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The Oregonian and Village Voice Media help to de-sensationalize a story

By Lauren Kirchner

In early 2009, the FBI organized a nationwide sting operation to rescue victims of sex trafficking and arrest their pimps. Shockingly, idyllic Portland, Oregon, yielded the second highest number of arrests and underage victims in the country. The outcry from Portland law enforcement, politicians, and women's and children's advocacy groups was swift and loud. Mayor Sam Adams often said that Portland police saw an average of two cases of child sex trafficking each week. Various factors were blamed in the city-wide dialogue: the local government's lax regulation of strip clubs attracted both prostitutes and johns; Portland's location along a Northwest highway corridor made traffickers' jobs easy.

So in January 2010, when reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones was working the weekend shift at *The Oregonian*, and was assigned to cover the second annual Northwest Conference Against Human Trafficking, she quickly wrote a six-hundred-word **story**. HUMAN TRAFFICKING INDUSTRY THRIVES IN PORTLAND METRO AREA, the headline read.

Portland's stigma as a "hub" for forced prostitution soon began to receive national attention. Senator Ron Wyden had just introduced a bill to send more funding to Portland law enforcement and to build shelters for trafficking victims. HDNet aired a melodramatic but thinly sourced **episode** of *Dan Rather Reports* called "Pornland, Oregon," in which Rather highlighted the irony that "one of the country's most liveable cities" had such a seedy underbelly. Over shots of Portland's railroads, ports, and highways, Rather's voiceover intoned, "Easy transit means easy trafficking, as girls are moved from place to place to keep up with growing demand." ABC's *World News with Diane Sawyer* and *Nightline* produced similar stories. The city's reputation had all but solidified.

On the occasion of the next annual conference, Hannah-Jones decided to write a more in-depth piece on the issue. When she started digging, though, she soon found an even bigger story: none of it was true.

The FBI told Hannah-Jones that the number of underage prostitutes found in Portland during the 2009 sting (seven) was never meant to be used for city-to-city comparisons. Stings could last a month in some cities and one night in others—the result was a snapshot, not a scientific

study. The supervisor of the Portland police sex-crimes unit told her that the mayor's two-arrests-weekly figure was false.

National statistics used by local advocates and politicians were merely estimates, or otherwise faulty; the "200,000 to 300,000 US youth" figure cited to quantify the child sex trade was taken from an academic study whose author stressed to Hannah-Jones that it was a wild guess, extrapolated from interviews with a few hundred teens. Worse, it actually referred to those who were "at risk of sexual exploitation," which included a wide range of crimes, such as molestation by family members. And as for the "transit hub" explanation: well, what major city isn't easily accessible by highway and train?

In short, every single statistic that advocates and politicians had used to justify Portland's label as a "hub" of child sex trafficking fell apart under Hannah-Jones's scrutiny. *The Oregonian* printed **the story** on its front page on January 14, 2011, with the headline **STORY OF 'PORNLAND' IS A MYTH**.

Hannah-Jones's editor, Michelle Brence, says she is embarrassed to admit that *The Oregonian* had previously relayed the advocates' statistics. "We had to note in our own stories that we had been among the culprits, reporting some of the bad information," says Brence. But, she says, it was important to correct the record—and the organizations with so much federal funding at stake weren't going to do that.

"The truth is the truth," Hannah-Jones says. "Just because it's a story that pulls on our heartstrings, we can't use false data to draw money into the county. You can't do that."

For Hannah-Jones's thorough and even-handed effort to de-sensationalize this story, *The Oregonian* gets a **LAUREL**.

Village Voice Media, too, refused to let statistics on underage prostitution go unexamined—although in VVM's case, the story hit a little closer to home. VVM-owned Backpage.com, a classified-ad website with an adult-services section, has long been a target of an advocacy organization called the Women's Funding Network. Last fall, WFN released a study that found that in just six months in 2010, the number of underage girls trafficked through such sites had exploded.

WFN's spokeswoman told Congress that the number of victims in New York had increased by 20.7 percent; in Minnesota, the increase was "a staggering 64.7 percent." These very scientific-sounding statistics were dutifully reported in **a wide array of news outlets**, including *The Dallas Morning News*, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Minnesota Public Radio, and *USA Today*.

City Pages staff writer Nick Pinto's **LAUREL**-worthy exposé "**Weird Science**," published in March across the entire VVM chain, revealed that the researchers behind the widely-cited data

had calculated the number of trafficking victims by first counting online adult-services ads, and then simply guessing at the ages of the girls in the pictures used to advertise those services. And that was about it.

“It was absolutely farcical,” says VVM executive editor Michael Lacey. And any reporter “would not have had to be a statistician” to recognize that the methodology was laughably flawed—if, that is, they had bothered to ask.