

The Post Crescent

The Unspoken Truth: Sex Trafficking in Rural America

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This previous November, [Ghislaina Maxwell offered her deposition](#) regarding the international sex trafficking ring led by Jeffrey Epstein. This high profile case resonated throughout the United States, drawing the attention of Americans across the country. The Epstein and Maxwell case acts as a stand-in for what most Americans picture sex trafficking to be. However, sex trafficking rarely takes this form and has a complicated history in the United States. Its modern prevalence in rural America forces us to examine its role in history and the long lasting effects it has had on the United States.

Modern day sex trafficking has evolved from a long history of sexual exploitation and removal of bodily autonomy from its victims, particularly women of color. Its roots can be traced back to the forced prostitution of enslaved women, in what historian [Stephanie E. Jones-Rogers](#) labels as “negro brothels.” White women played an integral role in the commodification of black women, and while the narrative at the time focused solely on the victimization of white women by black men, it is important to note the unimaginable horrors faced by black women at the hands of white men and women.

The Page Act of 1875 marked a new era in the United States where the federal government took action to codify stereotypes about Asian women under the guise of addressing prostitution, both forced or otherwise. It prohibited “[the importation into the United States of women for the purposes of prostitution](#)” by “[any subject of China, Japan, or any Oriental country](#).” The Page Act solidified American’s sexualization of Asian women without providing any real protections for the victims of sex trafficking even though, as Nicole Bromfield explains in [her article in Affilia](#), the most likely victims of sex trafficking at this time were women of color and predominately Asian women.

As [Nicole Bromfield](#) details, most narratives surrounding sex trafficking in the late 19th and early 20th centuries suggested it was young, white, European women who were assumed to be trafficked, often from rural to urban areas. The assumption was these girls were taken from rural America and brought to its cities by “[Eastern European Jews, Chinese immigrants, Italians ... or African American men](#).” Rural America was used as a picture of peace and innocence, and the

narrative surrounding sex trafficking was often used to keep rural women from breaking social norms and [seeking opportunities in larger cities](#).

During this same time period, the Progressive Era took hold of the United States, sparking social movements throughout the nation. While many of these movements resulted in positive outcomes, like women's suffrage, others had devastating effects in the search for real progress. The Mann Act of 1910 was the first major piece of federal legislation that sought to address sex trafficking in the United States. Prohibiting the transportation of any individual that would "engage in prostitution, or in any sexual activity for which any person can be charged with a criminal offense," [the Mann Act](#) and the Progressive Era focused on codifying accepted morals instead of offering protections to the Americans who needed it the most. As discussed by [David Langum in his book on the Mann Act](#), this piece of legislation was put in place solely to codify morality instead of addressing the systemic issues, specifically the lack of bodily autonomy women had. The movement that pushed for the end to "white slavery" sent an exclusionary message, suggesting that the only victims of sex trafficking were white, leaving out groups of people in their entirety and solidifying stereotypes and myths.

These myths suggesting that sex trafficking only occurs in urban areas persist to the modern day. In their article in [Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal](#), Elizabeth Perkins and Carey Ruiz perform interviews of forty young women in a rural, southern state who were found in the sex trafficking industry. They found that approximately sixty percent of these young women were from rural jurisdictions, pointing to the inaccuracy of the belief of sex trafficking being a problem relegated to our major cities. Jennifer Cole and Ginny Sprang found similar trends in their article in [Child Abuse and Neglect](#), as they studied the responses of professionals in various communities on their understanding of sex trafficking. They found that law enforcement officers and other professionals of rural communities often had less of an understanding of the laws and statutes regarding sex trafficking in comparison with those stationed in metropolitan areas.

The United States has a long history of sex trafficking and the institution of racial stereotypes and gendered myths has only furthered the crisis we now face as a nation. Throughout history, the sole focus of social movements was on large urban centers, not on rural America. Unfortunately, there is not enough research done on the demographics of the victims of sex trafficking in American history to determine its prevalence in the rural parts of the United States. However, the sole focus on urban areas in the history of sex trafficking limits our ability to fully understand its prevalence in today's society. In modern day, sex trafficking looks much different with [technology](#) allowing this crime to affect every small community in the United States. If our nation is to deal with the problem at hand, it is vital we understand the history of sex trafficking in America and the implications it has for our future.

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