

Lies, damned lies and sex work statistics

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A sex worker who goes by the name "Violet," poses for a picture at a bus stop as a bystander waits for a bus in downtown San Francisco in 2008. (AP Photo/Darryl Bush)

Imagine a study of the alcohol industry which interviewed not a single brewer, wine expert, liquor store owner or drinker, but instead relied solely on the statements of ATF agents, dry-county politicians and members of Alcoholics Anonymous and Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Or how about a report on restaurants which treated the opinions of failed hot dog stand operators as the basis for broad statements about every kind of food business from convenience stores to food trucks to McDonald's to five-star restaurants?

You'd probably surmise that this sort of research would be biased and one-sided to the point of unreliable. And you'd be correct. But change the topic to sex work, and such methods are not only the norm, they're accepted uncritically by the media and the majority of those who the resulting studies. In fact, many of those who represent themselves as sex work researchers don't even *try* to get good data. They simply present their opinions as fact, occasionally bolstered by pseudo-studies designed to produce pre-determined results. Well-known and easily-contacted sex workers are rarely consulted. There's no peer review.

And when sex workers are consulted at all, they're recruited from jails and substance abuse programs, resulting in a sample skewed heavily toward the desperate, the disadvantaged and the marginalized.

This sort of statistical malpractice has always been typical of prostitution research. But the incentive to produce it has dramatically increased in the past decade, thanks to a media-fueled moral panic over sex trafficking. Sex-work prohibitionists have long seen trafficking and sex slavery as a useful Trojan horse. In its 2010 "national action plan," for example, the activist group Demand Abolition writes, "Framing the Campaign's key target as sexual slavery might garner more support and less resistance, while framing the Campaign as combating prostitution may be less likely to mobilize similar levels of support and to stimulate stronger opposition."

But as sex worker rights organizations have repeatedly pointed out (as have organizations like UNAIDS, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International), those who are truly interested in decreasing exploitation in the sex industry would be better off supporting decriminalization of prostitution. New South Wales, Australia, decriminalized sex work in 1995, and a subsequent government-sponsored 2012 study found ". . . no evidence of recent trafficking of female sex workers . . . in marked contrast to the 1990s when contacted women from Thailand were common in Sydney . . ."

New Zealand legalized prostitution in 2003. A study by the New Zealand Ministry of Justice five years later found "no incidence of trafficking," and sex worker advocates say the law has made it

easier for sex workers to report abuse, and for law enforcement to make arrests for crimes against sex workers. Some anti-prostitution activists have tried to claim that Germany's liberal form of legalization has encouraged sex trafficking. But they actually cite coercion among *illegal* sex workers (for example, those who are too young to legally work at a German brothel) and claim that their exploitation had somehow been caused by the legal framework from which those women had been excluded.

Despite plenty of evidence of the harm caused by criminalization, there's still a tremendous amount of money in representing it as the "cure" for a situation it actually exacerbates. In an interview last May, Michael Horowitz, a fellow at the conservative Hudson Institute who led efforts to pass the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, told the Las Vegas Review Journal that the anti-trafficking movement has become more about securing grants for research than protecting victims. "Now it's just one big federal entitlement program," he said, "and everybody is more worried about where they're going to get their next grant."

Most of the scary articles about sex trafficking are larded with inflated figures and phony statistics that don't survive any serious analysis. For example, you will often read that the average sex worker enters the trade at 13, a mathematical impossibility which appears to have originated as a misrepresentation of the average age of first *noncommercial* sexual contact (which could include kissing, petting, etc.) reported by *underage* girls in one 1982 study as though it were the age they first reported selling sex. The actual average age at which they began prostitution was 16. And though the number was already dubious when applied to underage prostitutes, it became wholly ludicrous when applied to all sex workers.

Because prostitution is illegal in most of the world, the most reliable data on the proportion of sex workers that are underage will come from places where the industry is legal and it can be studied openly, like New Zealand. And there, estimates put the figure at about 3.5%.

Another common claim is that there are 100,000 to 300,000 children locked in sex slavery in the U.S. (For just a few examples, see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).) That number is a distortion of a figure from a 2001 study by Richard Estes and Neil Weiner of the University of Pennsylvania, which estimated that number of "children, adolescents and youth (up to 21) **at risk** of sexual **exploitation**." (Emphasis added.) "Sex trafficking" was the *least* prevalent form of "exploitation" in their definition. Other forms included stripping, consensual homosexual relations, and merely *viewing* porn. Moreover, two of the so-called "risk factors" were access to a car and proximity to the Canadian or Mexican border. In a 2011 interview, Estes himself estimated the number of legal minors actually abducted into "sex slavery" was "very small . . . {w}e're talking about a few hundred people."

Yet the myth persists. The Dallas Morning News recently took the figure to new levels of preposterousness, claiming in an editorial last November that, "In Houston alone, about 300,000 sex trafficking cases are prosecuted each year." As defense attorney Mark Bennett pointed out on his blog, the actual figure was two. Not 200,000. Just two. The paper did print a correction, though the correction simply deleted the original 300,000 figure from the editorial. The paper still

didn't bother to mention the actual number, perhaps it didn't support the alarmism in the rest of the editorial.

And the distortions go on.

- A mistaken, offhand guess by a panelist at symposium that sex trafficking might be the third most profitable underground industry gets repurposed as proven fact. Later, it's changed to the second most profitable black market, then the first.
- A highly flawed, anecdote-ridden feature in the New York Times Magazine that heavily relied on activist sources is repeated as gospel.
- A 2004 study of street sex workers who had been murdered found that the average age of the victims was 34. This has since been cited as the average life expectancy of *all* street workers, or of all sex workers. That would be analogous to saying that because the average soldier who is killed in battle is 21 years old, the average man who joins the military dies at 21. (Newsweek made this mistake in its sensationalist 2011 article "The John Next Door," and never bothered to correct it.)

One of the more comical incidents occurred in 2011, when an activist group called the Women's Funding Network put out a study alleging that ads for underage sex trafficking on websites like Craigslist and Backpage.com had "risen exponentially in three diverse states." The claim was picked up by media outlets across the country, including USA Today, the Houston Chronicle, the Miami Herald, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, and the Detroit Free Press. The Village Voice, which owns Backpage.com, took a look at the methodology, a term that flatters what the study's authors actually did. They merely asked a small sample group of people to *guess* the age of women pictured in ads for escort and erotic massage services. They then just assumed that the guesses were correct, and extrapolated the percentage of "underage" women in their sample set of photos were indicative of online sex ads in general.

Not surprisingly, none authors of the "study" were credentialed academics. Still, it inspired not only a wave of media coverage, but outrage from state attorneys general and members of Congress, and promises for new laws. The activists knew exactly what they were doing. As the director of the group that conducted the study told the Voice, "We pitch {a study} the way we think you're going to read it and pick up on it. If we give it to you with all the words and the stuff that is actually accurate — I mean, I've tried to do that with our PR firm, and they say, 'They won't read that much.'"

There have been two more highly-publicized examples of this phenomenon in just the past few weeks. The first was a study funded by Cindy McCain and led by Dr. Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, an anti-prostitution crusader responsible for a controversial "diversion" program in Phoenix, Arizona. It claimed to have "proven" an increase of "sex trafficking" in northern New Jersey near the time of the Super Bowl, and was apparently conducted to counter the evidence that this annual story — that Super Bowls bring sex slaves" — is largely hype. The researchers claim to have subjected sex workers' ads from Backpage.com to a "trafficking matrix." The report

doesn't offer much explanation about how this "matrix" was designed and tested, but the text in the report indicates that among its dubious premises are the claims that tattoos are a sign of trafficking, and the dubious claim that the term *kitty* (a euphemism for female genitalia) is code for "underage." Despite the absence of methodological design data and the obvious lack of experimental controls, the authors nonetheless boldly assert that 83.7% of the ads "showed signs of trafficking."

The other example is a study from the Urban Institute that was widely touted in the media last week (including here at The Washington Post). The researchers made bold statements about the "U.S. sex economy" based on interviews with law enforcement personnel, 73 men convicted as "pimps," and only 36 incarcerated street workers. As the sex worker activist Melissa Gira Grant observed, the average sex worker activist follows more sex workers on Twitter than these researchers managed to find for a supposedly "landmark" study.

Furthermore, the report's bias is clear from the skewed proportion of its interviewees: Street workers represent less than 15 percent of the trade, but were *100 percent* of the sex workers interviewed for the study. Moreover, fewer than half of street workers have pimps, and about half of the pimps are actually the employees of the women they manage, not the other way around. Yet the researchers interviewed twice as many pimps as sex workers, thus inflating their perceived importance remarkably.

To the extent that it exists, coerced sex work is of course abominable, and it should be prosecuted. But the media needs to be far more skeptical of the claims of anti-sex worker activists, including those that advocate from government perches. Uncritically repeating exaggerated claims and fabricated data may seem innocuous — after all, what harm could there be in drawing more attention to the issue? But when all sex work is illegal, consensual, of-age sex workers are far more reluctant to report coercion, abusive pimps, and underage prostitutes for fear of being arrested themselves. This makes actual sex trafficking more difficult to discover.

These moral panic proclamations and exaggerated or fabricated statistics are coming from activists who want stricter laws to criminalize prostitution, thus pushing it further underground. Spreading their message will only make actual sex slavery more difficult to detect.