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# Estimating the Size and Structure of the Underground Commercial Sex Economy in Eight U.S. Cities.

## Abstract


The underground commercial sex economy (UCSE) generates millions of dollars annually, yet investigation and data collection remain under resourced. Our study aimed to unveil the scale of the UCSE in eight major US cities—Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, Kansas City, Miami, Seattle, San Diego, and Washington, DC. Across cities, the UCSE's worth was estimated between $39.9 and $290 million in 2007, but decreased since 2003 in all but two cities. Interviews with pimps, traffickers, sex workers, child pornographers, and law enforcement revealed the dynamics central to the underground commercial sex trade—and shaped the policy suggestions to combat it.

## Underground Commercial Sex Economy Key Findings

“Sex sells” does little to explain the multimillion-dollar profits generated by the underground commercial sex economy. From high-end escort services to high school “sneaker pimps,” the sex trade leaves no demographic unrepresented and circuits almost every major US city. What we know about the underground commercial sex economy is likely just the tip of the iceberg, but our study attempts to unveil its size and structure while documenting the experiences of offenders and law enforcement.

Our study focused on eight US cities— Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, Kansas City, Miami, Seattle, San Diego, and Washington, DC. Across cities, the 2007 underground sex economy’s worth was estimated between $39.9 and $290 million. While almost all types of commercial sex venues—massage parlors, brothels, escort services, and street- and internet-based prostitution—existed in each city, regional and demographic differences influenced their markets.

Pimps and traffickers interviewed for the study took home between $5,000 and $32,833 a week. These actors form a notoriously difficult population to reach because of the criminal nature of their work. Our study presents data from interviews with 73 individuals charged and convicted for crimes including compelling prostitution, human trafficking and engaging in a business relationship with sex workers.

**Pimps claimed inaccuracy in media portrayals.**

Most pimps believed that the media portrayals exaggerated violence. Some even saw the term “pimp” as derogatory, despite admitting to occasional use of physical abuse for punishment. Although pimps may have underreported the use of physical violence, they did cite frequent use of psychological coercion to maintain control over their employees.

**Pimps manipulate women into sex work.**

From discouraging “having sex for free” to feigning romantic interest, pimps used a variety of tactics to recruit and retain employees. Some even credited their entry into pimping with a natural capacity for manipulation. Rarely, however, were pimps the sole influence for an individual’s entry into the sex trade.

**Women, family, and friends facilitate entry into sex work.**

Female sex workers sometimes solicited protection from friends and acquaintances, eventually asking them to act as pimps. Some pimps and sex workers had family members or friends who exposed them to the sex trade at a young age, normalizing their decision to participate. Their involvement in the underground commercial sex economy, then extends the network of those co-engaged in the market even further.

**Unexpected parties benefit from the commercial sex economy.**

Pimps, brothels, and escort services often employed drivers, secretaries, nannies, and other non-sex workers to keep operations running smoothly. Hotel managers and law enforcement agents sometimes helped offenders evade prosecution in exchange for money or services. Law enforcement in one city reported that erotic Asian massage parlors would purchase the names of licensed acupuncturists to fake legitimacy. Even feuding gang members occasionally joined forces in the sex trade, prioritizing profit over turf wars. The most valuable network in the underground sex economy, however, may be the Internet.

**The Internet is changing the limitations of the trade.**

Prostitution is decreasing on the street, but thriving online. Pimps and sex workers advertise on social media and sites like Craigslist.com and Backpage.com to attract customers and new employees, and to gauge business opportunities in other cities. An increasing online presence makes it both easier for law enforcement to track activity in the underground sex economy and for an offender to promote and provide access to the trade.

**Child pornography is escalating.**

Explicit content of younger victims is becoming increasingly available and graphic. Online child pornography communities frequently trade content for free and reinforce behavior. Offenders often consider their participation a “victimless crime.”

**The underground sex economy is perceived as low risk.**

Pimps, traffickers, and child pornography offenders believed that their crimes were low-risk despite some fears of prosecution. Those who got caught for child pornography generally had low technological know-how, and multiple pimp offenders expressed that “no one actually gets locked up for pimping,” despite their own incarcerations.

**Policy and practice changes can help combat trafficking and prostitution.**

• Cross-train drug, sex, and weapons trade investigators to better understand circuits and overlaps.
• Continue using federal and local partnerships to disrupt travel circuits and identify pimps.
• Offer law enforcement trainings for both victim and offender interview techniques, including identifying signs of psychological manipulation.
• Increase awareness among school officials and the general public about the realities of sex trafficking to deter victimization and entry.
• Consistently enforce the laws for offenders to diminish low-risk perception.
• Impose more fines for ad host websites.

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