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‘Every Parent’s Nightmare’



[Nicholas Kristof](#) MARCH 10, 2016

We as a society derided the Roman Catholic Church as an accessory to child sexual abuse, and we lambasted Penn State for similar offenses.

Yet we as a society are complicit or passive in a similar way, by allowing a popular website called Backpage.com to be used to arrange child rape. Consider what happened to a girl I’ll call Natalie, who was trafficked into the sex industry in Seattle at age 15.

“It was every parent’s nightmare,” Natalie’s mother, Nacole, told me. “It can happen to any parent. Fifteen-year-olds don’t make the best choices. I dropped her off at school in the morning, I was expecting to pick her up after track practice in the afternoon, and then I didn’t see her for 108 days.” The girl ran off to a bus station, was found by a pimp, and within days was being sold for sex on Backpage.

Backpage has classified ads for everything from antiques to boats, but it makes its money on escort ads. It has about 80 percent of the U.S. market for online sex ads in America, mostly for consenting adults but many also for women who are forcibly trafficked or for underage girls. Children in at least 47 states have been sold on Backpage, by one aid group’s count.

“We were an everyday, average family,” Nacole said. “Our children were involved in sports. She played the violin. She was on the soccer team. And she made a stupid decision one day that forever changed her life. And Backpage facilitated it.”

The girl was eventually rescued by the police, but by then she had been beaten and threatened by her pimp and endured innumerable rapes. “She’s forever changed,” her mom said. “Her siblings are forever changed. Today she struggles with life.”

If there were a major American website openly selling heroin or anthrax, there would be an outcry. Yet we Americans tolerate a site like Backpage.com that is regularly used to peddle children. We avert our eyes, and the topic tends not to come up in polite society.

“I had no idea how much juvenile trafficking goes on until my family became a victim of it,” Nacole said.

Thousands of children are trafficked for sex each year in the United States, but there are no solid numbers. What is clear is only that it’s a big problem that gets minimal attention; it’s essentially never mentioned in the current political campaign.

Yet a few forces are coming together to put pressure on Backpage. One is a [lawsuit](#) in Washington State against Backpage by Natalie and two other girls who at age 13 were also sold on the website; one of the 13-year-olds said that she was raped 20 times a day.

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Another is decisive action by credit card companies to [stop processing fees](#) for sex ads on Backpage, disrupting its business model.

Then there is the prospect that the Senate this month will adopt a [Contempt of Congress resolution](#), the first by the Senate in 21 years ([the last](#) involved the Whitewater investigation), and this time it’s bipartisan and the target is Backpage. The aim is to force Backpage to comply with subpoenas from the Senate’s Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which is [looking into the company’s role](#) in sex trafficking.

Senator Rob Portman, the Ohio Republican who leads the panel, told me that he expects the Senate to vote next week on the resolution and he doesn’t know of anyone planning to vote against it.

At a time when Congress seems gridlocked and dysfunctional, it’s nice to see the Senate moving in a bipartisan way to address an issue that affects America’s most vulnerable.

The subcommittee has already uncovered disturbing information about Backpage, including the way it edits ads to reduce law enforcement scrutiny and does not retain photo data that could be used to find missing children. And Senate investigators uncovered an instruction to the Backpage staff that seemed to suggest erring on the side of letting girls be sold: “only delete [ads] if you really very sure person is underage.”

The Senate panel found that Backpage was worth hundreds of millions of dollars and in 2014 had an Ebitda margin, a measure of profitability, of 82 percent, compared with an average of 9.3 percent for online services companies.

Yiota Souras of the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#) notes that the issue is not adult prostitution or sex among consenting adults: “That’s totally removed from what we’re focusing on here, which is children sold to be raped.”

Whatever we think about the presidential race, whatever our political party, we should be able to agree to act to stop the exploitation of children. It’s wrong when the Catholic Church hierarchy

looks the other way, when Penn State averts its eyes, and also when we as a society do the same thing.

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