, so they often feel pressure to “please the customer.”²
- “Extras” are the sexual services illegally provided by the prostituted women. The types of “extras” range depending on the fake massage establishment. Most brothels present their “extras” in the form of a verbal menu with clearly defined prices, usually ranging from \$45-\$250.
- Because fake massage establishments pose as legitimate businesses, they frequently advertise through legitimate means. These might include magazines, newspapers, directories, billboards, and online communities like backpage.com and craigslist.com. There are also websites specifically

¹ Polaris Project, National Human Trafficking Resource Center. (2011). *Asian massage parlors (amps) in the united states*

² Ibid.

designed to locate and review these brothels including eroticmp.com and rubmaps.com

- Many brothels disguised as massage establishments use locks, cameras, and a buzzer system to let individuals in and out of their business. An all male clientele is another potential indicator of illicit activity.³

Characteristics of Victims

- The standard schedule for a woman in a fake massage business starts at 10 am and ends at 2 or 3 am, 7 days a week. It is estimated that the average number of men that a woman must have sex with daily ranges between 6 and 10.⁴
- Women found in these illegitimate establishments typically live on-site 24 hours a day. They are rotated between brothels every 2-3 weeks, often via cabs affiliated with the illegal industry.⁵
- Victims tend to be both documented and undocumented Asian women.⁶
- This exploitation is considered trafficking due to the force, fraud, and/or coercion that are incurred to control the women providing commercial sex. The women are often vulnerable due to existing debt and/or immigration status.
- This network of exploitation under the guise of massage therapy does not often include minors.⁷

Characteristics of Johns

- While there is no stereotypical john, johns who frequent fake massage establishments often make it a “hobby” to buy sex and to track all such brothels nationwide. They frequently refer to themselves as “hobbyists.”
- For some johns, the privacy, stability, and potential for human connection appear to be the most desirable aspects of fake massage establishments.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.