

The Naked Anthropologist · No, Virginia, This is not a study of The Underground Commercial Sex Economy | The Naked Anthropologist

lauraagustin.com

In the last couple of weeks, on twitter, I tore into a piece of research funded by the US National Institute of Justice entitled Estimating the Size and Structure of the Underground Commercial Sex Economy in Eight Major US Cities. During that time every media outlet in the world reproduced the claimed findings as if they were facts, despite how ridiculous most of them are. I made a few punchy points in an interview:

Q+A: Why Pimps Can't Be Trusted to Talk About Sex Economics

Lauretta Charlton, *Complex City Guide*, 17 March 2014

Last week, the Urban Institute released a landmark study called Estimating the Size and Structure of the Underground Commercial Sex Economy in Eight Major US Cities. Its abstract states that “the underground commercial sex economy (UCSE) generates millions of dollars annually, yet investigation and data collection remain under resourced.”

The Institute's research was focused on gathering information about the sex economy based on evidence in eight major cities across the US. The research relied heavily on interviews with pimps, traffickers, sex workers, child pornographers, and police. According to a quick recap of the study on the Urban Institute's website, the major findings include:

- Pimps claimed inaccuracy in media portrayals.
- Pimps manipulate women into sex work.
- Women, family, and friends facilitate entry into sex work.
- Unexpected parties benefit from the commercial sex economy.
- The Internet is changing the limitations of the trade.
- Child pornography is escalating.
- The underground sex economy is perceived as low risk.

But critics say that the study is misleading and intentionally biased. It's an oversimplification of what researchers like Laura Agustín, also known as the Naked Anthropologist, argue is a very complicated system. *City Guide* asked Agustín a few questions via email hoping to get a clearer picture.

In your words, how has this study misrepresented sex workers in America?

LA: It's not a study about sex workers at all but rather an attempt to view particular sex economies through the highly limited lens offered by of convicted 'pimps'. The study was designed in a way that assured bias from the start. Women who sell sex are seen as objects manipulated by Bad Men. There's next to no information about sex workers.

The interview subjects were mostly black/minorities. How is this reflection of continued racism in America?

LA: Again, the bias was guaranteed when researchers chose to centre pimps, but the only pimps they could conveniently interview are incarcerated. Black men predominate in prisons and predominate in the kind of pimping researchers know about, so the study reproduces the usual racist idea that black men pimp white women. This then is made to seem to be the most important aspect of the sex industry, which is laughable.

How have reports of the study misconstrued the real issues at hand?

LA: Media reports uncritically accept and focus on the numbers provided in this study: which city has the biggest sex or drugs economy, how much money pimps earn. I haven't seen any reporter ask why researchers accepted prisoners' stories as fact. All interview research has to factor in the possibility that subjects lie; in this case that factor is very big indeed as prisoners can be expected to brag about their exploits.

Do you believe the issues of race and sex work are mutually exclusive?

LA: I'm not sure what you mean. People the world over take up sex work for thousands of reasons and are pulled into or attracted to it by their positions vis-à-vis class, race, ethnicity, gender. No single condition decrees how a sex worker will fare; to understand any individual you need to listen to their story.

Analyze this quote from the study, "They have a saying in the pimp game, 'If it ain't white, it ain't right. If it ain't snowing, I ain't going.'"

LA: Analyse? I'd say that's a typical cocky man's comment aimed at showing how in-control he is. Perhaps a black man said it to a white woman? In which case he was 'snowing' her.

Next *Huffington Post Live* did a brief show with four panelists using Google Hangout. The technology allows participants to interact verbally, but there's no eye contact, which limits things. This was called Understanding The Modern Sex Work Industry

Most of the critical commentary after this event centred on Dennis Hof's screwy comments about unregulated sex workers' having AIDS and being sex-trafficked, as he single-mindedly promotes the model of commercial sex he understands – his own Nevada brothels. More to the point, the show was meant to be about the Urban Institute study, but I doubt Hof ever even looked at it. This meant the already brief show lost focus. Still, because of twitter this small critique took place, which is a good thing.

Someone would have to pay me to write up a real critique of the Urban Institute study. The bottom line is researchers were funded by a crime-oriented agency to confirm everything the US government already does. Even sell-out researchers could not find the kind of horrible connexions between sex-drugs-weapons they wanted, but they admitted the possibility that things *could be much worse* than study shows (the Weapons of Mass Destruction ploy). I can imagine the study's results leading to proposal for national-US antiprostitution law – 'to facilitate policing'. Here's a selection of tweets from 12-20 March 2014 (from @LauraAcustia). More like

pimping . Here's a selection of tweets from 12-20 March 2014 (from @Ludicr0us). More the raw data, in no special order, hashtags removed.

“Estimating the Size and Structure of the Underground Commercial Sex Economy in 8 Major US Cities” Ludicrously banal Urban Institute report on US sex economy is obsessed with pimps. In fact the report is about pimping, not the sex industry, not sexwork This will become the Bible for End Demand. pimps are their sole interest. Today news items worldwide shout about a badly biased US govt-funded study of pimping. Bad Men- what everyone loves Headlines include “US pimps can pull in \$33 000 a week” & “Street Gangs Deeply Involved In Commercial Sex Trade”. No sexworkers visible. “Commercial sex trade widely segmented, the report found” Really? They call this study a first but it's the last to say the most basic stuff. “The focus is through the lens of imprisoned pimps & traffickers & those who put them behind bars” Barefaced bias that should be dismissed. Study= “Insights from local/federal law enforcement, prosecutors, former sexworkers, convicted pimps/sextraffickers & child pornographers” Urban Institute study chapter on 36 sexworkers limited to arrested women but also only street-based, for Extra Bias. Miami pimps network but mostly work independently, are not highly organized & not linked w weapons/drugs, ie no weapons of mass destruction UI finds brothels operated by individuals & families not large criminal networks in MIAMI, where they scream about foreign sextrafficking. Total sexworkers in UI study= 36 & that was 0 in Miami, San Diego, Kansas City. Limiting interview subjects to arrested/convicted senseless UI study could not find *10* sexworkers in each city. Why? They had to be arrested & jailed or in Diversion Programs. Outrageous bias. Biased UI sex economy study *failed to find* organized crime but notes police still suspect it. Because Weapons of Mass Destruction. No principled research *centres* interview material w prisoners & presents as numerical & other DATA. Urban Institute study ludicrously bad. I'm gobsmacked Dank claims this study as “the first scientifically rigorous estimates of the size of the underground commercial sex economy” Dank dimly thinks covering sexworkers isn't about business: “Little is known about how the sex trade operates from a business perspective” Researcher for the pimp-biased study backpedals now, claiming a whole chapter devoted to sexworkers – 36 of them Govt-funded study made sexworkers inanimate objects under male control & headline writers are glad to continue the theme. Uncritical media. Wouldn't stand up to ethical or any other review. the idea of doing underground economies through talking to prison inmates! d/n/say researchers shouldn't talk to convicted pimps as interesting small group. But 'sex industry' research that centres them? Ludicrous US antiprostitution study's pretense at 'data' reminds me most of the Weapons of Mass Destruction fiasco. Trumped-up excuse for war. I'm sure some interviews w pimps were informative. But as DATA on business & money? A few guys' claims w no evidence taken as fact? Absurd. Anti-prostitution folks always dismiss sexworker accounts of not being exploited, citing false consciousness, coercion. Why believe pimps? Interviewing as research method is always open to possibility subjects lie, for different reasons. Why believe 100% convicted pimp talk?? This study goes beyond my wildest dreams of what US government would do to push its war on prostitution. very instructive Whoa, look at this methodology ‘We used logistic regression to estimate propensity to travel of each pimp (the mass of the pimp, effect of distance on pimps' decision to travel, and the residual appeal of each city)’ Today's news on the most biased sex-industry report ever begins with “US sextrade nears \$1 billion annually”. Because a few pimps said so. Researchers had no idea how to meet & talk to people selling sex now without 'pimps', whether they are happy or not. Glaring inept omission I can see the govt-funded pimp-centred studv leading to proposal for a national antiprostitution law in the US. ‘To facilitate policino’ US-

govt research into sex economies “also examined the use of child pornography”. What does that have to do with commercial sex, again? Sex Trafficking The New Generation: US-govt-funded study points right at psychobabbling repression of Project ROSE. There’ll be more of this 49% of pimps use Internet ads = researchers talked to 51% that don’t use Internet = lower-end street bias expected from convicted men. BIAS. “49% of pimps reported using Internet ads to attract business” This does not mean 49% of Internet ads were placed by pimps. “A 22-yr-old white woman logs into her boss’s webpage & updates her profile” This is how they study sexworkers? Bias=There’s always a boss. “New Study Sheds Light on Local Sex Trafficking Industry” Changing focus to sextrafficking, that’s right, that’s what it’s all about. “Mobile prostitution” said to be “where a pimp has a small number of women on a circuit.” No women travel on their own, no mobile sexwork. “Interviewed said prefer to employ white women bec...they’re who clients typically want & easier to manage” Implication? Black men=pimps. Oh, so lots of black men were convicted for pimping in Atlanta? Let’s make that clear: “These girls, they don’t get no cut or anything,” Urban Institute flashy story on research makes racist bias clear: Guess who the convicted men they talked to are? “The study did not differentiate between forced & unforced prostitution”. It just failed to study the unforced kind. Shameful research. Mind-boggling what UI reports as if wondrous new information! “Pimps reported travelling to recruit new employees...as “fresh faces” Oh look a NEW bias, age: 13 sexworkers of 36 “traded sex in the 1970s-80s” So 13 older workers are used to give historical depth? Most incorrect headline so far: “Lives of American sexworkers revealed in unprecedented study” South China scores. “At least 1/4 we interviewed had a strict rule not to use drugs bec it ‘ruined the merchandise’” Otherwise all sexworkers wd be druggies? Plus they also interviewed 33 “child pornographers”. What that means or how it’s related is beyond me. Researcher nuances: “While many pimps would not admit to using physical force, psychological coercion plays a huge role.” All power to men. “While much research sextrafficking has focused on victims & sexworkers this provides insight into how pimps & traffickers operate.” WHAT? No one will believe this but UI researchers claim focus on street-based sexworkers & their drug use is new & original. Bare-faced spin What bias is: Choosing sites to study where you know beforehand you’ll have subjects that confirm your suppositions. Giveaway: “Study focused on 8 cities...to show regional diversity & because of...availability of enough convicted pimps & sextraffickers.” Another source of bias: Choosing sites where MORE men have been convicted may only reflect more vigorous policing in those places. Fail. Study foments dumb competition amongst US cities: Which is Worst? Atlanta for sex? Dallas for drugs & guns? Absurd. Clear where the sexindustry belongs according to US govt: alongside weapons & drugs. Criminal acts, no sexworkers. “Pimps find prostitutes from their friend groups” So no one decides to sell sex on their own – sexworkers invisible Making pimps the centre of things justifies more money to catch/punish them & keep the status quo where women are collateral damage in a war Answer to why convicted pimps are source of data on sexwork is US govt is working to make Bad Men the centre of every sex-industry story. Prices charged for sexwork according to pimps. Why are convicted men the source for data not sexworkers? Senseless. They mention ‘freelance prostitution’ but that presumably stays put, never travels. Appalling absence re mobility. “Mobile prostitution...where a pimp has women on a circuit advertising online in advance of arrival” So that’s no independent sexworkers. “3-4 women working together for a pimp may see 100 men each on Sunday, bringing in collectively \$12-16,000 in 1 day” According to guess who? “Narratives/data collected for this report not possible w/o cooperation of key players & facilitators in underground commercial sex economy approached... We wd like to thank them for

speaking so candidly about the crimes that led to their arrest & conviction”So the Urban Institute thank convicted criminals for helping w research whilst omitting sexworkers & other sex-industry participants. Wow.

My twitter ID is @LauraAgustin

–*Laura Agustín, the Naked Anthropologist*

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“Anti-prostitution folks always dismiss sexworker accounts of not being exploited, citing false consciousness, coercion. Why believe pimps?”

Hah!

—

“3-4 women working together for a pimp may see 100 men each on Sunday”

100 men per sex worker in a day? If they had a 16 hour workday, that’d be 9.6 minutes per man. Heck, if it were a 24 hour workday, that’d be 14.4 minutes per man, non-stop, like a sexual assembly line. This seems... unlikely.

Reply

1. on

Ha yes, someone else tweeted that craziness so I didn’t have to!

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 **Sex of the Mexicano: Migration, Labour Markets and the Peculiar Industriousness**



Sex at the Margins. Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry was published by Zed Books in 2007 and is now available from **Amazon on Kindle & as Audiobook** as well as paper. The book has been reviewed many times.

Laura Agustín – **The Naked Anthropologist** – is author of *Sex at the Margins*. A lifelong migrant, she spoke at the BBC World Debate as *International Expert on Trafficking*, invented the term Rescue Industry and was expert witness for Julian Assange. Read more

- I've been doing some renovation here on the website. No new look, but some structural features Google is said to like. When I first set the site up in 2008 (thanks to Texas Golden Girl for all the Las Vegas coffee dates) there were not 800 000 websites blathering on about sex trafficking, so when [...]
- You can now watch sessions from the University of Texas at Austin November 22-24 conference on Sexual Citizenship and Human Rights: What Can the US Learn from the EU and European Law? The panel called Sex Work, Migration and Trafficking was held on the 23rd, where my original talk was called 'Contentious and contradictory: Prostitution-law campaigns [...]
- Year beginning, low light and infantilising coverage of women combine to make me feel a bit lost for words but full of desire to publish pictures that resist the miserablism. Some of the women portrayed are probably offering sex for sale, but be careful about stereotyping when you imagine which ones they are. The exercise [...]
- *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry* was published by Zed Books in London in 2007 and is distributed in the US through Palgrave Macmillan. I blog often about issues covered in the book, and many of my published articles are available on this website, but to get the full picture, [...]
- At a conference on Sexual Citizenship and Human Rights the other week, I binned the talk I had prepared and instead gave a version of *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*. It turned out both the other speakers on the panel were to address trafficking, one as a straightforward Rescue-Industry member, [...]
- See this perfectly ordinary building? Most sex is sold here, out of conventional flats and apartments, anywhere in the world. The photos of women on the street beloved of dull editors teach that sex work is in the street, and the other photos editors use, of women sitting on barstools, teach that whatever's not in [...]
- Social work, whether voluntary or paid, rests on an assumption that people with problems can be helped by outsiders who provide services that facilitate solutions. Hands predominate in icons used on social-work websites: holding hands, piles of hands, hands of different shapes and colours. I suppose these are meant to signify working together – mutuality [...]

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