

From Speculative to Evidence-Based Interventions to Combat Sex Trafficking in the Hospitality Industry



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Introduction

In recent years, several hospitality organizations have started to disseminate speculative materials on how hoteliers can combat human trafficking. However, these training and educational programs are typically not based on empirical evidence and their reliability is unknown, if not questionable. Instead of focusing limited resources on potentially ineffective training that would likely lead to remarkably rates of false positives, hospitality leaders should consider redirecting anti-trafficking efforts toward burgeoning evidence-based interventions, such as computer vision technology [1].

Disseminating Misinformation

Hospitality leaders should be cautious about untested and speculative training programs because organizations that train the hospitality industry are known to cite misinformation. For example, on the prevalence of trafficking¹ and the average age of victims², as well as purported “red flags” of trafficking, and appearance or demographic of victims or offenders. The dissemination of misinformation results in interventions with low rates of sensitivity and specificity.

A human trafficking “red flag” training with low specificity can be criticized as being too eager to find a positive result, even when it is not present, which could result in false accusations/investigations of human trafficking against law abiding citizens.

Knee-Jerk Response to a Non-Existent Epidemic

Speculative trainings started to be increasingly disseminated among the hospitality industry in mid-2016 in response to

unsupported allegations that sex trafficking was occurring at “epidemic levels” in the hospitality industry [2]. However, available data suggests there may be much fewer incidents of trafficking in the United States than some organizations are alleging. For example, trafficking in “tourism” venues is rarely reported to the Human Trafficking. Hotline (4-12 reports per year since 2007) (Figure 1).

Speculative Interventions with Unlikely Efficacy

The reality is that the available toolkits which claim to facilitate trafficking prevention and identification in the hospitality industry are typically based on unsupported speculation and subjective belief. For instance, the Blue Campaign’s hospitality toolkit includes several “general indicators,” which at present lack any empirical support Table 1.

Ultimately, given the lack of qualitative or quantitative evidence to support the efficacy of these “indicia” and interventions, they should be applied cautiously, if at all. While these “indicia” have not been adequately empirically tested, extant reliable principles and scientific methods suggest that implementation and training of these “indicia” will have no bearing on a business’ ability to prevent, identify, or intervene against human trafficking on premises and may result in high rates of false accusations [3].

Evidence-Based Interventions

Instead of focusing on the dissemination of speculative training that has no empirical basis, hospitality leaders should explore the use of recently developed evidence-based interventions, such as computer vision and artificial intelligence to maximize the benefits of extant security cameras. According to

James Connor, Head of Corporate Engagement at Ambient.ai, AI technologies deliver “an evidence-based solution that prioritizes both security and privacy” with proactive threat identification and risk reduction.



Figure 1: Polaris National Statistics on Human Trafficking by Venue: 2023.

Table 1: Sample of Blue Campaign “Indicia” and Countervailing Information.

Applicable Staff	Blue Campaign “General Indicator”	Countervailing Information
All hotel and motel staff	Individuals have few or no personal items such as no luggage or other bags.	There is no empirical evidence to support this purported “indicium.” Publicly criticized for potentially ensnaring female travelers traveling alone, particularly for business.
Housekeeping, Maintenance, and Room Services	Refusal of cleaning services for multiple days.	There is no empirical evidence to support this purported “indicium.” Refusal of cleaning services is common, and, for disease safety, many hotels did not/do not provide it without explicit request.
Housekeeping, Maintenance, and Room Services	Smell of bodily fluids and musk.	There is no empirical evidence to support this purported “indicium.” Publicly criticized for potentially ensnaring sexual activity between consenting adults and violations of rights to privacy.
Housekeeping, Maintenance, and Room Services; as well as Concierge, Bellman, Front Desk, Security, and Valet Staff	The same person reserves multiple rooms.	There is no empirical evidence to support this purported “indicium.” Larger families with more than four people reserve multiple, adjacent rooms.
Housekeeping, Maintenance, and Room Services	Evidence of pornography.	There is no empirical evidence to support this purported “indicium.” Publicly criticized for potentially ensnaring sexual activity between consenting adults and violations of rights to privacy.
Housekeeping, Maintenance, and Room Services	Provocative clothing and shoes.	There is no empirical evidence to support this purported “indicium.” Publicly criticized for policing adult female clothing choice and violations to rights to privacy.
Housekeeping, Maintenance, and Room Services	Excessive amounts of sex paraphernalia in rooms (condoms, lubricant, lotion, etc.).	There is no empirical evidence to support this purported “indicium.” Publicly criticized for potentially ensnaring sexual activity between consenting adults and violations of rights to privacy.

Concierge, Bellman, Front Desk, Security, and Valet Staff	Room paid for with cash or pre-loaded credit card.	There is no empirical evidence to suggest that paying cash for a room is a reliable indicium of trafficking. Moreover, this is a common need for homeless populations, as well as for survivors of domestic violence and other people in need of emergency and temporary housing. Claiming that "accepting cash" is an indication of human trafficking is not only unsupported by empirical research, but suggests an elitist, unreliable, and subjective perception of reality. Denying rooms for homeless populations, simply due to mode of payment, can have legal repercussions.
Concierge, Bellman, Front Desk, Security, and Valet Staff	Individuals leave the room infrequently, not at all, or at odd hours.	There is no empirical evidence to support this purported "indiciu."

Essentially, companies like Ambiet.ai continuously mine security cameras for safety threats and can automate alerts to management, private security companies, and/or law enforcement. For example, outdoor cameras can detect the presence of a firearm and alert staff before it even reaches the inside of a building [4].

Conclusion

For anti-trafficking efforts to be effective in preventing crimes and facilitating identification and intervention of offenders and victims, it is imperative to place resources with evidence-based interventions instead of speculative programs, which lack any empirical basis.

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