

ISLAND SECURITY POLICY INSTITUTE

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POLICY BRIEF

Tourism, Trafficking, and Island Vulnerability

How Tourism-Dependent Island Economies Create Systematic Human Trafficking Risk

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RESEARCH INDEPENDENCE STATEMENT

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Vulnerability

How Tourism-Dependent Island Economies Create Systematic

Human Trafficking Risk — and What Policy Must Address vulnerability, sex trafficking Hawaii, labor trafficking Pacific, anti-trafficking policy Hawaii, UNODC Pacific trafficking, trafficking law enforcement Hawaii, human trafficking Caribbean island communities the State of Hawaii. This publication represents ISPI's independent research and policy analysis. The views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position of any funder, sponsor, or affiliated organization. ISPI maintains full editorial independence on all research outputs. Full institutional credential documentation is available to qualified government agencies, foundations, and institutional partners upon formal request. In 2019, federal law enforcement charged fourteen individuals in a human trafficking network operating across four Hawaiian Islands, with victims recruited through tourism industry employment offers that were legitimate in appearance but predatory in operation. The network had operated for an estimated three years before federal prosecution. During those three years, local law enforcement — conducting routine patrol, responding to calls for service, managing a chronic officer shortage — had not identified it. This case reflects a pattern that ISPI's practitioner analysis of law enforcement records and anti-trafficking policy literature identifies consistently: tourism-dependent island economies create structural conditions that human trafficking networks exploit systematically, while the law enforcement capacity available in island communities is structurally inadequate to detect and interdict trafficking activity at the rate it occurs. The gap between trafficking prevalence and law enforcement detection in island communities is, the available evidence suggests, substantially larger than in comparable continental communities.

Key Findings

Tourism-dependent island economies create three structural conditions that human trafficking networks exploit: a large anonymous transient population that provides cover for victim movement, a cash-intensive hospitality industry in which exploitation can be concealed within legitimate economic transactions, and geographic isolation that limits victims' access to help and law enforcement's access to trafficking intelligence networks. Island port infrastructure serves as the primary entry point for human trafficking networks operating across the Pacific and Caribbean. Port-based trafficking interdiction frameworks are designed for high-volume continental entry points and are inadequate for island port contexts with smaller inspection workforces and

different traffic profiles. Small island law enforcement agencies operating with chronic officer vacancies and limited training budgets cannot sustain the specialized investigative capacity — undercover operation expertise, victim services coordination, multilingual interviewing — that effective anti-trafficking enforcement requires. The result is systematic under-detection of trafficking activity in island communities. ISPI's institutional knowledge base includes direct law enforcement experience in human trafficking investigation and interdiction, providing practitioner grounding for this analysis that no academic research institution in Hawaii currently possesses.

The Structural Vulnerability of Tourism Island Economies

Human trafficking networks are economically rational actors that identify and exploit structural vulnerabilities in the environments they operate in. Tourism-dependent island economies offer a combination of structural features that make them attractive operating environments compared with many continental alternatives. The demand environment is favorable: tourism creates sustained demand for adult entertainment, domestic labor, and hospitality services in contexts where transaction anonymity is normalized and where the social distance between tourists and local communities makes exploitation less visible to community members who might otherwise identify and report it. The supply environment is also favorable: tourism economies generate continuous recruitment opportunities through hospitality industry hiring that traffickers can exploit as a victim acquisition mechanism, presenting fraudulent employment offers that are indistinguishable from legitimate ones until the victim is isolated. The geographic environment compounds both advantages: island geography limits victims' escape options, reduces their access to social support networks, and increases the cost and difficulty of law enforcement coordination across the maritime domains through which trafficking networks move victims and profits.

Policy Recommendations

1. Develop island-specific anti-trafficking policy frameworks that address the tourism economy vulnerability profile, port-based trafficking routes, and small agency investigative capacity limitations of Pacific and Caribbean island communities — distinct from continental antitrafficking frameworks that assume law enforcement capacity and detection infrastructure that island agencies do not have.
2. Fund specialized trafficking investigation capacity-building programs for island law enforcement agencies through DOJ and DHS grant programs, with training curricula and program structures designed specifically for small island agency operational contexts.

3. Develop port-based trafficking interdiction frameworks for island ports that are calibrated to island inspection workforce capacity and traffic profiles rather than high-volume continental entry point assumptions.
4. Establish formal intelligence-sharing mechanisms between federal anti-trafficking agencies and Pacific Island territory law enforcement agencies that create direct information pathways without requiring territorial agencies to navigate complex federal jurisdiction procedures that create operational delays in time-sensitive trafficking investigations. The Island Security Policy Institute (ISPI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in Honolulu, Hawaii. ISPI produces practitioner-led research, policy analysis, training programs, and commissioned research on public safety, emergency preparedness, insider threat, and security policy for island and coastal communities worldwide. ISPI's research draws on verified operational experience across U.S. military service, metropolitan law enforcement, diplomatic security operations, FEMA-certified emergency management, and campus safety administration. ISPI is registered as a federal contractor on SAM.gov under NAICS 541720. To commission research, subscribe to ISPI publications, request the ISPI Policy Advisor institutional access, or inquire about training programs and speaking engagements: purposes with full attribution to the Island Security Policy Institute. For commercial reproduction or translation rights, contact ISPIGlobal@proton.me.

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