



Police Department Perceptions Of The Mobility And Safety Of Online Vs Offline Prostitutes: An Exploratory Study

By: **Catherine Marcum, Elicka Sparks, Shelly Clevenger, and Jeffrey Sedlacek**

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Police department perceptions of the mobility and safety of online vs offline prostitutes

An exploratory study

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Abstract

Purpose – To date, there is a gap in the literature exploring the perceptions and experiences of law enforcement regarding enforcement of online and offline prostitution. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the perceptions of law enforcement in the USA regarding the safety and mobility of individuals who prostitute online compared to those who sell sexual services offline. The next section will explain the methodology of the exploratory study, including the method of original data collection.

Design/methodology/approach – All police departments in the USA located in a jurisdiction of 50,000 people or more were requested participation in the study ($n = 689$). Respondents were sent an initial mailing of a cover letter and survey, followed by an e-mail reminder and a second mailing of a cover letter and survey. Individual respondents were asked questions about their own perceptions of behaviors and lifestyles of offline vs online prostitutes.

Findings – The majority of law enforcement respondents did not feel as if online prostitutes were safer compared to offline prostitutes. However, the majority of respondents did believe that online prostitutes are afforded a better lifestyle and are more mobile.

Research limitations/implications – The majority of the respondents were from the Northeast and Southwest may mean that their perceptions could be different from those that are not located within either region. In addition, since almost 80 percent of the agencies were in a jurisdiction with a population between 50,000 and 249,000, this too may have influenced their perceptions. Law enforcement in a smaller or larger area may have felt differently or have had different experiences to report.

Originality/value – This study is very unique as to date, another study with the same methodology and question content was not found.

Keywords Crime and place, Adult sexual assault, Police perceptions

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

For cybercriminals, the internet often allows a veil of secrecy and anonymity not afforded in the physical world. A person can assume a different, or multiple identities, posting profiles and descriptions online of attributes with little connection to reality (Marcum, 2019). Cybercriminals can perform simple to intricate offenses without much risk of immediate detection. For instance, offenders can pose as legitimate entities (e.g. banks or other businesses) to obtain passwords from unsuspecting internet users, or child pornographers can buy and trade photographs in hidden online arenas without the detection of law enforcement. In addition, there is the added benefit of difficulty for law



enforcement in tracing the origin of the behavior once it is discovered, in part due to the lack of resources and specialized expertise required to police such offenses (Arnold, 2014; Brenner, 2012; Wall, 2010).

The internet also provides numerous benefits for individuals who sell sexual services[1] not afforded to individuals who sell sex on the street, from increased earnings, greater safety and efficiency, to simply spending less time out in the elements (Cunningham and Kendall, 2011; Moore, 2011). Online sex workers are often viewed as a higher class of sex worker compared to street walkers (Marcum, 2019), so they are able to charge more for their services. This class distinction arises largely from differences in the circumstances and resources available to sex workers; those who are more educated and/or technologically savvy, younger and more physically attractive, and generally in less desperate straits have easier access to online venues for prostitution. Sex workers who are severely drug addicted are also less likely to engage in online prostitution, and managers are less likely to make the effort for workers who cannot command a higher return. In fact, the desperation and relative class level of the sex worker tends to correspond roughly with the class level of their managers, who might also lack the skills to advertise their workers online for many of the same reasons.

Additionally, online sex workers have lower risk of arrest due to the difficulty and expense associated with policing internet crimes, and the relative anonymity the internet provides. Sex workers can raise their reputational capital with online advertising, as with any commodity. Purchasing sex online is also attractive to a different class of clientele: Research has indicated that sex workers who advertise their services online are more likely to attract clients who are educated, well-employed and more respectful (Peppet, 2013). However, these potential benefits are not to dismiss the danger, such as physical and sexual assaults or armed robberies associated with prostitution or reinforce the misconception that online sex workers lead a life of glamor and freely choose to participate in “the life.” Whether online or on the street, prostitution is an existence characterized by abuse at the hands of managers and customers, a high rate of victimization and risk, drug dependency, exhaustion and financial desperation.

In this exploratory study, we will investigate the perceptions of law enforcement professionals about the mobility and safety of online vs offline prostitution in the USA. Officers tasked with addressing prostitution and sex trafficking from law enforcement agencies across the country were surveyed regarding their experiences and perceptions of online and offline prostitution. To gain greater insight, some of the respondents were interviewed individually to gather further information on prostitution issues and trends in their jurisdictions. The goal of this exploratory study is to provide a thorough analysis of how law enforcement officers perceive the safety factors associated with online prostitution, as well as the mobility and resources associated with “the life” online.

Literature review

The FBI defines prostitution and commercialized vice as the:

[...] unlawful promotion of or participation in sexual activities for profit, including attempts to solicit customers or transport persons for prostitution purposes; to own, manage, or operate a dwelling or other establishment for the purpose of providing a place where prostitution is performed; or to otherwise assist or promote prostitution, sale of a sex act.

(FBI, 2010, Offense Definitions)

Individuals who pay for sex, commonly referred to as johns, generally use cash to pay in these transactions, though payment can also include drugs, food, gas or any other needed commodity for subsistence, as we see in the case of prostitution that constitutes survival sex (Watson, 2011). For years, the stereotype of a sex worker was a drug-addicted woman who

walks the streets in crime-ridden areas approaching cars and pedestrians to sell her services, but this scenario reflects the reality of sex markets less and less over time. Prostitution has undergone significant changes due to the addition of online markets, relegating street walkers to the lowest echelons of the profession.

When the first fee-based advertising site (Eros.com) was created in 1997 on the internet, sex workers could advertise based on country, state and biological sex preference (males, females or transgender). Buying sex online was almost instantly popular, allowing for an easier exchange of information for customers to choose the sex workers who best suited their particular tastes. Online advertisements now include more information about the sex workers soliciting customers, such as their physical attributes (including sexualized pictures of their bodies), a general location, cell number, their willingness to travel (out-call vs a location set by the prostitute), prices for services and services provided (Brooks, 2009; Cunningham and Kendall, 2011). The john simply shops for the sex worker that interests him from hundreds of solicitations, and texts or phones them to iron out any details and arrange to meet.

Ratings websites online are important for both sex workers and johns, providing reviews of both parties based on a variety of factors related not only to the quality of the interaction, but also the real or perceived safety of the encounters (Cunningham and Kendall, 2011; Richtel, 2008). This is especially helpful for sex workers, who can investigate if past interactions have involved violence or theft, potentially avoiding victimization at the hands of customers. In addition, sex workers may get a better sense of whether the person requesting sexual services is undercover law enforcement based on the questions that are asked and the number of reviews left online (more reviews indicate a person who is not posing as law enforcement).

Some sex workers believe doing business online makes it easier to avoid being managed by a pimp, and recent legislative efforts to curb sex trafficking, such as the Stop Enabling Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, which hold websites liable for hosting illegal transactions, have been criticized for the unintended consequence of driving some sex workers into the hands of managers (Glaser, 2019). However, while conducting business online may make it easier for individual prostitutes to avoid being managed, both managers and sex traffickers conduct a significant amount of their business online as well, and search advertisements of independent sex workers for the purposes of recruitment (this is called “trolling”). Given this, despite the unintended consequence of legal fights to curb internet prostitution, these efforts are still necessary if police and prosecutors are to continue trying to help managed and sex trafficked women (see Maras, 2017).

While it is intuitive that sex workers are safer conducting business on the internet rather than the streets, there is no research to support anything but a perception of greater safety on the part of sex workers. For example, *Doe ex rel. Roe v Backpage.com* alleged that managers advertised women online who were then raped and molested (Maras, 2017), and it is unlikely that online soliciting is more than marginally safer or free from predation of managers than the streets. Any greater margin of safety would certainly be appealing to sex workers, however, and it is easy to see why they feel less vulnerable online than they would on the streets. Vetting customers must be accomplished almost instantaneously and they are vulnerable to random offenders as well as customers and managers. More research is needed to discover any differences in actual vs perceived safety and their magnitude.

Physical safety is of paramount importance because prostitution is an extremely dangerous profession. In fact, it is the most dangerous profession in the world, with a workplace homicide rate of 204 per 100,000 (Potterat *et al.*, 2004; see also Cunningham *et al.*, 2018; Salfati, 2009). The risk of homicide victimization for female sex workers dwarfs that of both women and men in any other walk of life (Brewer *et al.*, 2006; Potterat *et al.*, 2004; Salfati, 2009). This is not

surprising, given that the very nature of soliciting requires that participants engage in a variety of high-risk behaviors on a regular basis (Quinet, 2011; Salfati *et al.*, 2008; Selby and Canter, 2009). Salfati and her colleagues (2008) identified a number of factors in the selection of sex worker homicide victims, including their availability, opportunity, expressive motivations (i.e. a hatred of sex workers and sexually active women), the secretive, unprotected, isolated and solitary nature of sex work, a lack of public interest in the welfare of sex workers, the location of sex markets in high crime areas and the unwillingness of sex workers to talk to the police. While still very dangerous, conducting business online appears to alleviate at least some of these conditions. Perhaps the biggest deterrent to violence against sex workers in an online environment is greater fear of detection through electronic evidence.

Another type of safety that sex workers believe to be greater online is safety from detection by law enforcement, mostly due to the extra time and effort necessary for such efforts. On the street, sex workers are visible and detection can occur in the course of normal patrol, or in response to complaints from citizens. While fairly easy to enact online stings, they require greater time and effort, and in the absence of complaints related to the visibility of these markets, police are believed to be unlikely to make the effort on a consistent basis. The low priority given to the enforcement of illegal sex markets relative to other crimes considered more serious further reduces the likelihood of arrest in the case of online prostitution. Though intuitive, this lesser risk of arrest online is a perception that has been accepted without empirical support. In this study, reports from law enforcement about their efforts online and in the street will be examined to see if there is sufficient information to know if this assumption holds true.

In addition to the possible safety benefits, research suggests a higher price point for online solicitation. Before its dissolution, Backpage.com accounted for 70 percent of prostitution advertising and accumulated more than \$22m in profits in 2012 (Madhani, 2015). Individuals who sell sex online can charge more for services compared to those working on the street, which is more customer-driven financially as prices are not set in advance of the transaction. This ability to increase the price is partially due to the clientele often associated with online prostitution. Researchers have found that online clientele were more likely to have higher professional and educational status compared to those who solicited sex workers on the street or through advertisements in magazines, as well as being less threatening and/or dangerous (Parsons *et al.*, 2004; Peppet, 2013).

Chan and Ghose (2014) also found there are health benefits to online vs street prostitution. Through examining entries in the personal ad section of Craigslist from 1999 to 2008 in 33 states, Chan and Ghose found a significant negative relationship with HIV transmission cases involving sex workers selling themselves as escorts online. The researchers posited that this decline is likely the result of both the availability of online resources and education regarding the transmission and prevention of the virus, and the fact that technology-savvy sex workers were able to better educate themselves (Chan and Ghose, 2014).

Prior to the internet boom of online prostitution and sex trafficking, clients seeking the sex-for-pay services of a sex worker in specific areas had to rely on word of mouth or cues given by the sex workers to passing pedestrians on the street. The main problem with this tactic is that it subjects sex workers to a greater likelihood of identification and apprehension by law enforcement, as well as long hours spent in the elements. The internet has allowed these transactions to move from plain sight to an anonymous, hidden world with many digital “dark corners” in which to hide and participate in criminal enterprises, while allowing the sex worker to forego the discomfort of street walking to attract johns (Marcum, 2019). Sex workers can employ encrypted e-mail addresses for communication or advertise services on social media with hidden innuendo that infers prostitution services to

the knowledgeable client (Holt and Blevins, 2007). The current study was undertaken to add to the existing research related to enforcement of online vs street prostitution in terms of the mobility and safety of sex workers.

Present study

To date, there is a gap in the literature exploring the perceptions and experiences of law enforcement regarding enforcement of online and offline prostitution. The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of law enforcement in the USA regarding the safety and mobility of individuals who sex worker online compared to those who sell sexual services offline. We were particularly interested in whether officers assigned to this type of vice saw differences in the victimization of sex workers, their earnings and other quality of life indicators. The perceptions of law enforcement officers influence their response to both the offense and the offenders. The proliferation of online sex workers and a growing awareness of sex trafficking is likely changing attitudes on the front lines in some manner, such as engendering a less derisive attitude or invoking greater sympathy, and this may influence law enforcement tactics. The methodology of the exploratory study will be detailed in the next section, including the method of original data collection.

Methodology

Research design[2]

This exploratory study used a purposive sampling design with an adapted method of Dillman's (2007) mail survey design to collect data. Contact information was gathered for all police departments in the USA located in a jurisdiction of 50,000 people or more ($n = 689$). A cover letter describing the intention of the study and the full survey were mailed via USA mail at the beginning of November 2018 to all the police departments. The cover letter requested the survey be completed by the most appropriate individual (i.e. the individual who managed and/or was most familiar with the data related to prostitution and sex trafficking). Participants were given three options to return to the survey: completion of the enclosed survey and returning it to the researchers via USA mail; completion of the enclosed survey and returning it to the researchers via scanning it and emailing it to the designated researcher; or completion of an electronic version of the survey with a provided Qualtrics link. No identifying information was requested in the survey; therefore, individual responses could not be linked back to a particulate agency.

After the initial mailing, researchers obtained a 10.2 percent response rate. In mid-December 2018, participants were sent an e-mail reminder (utilizing the same language as the initial cover letter) regarding the request to participate in the study with an attached survey. This second wave of request for participation increased the response rate to 13.2 percent. Lastly, a final mailing of a hard copy of the survey via USA mail was sent in mid-January 2019, resulting in a final response rate of 24.1 percent ($n = 166$).

Variables

The survey utilized in this study requested several types of information from the respondents. Demographic information regarding the law enforcement agency were requested (see Table I for descriptive statistics). The geographical location of the agency was requested, separated by region (Northwest, Northeast, Southwest and Southeast). Law enforcement were asked to categorize themselves as a city/town agency, county agency or state agency. In addition, representatives from the agencies were asked to report the approximate population in their jurisdiction.

Respondents were asked if there was a dedicated task force in their agencies for prostitution offenses. If agencies reported yes, they were then asked to report the budget

Measure	Frequency	Min.	Max.	Mean
<i>Geographic location of LEA</i>				
NE	49 (29.5%)			
SE	36 (21.7%)			
SW	47 (28.3%)			
NW	31 (18.7%)			
Missing	3 (1.8%)			
<i>Categorization of LEA</i>				
City/town	161 (97.0%)			
County	3 (1.8%)			
Missing	2 (1.2%)			
<i>Approx. population</i>				
< 50,000	3 (1.8%)			
50K–249,999K	131 (78.9%)			
250K–499,999K	16 (9.6%)			
500K–999,999K	8 (4.8%)			
1m+	6 (3.6%)			
Missing	2 (1.3%)			
<i>Dedicated prostitution task force</i>				
Yes	38 (22.9%)			
No	125 (75.3%)			
Missing	3 (1.8%)			
Current number trained personnel of task force ($n = 33$)		1	25	6.91
Current budget for task force ($n = 8$)		0	750,000	182,025
Number of prostitute arrests in past year ($n = 146$)		0	900	25.59
Percentage of arrests: street ($n = 94$)		0	100	8.34
Percentage of arrests: online ($n = 94$)		0	100	13.32
Number of john arrests in past year ($n = 146$)		0	363	16.77
Percentage of arrests: street ($n = 104$)		0	100	9.82
Percentage of arrests: online ($n = 103$)		0	100	12.82
<i>Safer selling sex online</i>				
Yes	19 (11.4%)			
No	62 (37.3%)			
Missing	85 (51.2%)			
<i>More money made online</i>				
Yes	123 (74.1%)			
No	21 (12.7%)			
Missing	22 (13.2%)			
<i>Online live different lifestyle</i>				
Yes	100 (60.2%)			
No	53 (31.9%)			
Missing	13 (7.8%)			
<i>Online struggle more with addict</i>				
Yes	41 (24.7%)			
No	95 (57.2%)			
Missing	30 (18.1%)			
<i>Involvement with trafficking</i>				
Yes	91 (54.8%)			
No	51 (30.7%)			
Missing	24 (14.4%)			

Table I.
Descriptive statistics

Note: $n = 166$

dedicated to the task force and any training provided to the officers on the task force. All agencies were asked to approximate the number of arrests of sex workers and johns by the agency within the past year. In addition to these measures, multiple open-ended questions were posited about the respondent's perceptions about behaviors and lifestyles of offline vs online sex workers, including lifestyle differences between offline and online sex workers, as well as their perceptions of safety for each group. Respondents were also asked their perceptions about the amount of income generated by each group, as well as issues related to drug and alcohol addictions.

This study also allowed us to examine the perceptions of law enforcement with regard to the mobility online solicitation allows sex workers, as well as the safety level afforded through selling sex online. To this end, the responding law enforcement officers were asked the following questions:

- (1) Do you feel as if individuals who sell sexual acts online are safer than those who sell on the street?
- (2) Do you feel as if individuals who sell sexual acts online live a different lifestyle than those who sell on the street?

To further explore the reasons for these perceptions, respondents were asked to explain their answers in open-ended questions.

Analysis plan

This is an exploratory study and, to date, there are no published works that have specifically looked at officer perceptions of online and offline prostitution in this manner. In this section, a description of the data will be presented, followed by an analysis of the opinions of the officers and the qualitative data provided through the open-ended questions. Given the exploratory nature of the research, inductive coding practices were employed for the qualitative responses provided by the respondents in the study, with *in vivo* categories created from the survey questions and key words from patterns in responses. As the coding did not involve judgment calls on the part of researchers for any quantitative or qualitative measures, no formal tests were conducted for inter-rater reliability.

Results

Descriptive statistics[3]

Complete descriptive information for the sample obtained in this study can be seen in Table I. The majority of the respondents were from the Northeast (29.5 percent) and Southwest (28.3 percent), and nearly all police departments designated themselves as a city or town agency. The responding agencies tended to be larger, with almost 80 percent reporting a jurisdiction with a population of between 50,000 and 249,000 people (Table II).

A small percentage of the sample ($n = 38$, 22.9 percent) had a designated prostitution task force (coded as Yes = 1, No = 2). Of those who reported having a designated task force for prostitution, 33 of the 38 agencies reported the number of assigned officers in the task force, which ranged from 1 to 25 officers with a mean of 6.91 officers per task force. Only 8 respondents reported their budget, with a mean of \$182,025 allotted per year for the task force to operate.

Of the law enforcement agencies that reported number of arrests for prostitution, the average number in the past year was 25.59. Agencies were asked to estimate the percentage of the arrests made for street vs online sex work. The average percentage of sex workers arrested for street prostitution was 8.34 percent, while 13.32 percent were arrests for online prostitution. The average number of johns arrested in the past year was 16.77, with 9.82 percent of the arrests attributed to street prostitution and 12.82 percent to online.

Table II.
Bivariate correlations

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Geographic region of LE	1.0								
2. Approx pop of jurisdiction	0.054	1.0							
3. Dedicated task force	-0.018	-0.359**	1.0						
4. Trained personnel TF	0.039	0.136	-0.197*	1.0					
5. Budget TF	-0.044	0.119	-0.427**	0.421**	1.0				
6. Percatge prost street arrest	0.101	0.133	-0.006	0.151	-0.045	1.0			
7. Percatge prost online arrest	0.072	0.237*	-0.349**	0.508**	0.564**	0.055	1.0		
8. Percatge john street arrest	0.085	0.063	-0.050	0.160	-0.040	0.917**	0.085	1.0	
9. Percatge john online arrest	0.036	0.191	-0.248*	0.342**	0.442**	-0.075	0.792**	-0.088	1.0

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

The second-half of the survey asked the reporting officers from each jurisdiction to share their opinions about different aspects of offline vs online prostitution. The majority of officers who responded did not feel that selling sex online was a safer venture, though it is important to note that less than half of the respondents answered this question. Nearly three fourths (74.1 percent) felt that online prostitution was a more lucrative venture compared to offline prostitution, which is likely responsible for the finding that the majority of reporting officers believed that online sex workers led a different, comparably less damaging, lifestyle. The majority of respondents (57.2 percent) did not feel addiction was an issue that varied much in the case of online vs offline sex workers. Lastly, roughly 55 percent of prostitution cases experienced in the surveyed jurisdictions were related to human trafficking.

Multiple bivariate correlations revealed a significant relationship between the population of jurisdictions and whether those jurisdictions had a dedicated task force, indicating that larger jurisdictions were more likely to have a dedicated task force for prostitution (-0.359^{**} , $p < 0.01$). The percentage of arrests for both online prostitution (-0.349 , $p < 0.01$) and offline prostitution (-0.248 , $p < 0.01$) decreased in jurisdictions without a dedicated task force for prostitution. Jurisdictions with more trained personnel and higher budgets were also more likely to have a higher percentage of arrests for online prostitution (0.508 and 0.564, $p < 0.01$; 0.342 and 0.442, $p < 0.01$).

Qualitative results

As noted previously, the second-half of the survey contained questions regarding the reporting officer's opinions about specific aspects of prostitution in their area, and a request to expand on the opinions expressed in the dichotomous questions in open-ended queries designed to elicit more information about the source of these beliefs. The qualitative results below are separated into the themes of perceptions about safety, mobility and resources.

Perception of safety. In the survey, law enforcement officers were asked the following question: do you feel that individuals who sell sexual acts online are safer than those who sell on the street? Only 11.4 percent of respondents felt that individuals who sold sex online were safer compared to those soliciting offline. Themes emerged in response to the open-ended query. Of the officers who believed online prostitution was a safer way to engage in solicitation, many believed street prostitution was more dangerous due to a less respectable – and perhaps respectful – clientele. For example, one officer stated the following:

Yes. Street selling is more invasive [...] face-to-face interactions, subject to potentially harmful situations. Difficult to back out of a situation. Could be life threatening. This individual [referring to the sex worker] has a different mindset – either more brazen/bold or in a desperate situation for money. Online individuals may be doing this for experimenting or as a fun activity or a dare or for novelty. This person assumes an online persona or identity.

and:

On average all sex workers are at risk of being assaulted, raped or seriously injured. However, those that work the street tend to operate on the higher end of the spectrum. There are many factors that play into it, with one being the societal belief the street sex workers are dispensable and no one really cares. Prior to being the supervisor for the task force, I was a gang unit supervisor and assisted in the investigation of two serial killers who murdered at least five street sex workers. Their belief as to the worth of the sex workers was very telling.

Additionally, some officers believed that the increased level of discretion available online improved safety for the sex workers:

Yes. Trends in [city name redacted] appear to be females on the street are mainly supporting their drug habits. Online sales tend to be more discrete, not appear as drug addicted, and not as obvious to law enforcement.

Another noted:

The difference is the ability to keep from walking the street. Advertising is easier and can reach more people online including those johns who want to avoid police contact. By driving in prostitution areas. Although prostitution is dangerous, online prostitution can give a feeling of being safer.

However, more officers (37.3 percent) asserted online prostitution was not safer than offline prostitution, indicating their belief that it was just as dangerous and that online clientele can be just as harmful as those soliciting sex from street walkers:

A false sense of security is really what it is. Street and online prostitution still are victims of crimes.
and:

I would say it is just as dangerous on the street as it is online. You do not know the clientele online and a person can be set-up and robbed online during the meeting [just] as they would be on the street.

Another officer even noted a potential benefit of prostituting on the street compared to the internet:

In a street level situation, the sex worker has at least some ability to assess the john. The online sex worker only has a few seconds while the person is at their door (for in-calls). We have had numerous robbery calls and several serious assaults that stemmed from online prostitution.

Perception of mobility and resources. Over 60 percent of respondents felt online sex workers live a different lifestyle than those plying their trade on the street. When asked to elaborate on this assertion, a theme emerged in which officers indicated they believed that online sex workers live a more stable, lucrative lifestyle that afforded them extra resources in addition to meeting basic needs:

Yes. I think that the individuals who sell sex online have more resources than those on the street, such as internet, phones, vehicles, [and] money for motel rooms.

and:

Those who strictly work online and command higher prices, obviously can have a better life in that sense. They are also less likely to be in a human trafficking situation, and are most often in a pimping relation. Of course, this does not address illegal massage parlors who have transitioned from a fixed location and working on the Internet at hotels and residential brothels.

and:

Some street sex workers are actually homeless, online accessibility suggests [a] more stable housing situation. Online providers will have fewer shelter and basic needs issues than the street providers. Street providers may be working to support a drug habit, have "aged out," or may be homeless. Online providers may have a home and customers can encounter providers from \$300 up to \$1,000 per night.

Discussion

This is the first study to examine the issue of law enforcement officers' perceptions about online vs street prostitution and prostitutes, and these attitudes likely translate into, or at least influence, policy in responding to the offense. Through surveying officers in agencies with larger jurisdictions (50,000+), we were able to glean information from respondents who were more likely to have had interactions with both types of sex workers, and/or have had some level of training about this population than those in smaller jurisdictions. In addition, employing

qualitative methods provided the opportunity to dig deeper into perceptions and gain insight that could be valuable for future research, through crafting survey and interview questions that take these attitudes into account in order to measure their impact.

Law enforcement respondents were asked a variety of questions regarding their experiences and opinions about the activities and lifestyle of sex workers. Overall, the majority of law enforcement officers who participated in this study believed online prostitution resulted in a different lifestyle compared to sex workers working the street, though benefits are likely the result of different levels of resources going in. Many officers noted that increased income and the appearance of a more affluent lifestyle may be due to the more polished appearances that are necessary to sell oneself online compared to sex workers walking the street. Online sex workers must depict a person who is clean, well-groomed and classier to succeed in attracting johns compared to an individual wearing cheap clothing, with poor hygiene and, often, physical indicators of drug addiction. As such, online sex workers are more capable of attracting a clientele that is more educated, financially stable and who are less likely to be violent or abusive (Marcum, 2019).

The majority of respondents (74.1 percent) reported that online prostitutes earned more money compared to offline prostitutes, and 60 percent reported that those selling sex online were more likely to have better financial and living situations. However, only a small number (11.4 percent of responding officers) believed the difference in lifestyle corresponded with increased safety, which is consistent with past research indicating the dangerous nature of prostitution generally (Potterat *et al.*, 2004; see also Cunningham *et al.*, 2018; Salfati, 2009). This finding indicates that officers do not share the perception of sex workers that online prostitution is safer, and it is reasonable to afford more weight to their perceptions due to their experience responding to numerous crimes against sex workers. This might indicate an additional area for further study to determine if prostitutes working the streets have superior or inferior networks for intelligence regarding risks relative to online prostitutes. Despite the availability of websites where sex workers can post warnings about dangers, there is no research to date on whether they access and make use of this information, or whether they have smaller or larger personal networks of sex workers to share information about risks. Further, in both settings, the presence of managers might mitigate the freedom of sex workers to heed such warnings.

In terms of financial gain, it is also important to consider that, while the majority of law enforcement officers perceived that online sex workers are more successful, it would be a misconception to believe that online sex workers themselves make more money as a result of the higher asking price for their services. Most of these sex workers are managed by someone, and do not get to keep all, or even some of the greater profits they make advertising online. Managers know that presenting sex workers in a more attractive way boosts profits, both in allowing for a higher asking price and in increasing the frequency of transactions, which tends to reinforce the notion that online sex workers are “classier” than their counterparts on the street (Parsons *et al.*, 2004; Peppet, 2013). Law enforcement officers are no less likely than anyone else to accord more respect to people making more money in their profession. Whether this has a legitimizing effect that impacts enforcement remains to be seen. Another avenue of inquiry suggested by these findings is whether this perception of greater profits results in officers feeling less sympathy for online sex workers, whose coercion, desperation and victimization may be less obvious than those working the streets. This perception might reinforce the focus of enforcement efforts on sex workers rather than johns, whereas greater visibility for the plight of sex workers might shift that focus to johns and managers. Though it was beyond the scope of this study, increased awareness about sex trafficking might have a powerful impact on law enforcement attitudes about prostitution, as well. The definition of sex trafficking encompasses much of the solicitation that is currently defined as prostitution, so it would be interesting to gauge shifting

attitudes about sex workers as victims rather than offenders. Utilizing more of a social work approach, compared to a punitive criminal justice system approach, could be more effective for law enforcement to utilize.

There is also the perception among many that sex workers are safer from arrest and prosecution online due to the more private, hidden nature of working online. Here again, we find that the perception of sex workers differs from that of law enforcement officers, as these findings indicate that the average number of arrests for street prostitution were lower (8.34 percent) than for online prostitution was (13.32 percent). The same pattern holds in the arrests of johns (street 9.82 percent vs online 12.82 percent). Based on these findings, it appears that online sex workers are not insulated from apprehension through the anonymity of the internet. This is likely due to dedicated task forces focusing more of their effort on online prostitution, leaving the enforcement of street prostitution to the rank and file in response to citizen complaints or 911 calls related to victimization occurring in the context of prostitution.

Potential misconceptions of lifestyle and safety of sex workers by law enforcement could be a result of lack of training. The discussion above provides many examples that support different training tactics for officers. Furthermore, the findings from this study support the implementation of training that not only focuses on better reactive practices to the occurrence of prostitution, but also preventative practices that provide skills to facilitate resourceful interactions with sex workers. Law enforcement should receive training that allows them to better manage this population while in police custody, as this is a population that often has substance abuse issues and history of abuse and violence (Deering *et al.*, 2014; Rhodes *et al.*, 2012; Ulibarri *et al.*, 2011). Not only should this training include custody management, but also assistance with resources and safety measures. Many sex workers do not have positive interactions with the law enforcement, which causes mistrust and fear of the police (Footer *et al.*, 2019). Footer *et al.* go on to determine this has resulted in rushed negotiations and moving sex workers to unsafe areas.

A 2012 Department of Justice report indicated that more than 43,000 women were arrested for selling sex, and 19,000 men were arrested for buying sex in a single year (Snyder, 2012). This report does not differentiate between online vs offline solicitation, though the online market was firmly established by that time. While the now defunct Backpage was once the go-to place for the online sex market, other avenues are quickly filling the void. For example, SkiptheGame, EroticMonkey, EscortMeetings and Eros are all sites on which sex workers, managers and traffickers either were or are selling sex in the USA and internationally. Targeted investigations and/or sting operations conducted by law enforcement of these sites will likely meet with limited success beyond a chilling effect on local markets. The use of Federal laws to target site operators for offenses such as conspiracy, human trafficking and money laundering have had an impact on the online market. The latest legal front in trying to reduce or eliminate online prostitution and trafficking is an effort to target the platforms hosting these sites, as the businesses themselves moved to countries where they could not be prosecuted. Like nearly all crime, law enforcement will expend most of its resources responding to such innovation in the market.

The finding indicating that only 38 percent of responding law enforcement agencies had a dedicated prostitution task force speaks to the difficulty in getting a handle on these markets. While the internet has provided arenas another venue for buying and selling sex, the finding that less than four in ten larger jurisdictions even have a task force indicates the need for more resources to be dedicated to combatting online prostitution if the crime is to be taken seriously. Past research has relatedly supported this assertion, as Marcum and Higgins (2011) found a dedicated task force increased the likelihood of arrest frequencies of technology assisted exploitive crimes against children, indicating similar success could

be found with this form of online criminality reduction. Furthermore, other countries are discovering that arresting johns can be a better preventative strategy than arresting sex workers. A john-targeted approach used in Europe is a recent initiative being implemented in cities in the USA such as Chicago (Demand Forum, 2019). This approach is focused on catching, arresting and prosecuting johns (on and offline) in an attempt to provide a deterrent for offenders, while also strangling the market to reduce the desire for sex to be sold.

More research is needed to fully understand the online prostitution market in order to prevent and reduce crime, investigating if the findings of this study are consistent. Future researchers could investigate those individuals currently or formerly selling sex online to determine the characteristics of their lifestyle, including if they are managed by an individual and/or being trafficked. In addition, future research should further investigate the lucrateness of selling sexual services on the street compared to internet arenas. This would shed light onto lifestyles afforded online vs offline prostitution, as well as the frequency of sex workers managed by other individuals both on and offline.

While this study contributed to the limited literature in this area, it is important to note that it is not without limitations. First, the fact that the majority of the respondents were from the Northeast and Southwest may mean that their perceptions could be different from those that are not located within either region. In addition, since almost 80 percent of the agencies were in a jurisdiction with a population between 50,000 and 249,000, this too may have influenced their perceptions. Law enforcement in a smaller or larger area may have felt differently or have had different experiences to report.

During the entirety of the study, responding law enforcement agencies were extremely helpful with providing information and offering follow-up. Prostitution is a continuously growing problem for many agencies, especially as many reported a strong tie with human trafficking in certain geographic regions. Law enforcement in the USA are tirelessly working to find a solution to better combat online and offline prostitution and are very open to learning from each other to see what works and what does not work. There is definitely recognition that the online forum can make it more difficult to track and apprehend offenders, as well as provide resources to those who no longer want to live in "life."

Overall, this study showed that there is a fairly widespread perception of greater financial success among online sex workers by law enforcement officers, but few perceive that online prostitution is any safer than street walking for sex workers. This is particularly important given the disconnect between the perceptions of officers and sex workers in assessing threat in the online venue, as the expectation of greater safety might contribute to greater risk. Further, while it is widely accepted that online prostitution is more difficult to police, it also appears that law enforcement officers are making more such arrests than for street prostitution. It may require greater effort to enact these arrests, but the statistics indicate that online solicitation is a focal concern for task forces. More research is needed to further clarify the impact of law enforcement perceptions about prostitution, and to determine the extent to which they are accurate.

Notes

1. There is an ongoing debate over the appropriate term for individuals who sell sexual services, generally over the terms prostitute vs sex worker. For this study, the researchers will denote individuals who sell these services as sex workers and individuals who manage sex workers (denoted by many law enforcement as pimps) as managers in order to reflect the broader variety of methods when the offense takes place online. This is not intended to sanitize or legitimize the offense, which is almost universally harmful to those forced by others or their circumstances to provide these services.

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2. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of the lead researchers on this study.
 3. Multiple bivariate models were with the quantitative data provided in this study. However, due to the sample size, models provided high standard errors and, therefore, deemed inappropriate for any inferences made in the study. Researchers recognize the limitations of the findings, but still assert the qualitative analyses to provide important insight into this unexplored area.

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