

Las Vegas Sun

J. Patrick Coolican:

# Time for real conversation about prostitution

By [J. Patrick Coolican](#) ([contact](#))

Monday, Jan. 2, 2012 | 2 a.m.

Like much else in Las Vegas, we treat prostitution with a wink and a nod. Although our police agencies fight it with varying degrees of success, our culture is so nonchalant about it that the rest of the country thinks it's legal here.

We seem to collectively believe it belongs in our libertarian pantheon of guns, gambling and 24-hour access to alcohol and, to a lesser extent, other intoxicants, especially on the Strip. What a person does with his body and mind, the thinking goes, is his (or her) business.

But we need to educate ourselves about prostitution, and if we do, I think we'll re-evaluate our stance toward it.

As my former colleague Abigail Goldman [reported in 2009](#), [“Vice detectives will tell you \(that\) behind every prostitute is a pimp. These relationships are by nature coercive, and these coercions are often cemented with violence.”](#) In other words, we're not talking about a victimless crime, about two consenting adults, because one of those adults is often a prisoner to a violent pimp. He gives her food, clothing, a roof over head, and that's it.

Metro Police has changed its focus from prostitutes to pimps — the crime is called “pandering” — in an attempt to get to the source of the problem. But it's a Sisyphean task because of the combination of demand — thousands of men with money who come here for business or leisure every few days — and the perception that prostitution is an accepted — or at least tolerated — activity in Las Vegas.

A few people are trying to change that perception. I recently attended a screening at UNLV of the documentary “Sex + Money: A National Search for Human Worth,” which shows the darkness of the American sex trade.

Although the film draws attention to this problem, as a documentary it's a self-indulgent failure. Note to the filmmakers: It's not about you. Get the camera off yourselves and stop talking. At one point, we listen to one of the filmmakers say, “I'm in crisis mode now. I don't know how to channel my anger.” You're in crisis? No, you're not in crisis. The women held captive are in crisis.

In another moment of epic solipsism, the filmmakers are at a lodge at Mount Charleston discussing their new feelings about prostitution. I tried to count how many times in a minute they used the word “like,” valley girl-style,

but lost count.

(I feel almost rude raising these issues, but I'm compelled to because it reflects a broader trend in documentary filmmaking, in which the ethos of reality television has infected everything like a virus.)

A question-and-answer session after the screening, however, was very valuable. Alexis Kennedy, a UNLV forensic psychologist who specializes in this issue, said the violence she sees among survivors is "unbelievable" and that "a blind eye is being turned" to the suffering caused by the sex trade.

Christopher Baughman, a member of Metro's Pandering Investigation Team, offered a sobering portrait of what he believes is a burgeoning problem. He said criminals have considered costs and benefits and determined that the sex trade offers more money for less risk than dealing guns or drugs.

How so? A bag of drugs can be sold just once; a prostitute, many times. Moreover, women are often reluctant to testify, and for good reason. They live in fear of their pimps. Finally, even if Baughman can make these tough cases, the penalty is just four years maximum, or five years if violence was used to coerce the victim into submission.

Think about that. You terrorize and enslave me, and the penalty is four or five years max? Contrast that with much longer sentences for major drug trafficking, and you can see how our city might be flooded with pimps.

The next Legislature needs to fix this by making it easier to develop cases and by increasing penalties.

As for legalization and regulation? Baughman says he doesn't believe this would solve the problem of pimps using violence to control prostitutes, even if the women were in a legal brothel.

We need to have a communitywide conversation about prostitution and the damage it inflicts. Let's start now.

© [Las Vegas Sun](#), 2012, All Rights Reserved. [Job openings](#). Published since 1950. [Contact us](#) to report news, errors or for advertising opportunities.