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Comparison of Financial Lucrativeness and Safety in the World of Online and Offline Prostitution: An Exploratory Study of Perceptions and Experiences of Law Enforcement

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Abstract

To date, there is a gap in the literature exploring the perceptions and experiences of law enforcement regarding enforcement of online and offline prostitution. As there are multiple fallacies regarding the benefits of online prostitution versus offline prostitution, the purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of law enforcement in the United States regarding the financial lucrativeness and lifestyle of those who prostitute online compared to those who sell sexual services offline. Findings indicated that law enforcement believed online prostitutes grossed more money for their services and also demonstrated a cleaner, more polished lifestyle. However, the majority of respondents still believed both types of prostitution to be dangerous.

Keywords Internet · Prostitution · Policing · Victimization

Online prostitution is growing industry. It is estimated that 80% of prostitution now occurs online, which is causing police to dramatically shift their tactics, as enforcement

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is less likely to result from citizen complaints about open air markets (Stalans & Finn, 2019). It is also an extremely lucrative business: In 2007 alone, the sex trade produced a profit range of \$39.9 million to \$290 million dollars in each of seven U.S. cities (Dank, et al., 2014, p. 22). Given that the arrest rate for pimps and traffickers is quite low due to a variety of factors, such constraints on resources, and a lack of political and public will, pimps view trafficking sex as a safe bet in terms of avoiding arrest relative to other money-making offenses, such as trafficking in drugs (Dank, et al., 2014; Farley, Franzblau, & Kennedy, 2014).

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). Blurred jurisdictional lines, the common use of cash payment for services in person, and a lack of resources further hamper law enforcement efforts to curb online prostitution (Farley, Franzblau, & Kennedy, 2014). Payment can also include drugs, food, gas, or any other needed commodity for subsistence, as we see in the case of prostitution known as survival sex, but this sort of bartering is less common in online transactions (Watson, 2011). Prostitutes working online are generally perceived as being of a higher class relative to street walkers (Marcum, 2019), and there are some indication that they are able to charge more for their services (Marcum, Sparks, Clevenger, & Sedlacek, 2019).

According to Peppet (2013), online sex workers have a lower risk of arrest and are able to raise their reputational capital through online advertising efforts. While the clients who purchase the services of prostitutes advertised online—more commonly referred to as johns or tricks, especially beyond the veneer of online and call-out escort services—are more likely to be educated, gainfully employed, and more respectful, these potential benefits are not to dismiss the danger associated with prostitution, such as physical and sexual assault or armed robbery. In addition, there is a common misconception that online sex workers lead a life of glamor and choice to participate in “the life,” rather than being abused by pimps or supporting drug habits, which is commonly thought to be true of prostitutes working the streets.

In this study, we investigated the veracity of these assumptions about online prostitution through data gathered from law enforcement officers charged with investigating and combating prostitution and sex trafficking. Law enforcement agencies across the United States were surveyed regarding their experiences and perceptions of both online and offline prostitution. In addition to the surveys, a smaller sample of individual law enforcement officers were interviewed in more depth to garner further information on the prostitution and sex trafficking markets in their jurisdictions. Specifically, results from this exploratory study provide the first analysis of how officers themselves perceive the safety factors associated with online prostitution, as well as the mobility and resources associated with “the life” when sex becomes an online commodity. Our hope is that law enforcement agencies can learn from these findings, promoting more effective training and understanding to combat the crime of prostitution, and justify the use of increased resources for task forces and training focusing on prostitutes, johns, and pimps.

Literature Review

Prior to the Internet boom of online prostitution and sex trafficking, clients seeking sex for pay in a specific area relied on word of mouth or cues given by prostitutes to passing pedestrians on the street. The tactics necessary to attract business in this manner subject prostitutes to a higher 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 a more anonymous platform with many digital dark corners in which to hide and participate in criminal enterprises, while allowing prostitutes to forego the discomfort of street walking to attract johns (Marcum, 2019; Marcum, Sparks, Clevenger, & Sedlacek, 2019). Prostitutes employ encrypted email addresses or, more often, cell phone numbers to communicate with johns attracted to their advertisements on platforms purporting to provide escort services.

These advertisements initially consisted of coded innuendo that inferred prostitution services to the knowledgeable client (Holt & Blevins, 2007). Now, the ads require little imagination or knowledge to decipher beyond a few acronyms that are easy for even the uninitiated to interpret using online urban dictionaries. Prostitutes post nearly nude body shots, mostly in lingerie, and give specific information about the sex acts they will and will not perform, restrictions on johns they will not service,¹ prices, the geographical location they work, whether they perform out or in-calls, and the like. Johns even have the option to check several websites for reviews of prostitutes, which include a wide range of information from other johns about their experiences, from the prostitutes' perceived sexual enthusiasm to their appearance in person to whether they were able to get the prostitute to take less money for their services.

Websites used to advertise sexual services are incredibly profitable. The most widely known website for prostitution, Backpage.com, accounted for 70% percent of online prostitution advertising in its heyday, accumulating more than \$135 million in revenue in 2014 before federal agents shut it down in April 2018 (Madhani, 2015; Savage & Williams, 2018; see also Dank, et al., 2014).

At the supplier end, individuals who sell sex online can charge more for their services compared to those working on the street (Farley, Franzblau, & Kennedy, 2014). This upcharge for services is partially due to the clientele associated with online prostitution, as they are more likely to have higher professional and educational status compared to those soliciting sex workers on the street or through advertisements in magazines. Clienteles for online sex workers are generally perceived as less threatening and/or dangerous by the prostitutes themselves (Parsons, Koke, & Bimbi, 2004; Peppet, 2013), though law enforcement officers surveyed and interviewed in this study did not agree with this perception.

There are multiple assumptions made about online prostitution by the prostitutes themselves, johns, and the general public that are not borne out by research. For example, it is a common perception among sex workers that online venues are safer than street-walking, though there is little empirical work supporting this belief is true (Farley, 2013; Glaser, 2019). There is some evidence to the contrary,

¹ This is principally based on race, with the most common restriction leveled against black men. We do not know whether this is based on negative perceptions about black men as johns or a restriction prostitutes believe white johns find appealing. There is nothing in the literature addressing this point.

in fact: *Doe ex rel. Roe v Backpage.com* alleged that pimps 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 the predation of pimps than the streets.

Prostitution is an extremely dangerous profession, but we are not certain whether this holds true both on and offline (Farley, Franzblau, & Kennedy, 2014). Based on studies focusing on streetwalkers, 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, Sanders, Platt, Grenfell, & Maciotti, 2018; Salfati, 2009). The risk of homicide victimization for female sex workers dwarfs that of both women and men in other professions (Brewer et al., 2006; Kinnell, 2008; 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, James, & Ferguson, 2008; Selby & Canter, 2009). Aside from homicide, sex workers are at extremely high risk for many types of violent victimization, particularly sexual and physical assault (Farley & Barkan, 1998; Raphael & Shapiro, 2002). The question is whether this risk is comparable, increases, or decreases when sex workers find their customers through the internet.

Sex workers often equate online prostitution practices to a lower likelihood of detection by law enforcement, mostly due to the extra time and effort necessary for such efforts. On the street, sex workers are visible and often easily identified. Identification can occur in the course of normal patrol, or in response to complaints from citizens in the area. While fairly easy to enact online stings, they require more planning and a different approach, and police are often believed to be unlikely to make the effort on a consistent basis. The generally low priority given to enforcement of illegal sex markets relative to other crimes considered more serious further reduces the likelihood of arrest in the case of online prostitution—or at least the perception of risk. Though intuitive and a seemingly logical assumption, this lesser risk of arrest online is a perception that has been accepted without empirical support (Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006).

It is important to note that some research has indicated the lifestyle associated with online prostitution provides potential health benefits compared to street prostitution (Chan & Ghose, 2014). Through examining entries in the personal ad section of Craigslist from 1999 to 2008 in 33 states, Chan and Gros found a significant negative relationship with HIV transmission cases involving prostitutes 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 & Ghose, 2014).

Overall, most of what we know about online prostitution is based on the perceptions of prostitutes, johns, and pimps. The low rate of police enforcement and illicit nature of the online sex trade make it difficult for researchers to study the online market directly, or have much faith in official statistics to tell the story, so this study seeks to at least offer another perspective that is arguably more informed, since the perceptions of law enforcement officers are based on more points of direct observation than that of individual prostitutes. While law enforcement officers are not free from their own biases, they have less skin in the game in terms of wanting to believe that online

prostitution provides more safety and reduces or eliminates most of the negatives associated with the profession, while increasing profit.

Present Study

To date, there is a gap in the literature exploring the perceptions and experiences of law enforcement regarding the enforcement of online prostitution. Given that they constitute the first formal contact with sex workers in the criminal justice system, their perceptions are extremely important. The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of law enforcement in the United States regarding the financial lucrativeness and lifestyle of those who sell sex online versus offline.

Methodology

Research Design²

Police departments in the United States located in a jurisdiction of 50,000 people or more received requests to participate in the study ($n = 689$). A cover letter and survey were mailed at the beginning of November 2018 to the various agencies requesting that the survey be completed by someone working most closely with the enforcement of sex trafficking and/or prostitution (i.e. the individual managing or was most familiar with the data related to prostitution and sex trafficking in that jurisdiction).

Participants were given three options to return to the survey: 1) completion of the enclosed survey and returning it to the researchers via mail; 2) completion of the enclosed survey and returning it to the researchers via scanning and emailing it to the designated researcher; or 3) completion of an electronic version of the survey with a provided Qualtrics link. In order to maximize candor, no identifying information was requested in the survey; therefore, individual responses could not be linked back to a particular agency.

After the initial mailing, researchers had obtained a 10.2% response rate. In mid-December 2018, participants were sent an email 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%. In mid-January, a last mailing of the survey resulted in a final response rate of 24.1% ($n = 166$).

While the response rate is low, this is not unusually low given falling response rates for survey research combined with institutional factors, and efforts were made to ensure that the sample did not suffer from nonresponse bias based on geography, type of organization, or population size (Carley-Baxter, Hill, Roe, Twiddy, Baxter, and Ruppenkamp, 2009). Response rate tends to be lower in organizational research, with an average response rate of 35.7% compared to surveys targeting individuals (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). The current crisis in recruiting and retaining law enforcement officers nationwide likely added to the difficulty in obtaining responses, as

² This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the lead researchers' University.

understaffing leads to heavier workloads in the profession and doing something optional is more likely to fall by the wayside (Police Executive Research Forum, 2019). In such an exploratory study, the goal is to gain insight rather than generalize findings to a wider population at any rate, so this issue is less a concern.

Variables

The instrument surveyed several types of information from the respondents, including demographic information, geographical location, the population of the jurisdiction, and the type of agency. The geographical location of the agency was separated by region (Northwest, Northeast, Southwest and Southeast). Respondents were asked to categorize themselves as a city/town, county, or state agency, and to provide the approximate population of their jurisdiction.

The survey also queried respondents about whether their agency had a dedicated task force for prostitution, and, if so, the approximate budget allocated to the task force, as well as any specialized training provided to the officers. Finally, respondents at all agencies were asked to approximate the number of arrests of sex workers and johns by the agency in the past year. In addition to these measures, multiple open-ended questions were posited about the respondents' perceptions about a variety of characteristics of offline versus online prostitutes, including differences in their lifestyles, perceptions of safety for each group, 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 prostitutes, as well as the safety level afforded to them by selling sex online versus offline. To further explore the basis for these perceptions, representatives from the agencies were asked to further elucidate their answers in open-ended questions.

To date, no published works have examined law enforcement officers' perceptions of online and offline prostitution, so this exploratory study is intended to determine what can be gained from this angle. 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 interrater reliability.

Results

Quantitative Results

Complete descriptive information of the sample for this study can be seen in Table 1. The majority of the respondents were from the Northeast (29.5%) and Southwest (28.3%), and nearly all police departments designated themselves as a city or town agency. The responding agencies tended to be larger, with almost 80% reporting the population of their jurisdiction between 50,000 and 249,000 people.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics (*n* = 166)

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

Table 1 (continued)

Measure	Frequency	Min	Max	Mean
No	51 (30.7%)			
Missing	24 (14.4%)			

A small percentage of the sample ($n = 38$, 22.9%) had a designated prostitution task force. 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 prostitution task force. Only eight 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 further asked to estimate the percentage of the arrests made for street versus online sex work. The average percentage of arrested for street prostitution was 8.34%, with 13.32% arrests for online prostitution. The average number of johns arrested in the past year was 16.77. The average percentage of arrests of johns that were attributed to street prostitution was 9.82%, while 12.82% of arrests were attributed to online prostitution.

The second half of the survey asked the reporting officers from each jurisdiction to share their opinions about different aspects of offline versus online prostitution. The majority (76.5%) 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 ventured an opinion. Nearly three-fourths (74.1%) felt that online prostitution was more lucrative than offline prostitution. Potentially as a result of perceived greater earnings, the majority of reporting officers felt online sex workers led a different, more positive, lifestyle. The majority of respondents (57.2%) did not feel addiction was an issue associated more strongly to online or offline prostitution. Lastly, almost 55% of prostitution cases experienced in these 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 ($-.359^{**}$, $p < .01$). The percentage of arrests for both online prostitution ($-.349$, $p < .01$) and offline prostitution ($-.248$, $p < .01$) decreased in jurisdictions without a dedicated task force. Agencies with more trained personnel and higher budgets were also more likely to have a higher percentage of arrests for online prostitution ($.508$ and $.564$, $p < .01$; $.342$ and $.442$, $p < .01$) (Table 2).

Perceptions Related to Income

In the survey, respondents from each agency were asked the following question: Do you feel that individuals who sell sexual acts online make more money than those who sell on the street? A full 74% percent of respondents felt that individuals who sold sex online made more money than those who sold sex on the street. When prompted to

Table 2 Bivariate correlations

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Geographic region of LE	1.0								
2. Approx pop of jurisdiction	.054	1.0							
3. Dedicated task force	-.018	-.359**	1.0						
4. Trained personnel TF	.039	.136	-.197*	1.0					
5. Budget TF	-.044	.119	-.427**	.421**	1.0				
6. Percetge prost street arrest	.101	.133	-.006	.151	-.045	1.0			
7. Percetge prost online arrest	.072	.237*	-.349**	.508**	.564**	.055	1.0		
8. Percetge john street arrest	.085	.063	-.050	.160	-.040	.917**	.085	1.0	
9. Percetge john online arrest	.036	.191	-.248*	.342**	.442**	-.075	.792**	-.088	1.0

Note: + $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

provide open-ended responses to elaborate on their response, the majority noted the increased desirability of prostitutes capable of advertising themselves—or being advertised by others—online:

“Online is probably more desirable looking person that may not have the “look” of the street. Cleaner, better looking, more desirable may equal more money.”

And:

“Online sex workers often charge more because they are younger, more attractive, and cleaner. They also can pick appealing profile pictures and charge more. Street sex workers are just looking for quick money and can charge less.”

And:

“Street level prostitution often involves sex workers who are on the lower rung of the business. Although people engaged in this type of work can see a high volume of customers, the fee they command for services is usually lower than online sex workers. Also, from my experience, street level sex workers regularly engage in drug abuse, which may cut into the profit margin. There is also a higher number of pimps involved with street workers than in the online world.”

Many officers asserted that while sex workers who advertise online may charge more, they are not necessarily bringing home a higher net income due to several factors, including expenses and the profits taken from managers (aka pimps):

“They gross more with each engagement. They have more expenses and are far more likely to be pimped in our experience.”

And:

“The prices are higher for online prostitution and are better controlled. However, from investigations we have seen large amounts of money wired to other cities from these sex workers. Is online prostitution more profitable? Yes. Do the sex workers make more money? No.”

And

“Many of the individuals who sell sexual acts are not seeing the money for the sexual acts, no matter where the sex is being sold. Those facilitating the sexual acts are the ones profiting.”

Lastly, it is important to note that officers recognized that income level may differ between online and offline sex workers simply because of the environment available for the sex act, as well as the type of clientele seeking out online sex workers:

“They have a larger base/audience in which to obtain clients (the internet) and provide a location (room) which appeals to clients trying to be more discrete. It also allows the sex worker to provide a more relaxed, entertainment type of service more appealing to the john.”

And

“Online sex workers generally charge more and cater to affluent clientele.”

Perception of Lifestyle.

In the mail survey, respondents were asked the following question: Do you feel that individuals who sell sexual acts online live a different lifestyle than those who sell on the street? More than 60% of respondents felt online sex workers live a different lifestyle. When asked to elaborate on the dichotomous response, a clear theme emerged indicating that many officers felt that online prostitutes had a lifestyle preferable to offline prostitutes. Specifically, individuals who solicited sex online often had other employment, and were prostituting themselves on the side to make additional money. According to respondents, online prostitutes appeared to be of a different socioeconomic status and “cleaner” compared to those who solicited sex on the street:

“Females who solicit online usually have another job and are doing this for either entertainment or to assist with family needs such as paying bills, taking care of children, etc. The females maintain themselves personally/hygienically compared to street level individuals who have not bathed in days because they are homeless.”

And:

“People are internet and technology savvy—often belong to “other respectable” professions or jobs. They do this on the side for fun or to experiment and appease the baser instincts, or as a dare, or simply to make some extra cash. These people may be introverts who are afraid of social interaction. The people who sell on the street tend to be from a lower socio-economic strata, often uneducated comparatively. These individuals may belong to a ring, brother, or pimps.”

And:

“The online sex workers typically see themselves as having a job, whereas the the street level sex workers consistently tell us that they are “getting by.”

While the Internet allows the potential for a different type of lifestyle and appearance, multiple officers indicated that drug use was extremely prominent in their jurisdictions in both online and offline prostitution:

“Yes, but opiate addiction is prevalent in both. Those in an online lifestyle have better access to personal hygiene, food and shelter.”

And:

“When I began this work, I could pick up 3-4 girls in 30 minutes and they were all addicted to crack cocaine. Now they are using heroin.”

Other jurisdictions indicated that the online venue simply opened up more opportunities to sell sexual services. In fact, much of the behavior is influenced by the desire to have a connection with the pimp and the lifestyle promised by him:

“The vast majority who are managed (or were managed) by a pimp are prostituting for survival. Most women start in their teens, and need a pimp to rent a hotel room, own a cell phone. They are so many things an adult has to help you with. Once you get older, you know the business, post an ad online, and can make quick money.”

And:

“Many girls get into prostitution because it is easy and there is high demand for it. They are not necessarily chasing it for the money, but for the positive reinforcement from the pimp. Girls managed by the pimp turn over ALL their money over to a pimp. All women have a quota and if they meet the quota, they receive positive reinforcement.”

Discussion

This exploratory study provides a unique, if modest contribution to the literature through examining law enforcement perceptions about the differences in the profitability and lifestyle factors associated with online prostitution versus offline prostitution. This offers insight into possible areas for training officers to increase understanding about many of the harsh realities of prostitution, both on and offline. Many of the respondents appeared to understand the realities beyond the airbrushed notion that prostitution is a choice made of free will, and that it provides a good living or any semblance of safety—a notion that is more prevalent in the guise of online “escort” work—but many responses indicated that some officers have not questioned this belief (Dalla, Xia, & Kennedy, 2003; Farley, 2013; Sanders, 2007). One officer shared that he had encountered a prostitute making \$30,000 a month, and used this experience to support his belief that online prostitutes do extremely well for themselves financially. There is an abundance of research that suggests these kind of earnings are a distant outlier, but the comment illustrates how perceptions can be skewed by experience or more accurately informed by them. While there are undoubtedly prostitutes making good money and living a lifestyle commensurate with that income, a wealth of research confirms that these prostitutes are exceptional in this experience, and that this success is difficult, if not impossible to maintain as the prostitutes age, especially given the impact of the profession on both physical and mental health (Cusick, 2006; Bellhouse, Crebbin, Fairley, & Bilardi, 2015; Farley, 2004; O’Doherty, 2011; Sanders, 2004; Sohn, 2016; Vanwesenbeeck, 2005).

Nearly three-fourths (74%) of officers believed that online prostitution was more lucrative than street prostitution. Additionally, over 60% of respondents felt online sex workers have a lifestyle preferable to those working offline. Many officers noted that this income differential and perceived more desirable lifestyle might be due to the polished appearance that is necessary to conduct business online compared to walking the street. The officers certainly perceived that online prostitutes were better able to at least advertise being clean, more physically attractive, and more affluent, whereas offline prostitutes are more commonly found in cheap clothing, with poor hygiene (sometimes due to homelessness), and, often, physical signs of drug addiction and other indications of a rougher life.

Despite the appearances promoted online, many officers believed the general view that online prostitutes have a financially lucrative lifestyle as a result of their gross earnings is a misconception, due to several factors. First and foremost, many officers noted that most online prostitutes are managed by a pimp, and thus do not get to keep the greater profits they make online. This perception runs counter to claims in the mainstream media that most online prostitutes are independent workers, and that one unintentional consequence of eliminating online sex markets is that these online prostitutes are better able to avoid pimps online (see, e.g., Schragar, 2018). In addition to the law enforcement officers’ reported experience, the presence of a great deal of sex trafficking online also calls this claim into question, as does interviews with prostitutes describing the difficulty they face avoiding pimps posing as customers online. There is currently only one study in which pimps were interviewed about their use of the internet to market prostitutes, and it lays bare that pimps are driving the internet market—and that police enforcement of internet prostitution has very limited potential to deter pimps

from managing their prostitutes online (Stalans & Finn, 2019). None of the respondents mentioned the increased expense associated with selling sex online, especially in the case of in-calls, where a prostitute needs to maintain a residence with enough privacy to conduct business that is also clean and not off-putting to johns (Farley, 2013). Overall, while most prostitutes may be charging more for their services, the majority of officers do not believe that most are keeping more money as personal earnings.

A *Pretty Woman* scenario is nearly as likely as a lottery win in the world of prostitution, and most law enforcement officers surveyed seemed well-aware of this (Parsons, Koke, & Bimbi, 2004; Peppet, 2013). Given their level of contact with prostitutes, this is not surprising. But even in the case of these officers, a few responses suggested that better training might be necessary to aid in understanding and responding to most prostitution cases. For example, one respondent's view of earning power was clearly formed through his interaction with one online prostitute who reported a monthly income of \$30,000. Officers are no less susceptible to the availability heuristic, in which a particularly memorable example shapes perceptions in a disproportionate manner, than any other human being, and, in this case, the officer's description belied a level of resentment at these spectacular earnings with a concurrent lack of empathy for online prostitutes.

Just as prostitutes themselves might hold skewed perceptions regarding their relative safety online in order to feel safer, officers' perceptions are undoubtedly shaped by a number of factors, such as their relative level of experience in vice, their religious beliefs, and the particular cases they have encountered. The sexual nature of the offense only adds to the likelihood that perceptions will be impacted by ideological, emotional, and psychological factors. Shame, fear management, and stigma management are likely influencing reported perceptions of prostitutes, as well (Bachman, Rodriguez, & Kerrison, 2019). As such, all qualitative research, including this exploratory study, are less than ideal, but given the illicit nature of the market and the low level of enforcement, they are the most viable option to try to gain an understanding of what is really going on in the world of prostitution. While officers' perceptions are shaped by factors beyond the facts, they are less invested in the market than participants, and have a broader base of experience on which to base their observations.

Many of the respondents who provided qualitative comments on the survey also noted that drug use was prevalent in both online and offline prostitutes, but it was more readily apparent more in the case of street prostitution. This is likely due to a selection bias in online markets that favors younger, more attractive, and less desperate prostitutes (Bernstein, 1999; Murphy & Venkatesh, 2006; Surratt, Kurtz, Weaver, & Iniardi, 2005). Those who are not pimped are more likely to be technologically savvy, and those who are pimped are deemed worth the investment of time and energy to advertise online (Stalans & Finn, 2019). As such, there is a distinct class system present between on and offline markets in which prostitutes either start out selling sex on the street, or end up on the street as a result of aging, appearance, the ravages of drug use, and the like (Stalans & Finn, 2019).

Some research suggests that the sense of greater security experienced by online prostitutes delays exiting the profession, raising the likelihood that an online prostitute will transition to street work over time (Cusick, 2006; Prebble, Magruder, & Cimino, 2019). Drug use and incarceration are also factors that delay exiting the profession, so the finding that online prostitutes account for a slightly greater number of arrests than

offline prostitutes also has implications for the duration of careers in the sex market (Bachman, Rodriguez, & Kerrison, 2019). Where drug use and the risk of arrest are concerned, the perceptions of law enforcement officers about online prostitution run counter to the perceptions of the general public, johns, and prostitutes (Farley, Franzblau, & Kennedy, 2014).

Some prostitutes believe doing business online makes it easier to avoid being pimped, and recent legislative efforts to curb sex trafficking, such as the Stop Enabling Online Sex Trafficking Act (SESTA) and the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), which hold websites liable for hosting illegal transactions, have been criticized for the unintended consequence of driving some prostitutes into the hands of pimps (Glaser, 2019). However, there is little empirical evidence to support the notion that conducting business online makes it easier for individual prostitutes to avoid being pimped; both pimps and sex traffickers conduct a significant amount of their business online, and troll advertisements of independent prostitutes for the purposes of recruitment (Farley, Franzblau, & Kennedy, 2014; Stalans & Finn, 2019). The responses from law enforcement officers suggest that online prostitutes are already being pimped, so these legal efforts are unlikely to do much to change this. However flawed and ineffective, legislative efforts to curb internet prostitution are still necessary if police and prosecutors are to even begin trying to help pimped and sex trafficked women (see Maras, 2017).

The finding indicating that only 38% of responding law enforcement agencies had a dedicated prostitution task force speaks to the low priority given to combatting this crime, as well as the difficulty many agencies have when it comes to manpower. The finding that just less than four in ten larger jurisdictions even have task forces indicates the need for more resources to be dedicated to combatting online prostitution if agencies expect make a dent in these illegal markets. Marcum and Higgins (2011) found that the presence of dedicated task forces increased arrest frequencies in technology-assisted exploitive crimes against children, suggesting that similar gains might be made in the case of online prostitution.

More studies are needed to better understand the online prostitution market in order to prevent and reduce crime, and more extensive interviews with law enforcement officers might be a key component in developing a fuller picture of the current situation, including areas of inquiry such as the impact of online work on desistance, more specific areas of training for officers, and officers' ideas about the most effective law enforcement response to prostitution. As the front line in addressing this market, officers clearly have important insight that should be tapped.

While this study contributed to the limited literature in this area, it is important to note that it is rife with limitations. First, the fact that the majority of the respondents were from the Northeast and Southwest raises the question as to whether their perceptions could be different from those in other regions. In addition, perceptions might differ by the size of service area, and nearly 80% of the agencies were in a jurisdiction with a population between 50,000 and 249,000. Law enforcement in smaller or larger areas may have felt differently, or have had different experiences to report.

Finally, online prostitution is a growing problem for many agencies, especially as many officers reported a strong tie with human trafficking, which is given a higher priority given the recognition of those being sold for sex as victims. But many researchers and advocates have noted that prostitution often meets the legal definition

of sex trafficking, which generally includes the elements of “coercion, force, fraud, or abuse of power to trap a victim in an exploitive situation” (Farley, 2013, p. 103). In many international definitions of sex trafficking, consent is irrelevant due to these elements. A meta-analysis of eighteen studies produced an estimate that 84% of female prostitutes are under third party control, whether by a pimp or trafficker (Farley, 2013, p. 104). The officers in our sample tended to work on both trafficking and prostitution, and it seems likely that their experience working with trafficking victims might be drawing the attention of law enforcement officers to the negative impact of the sex market more generally. Further research is needed on this intersection.

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