

Most of What You Think You Know About Sex Trafficking Isn't True

By Amanda Hess



Previous research on sex work “paints a skewed picture of the complex environment of prostitution,” researchers write in a new study.

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When Dr. Anthony Marcus, chair of the anthropology department at New York’s John Jay College of Criminal Justice, kicked off a massive study of underage sex work in America in 2008, finding interview subjects was easy. Marcus and his team of researchers met minors working as prostitutes in

New York City, then gave each of them three coupons they could redeem for \$10 if they brought back more teens for interviews. Soon, their network grew large enough that they had reached their goal of interviewing 300 minors working in the city, the largest data set of its kind. But as soon as they moved the operation to Atlantic City, N.J.—a much smaller venue, but one that they’d heard had an “epidemic” of commercial sexual exploitation of children—the coupon system fizzled out. Underage sex workers in Atlantic City were almost impossible to find.



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Unable to find their subjects, the researchers reached out to members of the city’s anti-trafficking task force—including local social workers, law enforcement officials, and religious leaders—for leads. At night, they sat on cinder blocks on the boardwalk with cartons of cigarettes, handing out coupons and sharing smokes with street hustlers and drug dealers. One researcher moved into Atlantic City’s boarding houses to get closer to the market. But when they could only locate a handful of minors to interview, members of the anti-trafficking task force advised Marcus and his team that the underage sex market was “hidden” in the city. “Researchers like you will never gain their trust,” one member told them. “They all hide under the boardwalk, and none of the girls will be brave enough to talk to you. If they do, their pimps will cut their faces, and it will be your fault.” An FBI agent admonished the researchers that they were “too academic to do this study” and needed to talk in “police television slang” in order to win their trust.

Eventually, some members of the task force admitted that they had little personal interaction with underage sex workers themselves. “It soon became clear that as researchers staying up all night on Pacific Avenue we knew it better than they did, since they all lived in the suburbs and rarely saw Pacific Avenue after 5 p.m.,” Marcus and his co-author, John Jay anthropology professor Ric Curtis, wrote in an article on the experience last year. Finally, they raised the age limit of interviewees to 24 and conducted additional interviews with local pimps, drug dealers, customers, and business people to get a more comprehensive understanding of Atlantic City’s market. What they found was that the narrative of commercial sexual exploitation of children (or CSEC) they had been sold by local activists—one where knife-wielding pimps lure girls into prostitution then brutalize them into compliance—existed in only rare cases and didn’t describe most people’s experiences.

In the resulting study, “Conflict and Agency Among Sex Workers and Pimps,” released in this May’s *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Marcus and Curtis (along with researchers Amber Horning, Jo Sanson, and Efram Thompson) interviewed a total of 372 sex workers (262 of whom were minors and 70 who had previously worked as minors) to present a more complicated idea of how the market for underage sex work functions, one that some well-meaning activists—and legislation like the Trafficking Victims’ Protection Act, which seeks to prosecute pimps to save underage sex workers—may not fully understand. Previous research in the area, much of which relied on interviews with a handful of underage sex workers who turn up in rescue institutions, rehabilitation programs, or in jail, “paints a skewed picture of the complex environment of prostitution,” they

wrote. Really, “stereotypical pimps are far less common and important to street sex markets than would be expected.” In their sample, only 14 percent of female underage sex workers in New York City (and 6 percent of the males) had a pimp. Some testified that they had recruited their friends and boyfriends to help them with their business. And “all sex workers in both Atlantic City and New York City described experiencing increasing, rather than decreasing, agency and control over their work over time.” Many of the girls and boys they interviewed “had left pimps because they were violent, mentally abusive, lazy, poor business associates, unable to protect them, extracting too much money, or no longer fun to be around,” sometimes within days or weeks of meeting. One 17-year-old sex worker in New York says her boyfriend tricked her into sex work at the age of 12. But he’s not the one keeping her on the street—she left him and began working independently less than a year later. Another 17-year-old sex worker in Atlantic City says that she was initiated into sex work by a pimp, but dropped him after her first gig. “I’d rather work for myself,” she told them. “It’s more money.”

Pimps, too, failed to fit the stereotypical mold. “We were told pimps were not approachable because they were too dangerous and didn’t want to talk,” Marcus told me. “But all they wanted to do was talk, talk, talk—that’s what they do for a living.” Many pimps referred the researchers to their sex workers if they approached them in the right way, no cuts on the face required. (In addition to interviewing pimps in Atlantic City, the researchers spoke with 85 male pimps working in New York.) One pimp told them that going after underage girls constituted “pimp suicide,” not because it makes pimps vulnerable to harsh anti-trafficking laws, but because “teenage prostitutes don’t earn enough money,” Marcus says. In Atlantic City, they found, “those who first entered when over 18 years of age reported being approached by a pimp at nearly twice the rate of those whose entry occurred when they were minors.” And while some pimps boasted about exerting control over “their” sex workers, the women working with them told a different story. One sex worker named Diamond says that she had led her pimp to believe that he had initiated her into sex work, though she had been working for some time. She did it in order to hold up her pimp’s “narrative of hypermasculine enticement and feminine vulnerability,” as the researchers put it. Says Marcus: “It’s like when you listen to couples debating about who made the move on who.”

The image of the pimp who uses violence to keep unwilling sex workers on the street is real: One 14-year-old girl in New York told researchers that a pimp raped her after she attempted to leave; another told the story of her mother’s ex-boyfriend, who started pimping her out at age 11, and now tracks her down whenever she tries to run away. And even in the more common situations, when the pimp was either nonexistent or not such a menace, the sex workers weren’t exactly in optimal situations. “We did not encounter one [sex trafficking victim] who came to engage in sex work out of what one might call a fully realized choice: in every case their agency was constrained,” the researchers found. But “in very few of these cases was a ‘trafficker’ responsible for that constraint.” Rather, “it was a complex set of life crises or near-crisis points that compelled them into the sex trade.” Most of the underage sex workers they spoke with said their “biggest dangers” came from “customers, homelessness and drug addiction, rather than pimp-traffickers.” Eighty-seven percent of underage sex workers in New York they spoke to said they wanted to quit; most didn’t work with pimps.

Marcus and his colleagues conclude that the laws, like the Trafficking Victims’ Protection Act, that focus on nabbing the pimps and have led to

“decriminalization of minors involved in sex work” are “wholly positive.” But “the logical premise of victimhood upon which this decriminalization rests is too narrowly construed to adequately respond to the realities these minors confront.” In other words, prosecuting pimps will only help a slim minority of underage girls and boys who turn to sex work.

Lucy Berliner, director of the University of Washington’s Harborview Center for Sexual Assault and Traumatic Stress, told me that she thinks Marcus’ work is “a valuable contribution” to the issue because it shows that “there’s a huge amount of variability under the umbrella of one named problem. Kids who are controlled by these brutal pimps are not the most common,” she said. But to her, the numbers game doesn’t obviate the need for the criminal justice system to go after the pimps who do participate in underage sex work: “Prosecute the heck out of them,” she said. “These are people who literally sell children’s bodies for money. That, in my mind, is a very heinous crime.” Valiant Richey, who has prosecuted pimps in King County, Wash., concurs. “The bottom line is: It doesn’t matter whether the pimp has forced somebody into it,” he told me. The reason, Richey says, is because “any time you have a situation where a juvenile is engaged in prostitution and an adult is helping her do it and profiting from it, you are talking about a situation that is inherently exploitive.” Prosecuting a pimp may not have “a measurable impact” on the wider sex trade, Richey says, but “it’s obviously extremely helpful in aiding the victim of that pimp. That cannot be overstated.”

Still, Berliner says, the pimp-focused approach will fail to reach the vast majority of underage sex workers who want to leave but have no adult forcing them to stay. “We haven’t really nailed down what works to get these kids back in the mainstream,” she says. “Many of them are quite disaffected. They’ve been thrown away by their families. The street has become a life they can negotiate relatively well. They’re not banging on our doors.”