



## CASE STUDY

# Combatting Human Trafficking During Large Scale Sporting Events



Large scale sporting events bring visitors from across the world together and create an atmosphere of excitement and camaraderie amongst fans.

These events also bring threat actors from across the globe, looking to use the anonymity of the event for illicit activities. These sporting events have become a magnet for human traffickers, looking to exploit young and vulnerable victims. The 2021 Super Bowl brought record numbers of fans to Florida. The event also attracted human traffickers looking to take advantage of some of the most vulnerable in the city and surrounding areas.

## SPORTING EVENTS: HUMAN TRAFFICKER'S GAME DAY

This case study will provide background on one human trafficking case that occurred during the 2021 Super Bowl and how open-source intelligence (OSINT) was leveraged to understand the breadth and network of one human trafficking network. This investigation began with the name of a person charged with human trafficking, obtained from publicly available information on the Hillsborough County Sheriff's website and through the news media's coverage of the case<sup>1</sup>. Cobwebs' OSINT platform was used to work the case to help uncover possible accomplices and additional victims. Our tool provided the digital intelligence needed to uncover the true network of illicit activity before and during the Super Bowl.

## UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN TRAFFICKING "TEAM"

Online human trafficking investigations often start with a name or an online profile. In this case, the investigation started with the arrestee's name, to uncover a nickname/pseudonym and associated online accounts, which led to the identification of a potential sex trafficking victim. Using the Cobwebs' platform, analysts identified additional online accounts and photos that appeared to be older than the suspect. However, when reviewing the online footprint of this individual, it appeared to be of the same person. Further, an image from this account on a business card had the name of the suspect on it, confirming his identity. After finding and connecting the arrestee to the pseudonym, analysts began to dig deeper using our solution to uncover additional online accounts, leading to searches on deep web platforms. Analysts could see where illicit activities took place leading up to the Super Bowl via these accounts. This type of wide scope analysis is critical to see activity, associates, and locations to begin understanding the reach of the human trafficking network.



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wbtw.com/news/super-bowl-human-trafficking-bust-nets-over-70-arrests-florida-sheriff-says>



## CALLING PLAYS: COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Analyzing online ‘conversations’ is another critical piece to understanding human trafficking patterns, connections, and activities. Since much of the communication related to human trafficking is done through emojis, gifs, images and code words, investigators and analysts must be educated and familiar with such online terminology to perform online research effectively. In this case, analysts leveraged built-in human trafficking-specific dictionaries into the search to expedite and prioritize critical pieces of information found online. Using our automated AI tool, they scanned online text and imagery quickly to also find other pieces of information tied to this person online. This furthered their understanding of his online communication patterns and also strengthened his connection to human trafficking activities. That information was pieced together with other online activity to show communication through various platforms indicating human trafficking activity.

## USING ONLINE PLATFORMS: A HUMAN TRAFFICKER’S PLAYBOOK

Making connections between online accounts is another critical piece to uncovering human trafficking rings. While networks may be vast and tangled, investigators must be able to get to a potential core network to quickly focus on a few key players. This online network analysis may also bring forward unknown victims’ online presence to help identify them and free them from human trafficking. It also showed how a variety of platforms and methods are exploited to keep this illicit activity from discovery. In this case, analysis of the subject’s online network brought forward two additional potential victims. Online advertisements were also uncovered indicating human trafficking tied to both these potential victims as well as the subject.

To stay anonymous, these victims used pseudonyms to advertise their services online. Analysts were able to quickly search the web to find online evidence to help identify them. In this case, analysts found an obituary that had been shared by one potential victim. The names from this obituary were queried through our tool, helping analysts to discover family members, leading the real identity of the victim. Photos from the pseudonym profile advertising prostitution were compared to photos found through other online platforms. Photos also showed the victim in the pseudonym account wearing the same outfit as a photo in the other online account, strengthening the connection that it was the same person. This real identity was searched again, and her Florida arrest records were discovered. By marrying the two accounts together and cross-checking photos discovered online with Florida public records, identities were confirmed to bring another potential victim forward to authorities.



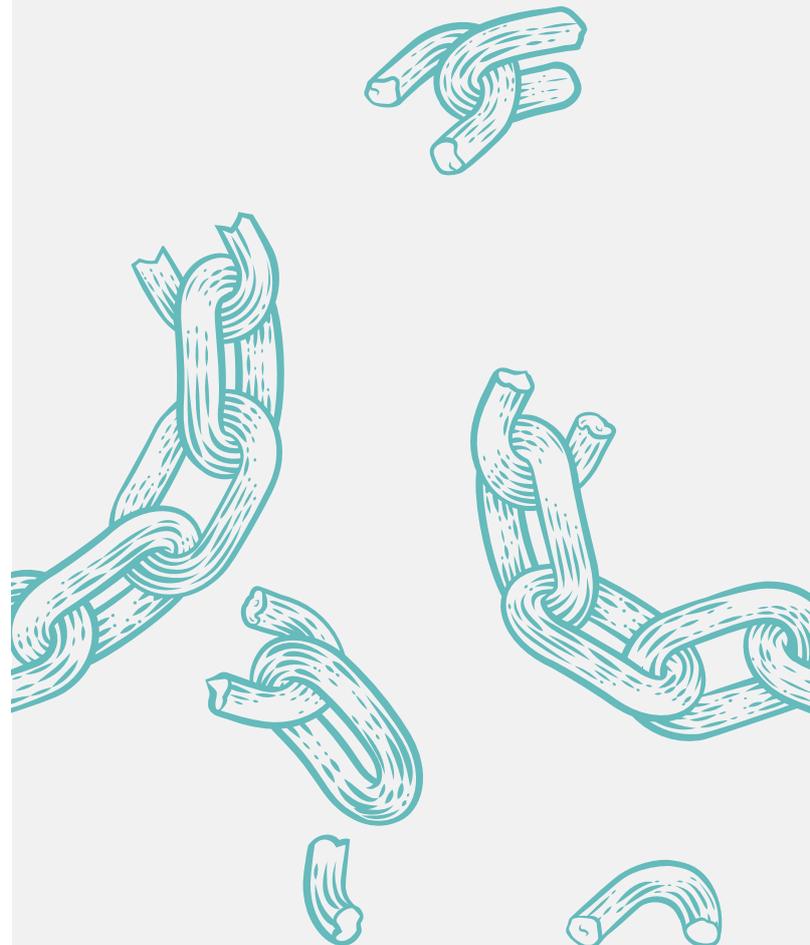
## MARCHING DOWN THE FIELD: HUMAN TRAFFICKING PATTERNS COME TO LIGHT

Human traffickers are mobile, exploiting the transient culture of major metropolitan areas throughout the world. To identify additional victims, other contacts in trafficking network and routine patterns of activity, analysts and investigators need automated tools to identify these movement patterns across the web. In this case, analysts were able to identify the movement patterns of the subject online to tie him to locations and people online. Through this analysis, the subject and victims were identified together at locations, further strengthening their connection to the human trafficking ring.

**The U.S. National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) reported a 98.66 percent increase in online enticement reports between January and September 2020 compared to the same period in 2019, and reports to their CyberTipline doubled to 1.6 million.<sup>2</sup>**

## THE WINNING PLAY: STOPPING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

This case scratches the surface of human trafficking around large-scale sporting events. Any time thousands of people come together for an annual event like the Super Bowl, there is an opportunity for exploitation. This case highlights how our solution mined and analyzed digital media to find and identify victims in this human trafficking case. It also emphasizes the need for an automated, AI-powered tool to examine the various platforms and online sites used by human traffickers to advertise and exploit their victims. Finally, it shows how vast the Internet is and why an automated tool is needed to sift through 'noise' to identify victims to help free them from the bonds of human trafficking.



<sup>2</sup> [TIPR-GPA-upload-07222021.pdf \(state.gov\)](#)

## ABOUT COBWEBS TECHNOLOGIES

Cobwebs Technologies is a worldwide leader in web intelligence. Our innovative solutions are tailored to the operational needs of national security agencies and the private sector.

Cobwebs' solutions were designed by our intelligence and security experts as vital tools for the collection and analysis of data from all web layers: social media and the open, deep, and dark web. Our web intelligence platform monitors these vast sources of data to reveal hidden leads and generate insights.

Our exclusive technology extracts targeted intelligence from big data using the latest machine learning algorithms, automatically generating intelligent insights.

We offer innovative, cutting-edge systems to national security agencies and private sectors, as our solutions pinpoint web relations, criminal activities, and terrorist threats with the click of a button.

Working with clients worldwide, Cobwebs assists them with investigations and analysis of targeted data with a range of products, from robust, end-to-end solutions, to professional services and detailed analyst reports.



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