

# The Social Control of the Commercial Sex Industry: Qualitative Reflections on the Police

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**Abstract.** The social control of prostitution has resulted in enormous expenditures of police time and resources in many communities across the United States. Police strategies such as aggressive hot spot patrols and sting operations resulting in multiple arrests of prostitutes are commonly used by social control agencies. It is questionable whether strategies such as these are effective in resolving prostitution both in the long and short term. Furthermore, there is a dearth of literature that assesses the perceptions of police officers themselves toward the social control of prostitution. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to examine the perceptions of police officers toward prostitution using interviews as the data collection strategy. Results indicate that many officers believe that traditional enforcement strategies are ineffective in dealing with prostitution. Officers also reported that while legalization of prostitution does not fit within the moral framework of the community, it would lower the frequency of harm, and that sexually transmitted diseases and associated instances of drug use and interpersonal violence, are the principle social pathologies for which they are concerned.

## 1. Introduction

This specific study was an outgrowth of a larger study on commercial sex work here in Wichita, Kansas. Wichita and the surrounding community have experienced issues with commercial sex work throughout their long history. However, street prostitution in the North and South Broadway areas constitutes the only configuration with which the public is largely aware. The researchers conducting this study were not fully aware of the actual diversity in venue that existed within the community, although we were aware that approximately eight escort services operated in the area. Within the context of the larger study we were interested in understanding to what extent police interventions, or the threat of such, structured these activities. Describing the nature and frequency of police officers' interactions with commercial sex workers and their controllers is one way of triangulating this information.

## 2. The Study

We initially framed this part of our investigation as a case study. Creswell (1998) defines a case study as the exploration of a bounded system, case or multiple cases over some period of time through detailed, in depth data collection. This study was bounded within the Sedgwick County law enforcement community, and included the sampling of county, city and federal law enforcement officers as its primary data source. Other data sources used included document analysis of escort service licensing data, reviews of web-based discussions among patrons of prostitutes and non-participant observation of several locals. Additionally we identify this as an *instrumental case study* due to (a) our need to develop contacts and informants, familiar with commercial sex work within the community, and (b) the general exploratory nature of this study.

We utilized a snowball sampling procedure, and through subsequent referrals we were able to interview eleven law enforcement officers (n = 11). Snowball sampling is a technique where the researcher obtains knowledge of potential participants from people who know people who meet research interests. While a larger, randomized sample would have allowed us to produce some generalizations about police officers in the area, such a procedure was not possible due to a lack of funding and administrative access to these police agencies. As pointed out previously, this case study is exploratory in nature, which means that we did not fully understand the boundaries and parameters of the system prior to entry. In many ways this study represents a first attempt at generating this type of information about police officer perspectives.

Initially we asked officers three questions, and shortly after beginning the interviews, we added two questions about how they experienced interactions with commercial sex work populations. These five questions are as follows:

1. What are your perceptions in regards to expending time and resources toward the enforcement of prostitution laws?
2. What are your perceptions regarding whether or not prostitution should be decriminalized and regulated?
3. What are your perceptions regarding whether or not prostitution results in social harms?
4. Has your area of responsibility encountered any problems with prostitution?
5. How are these problems being handled?

Responses were analyzed through a technique developed for grounded theory by Corbin and Strauss (1990). Creswell (1998) describes this as a process which consists of building categories for the responses (open coding), demonstrating connection between categories (axial coding) and finally building several theoretical positions from those connections (selective coding). While exploration rather than theoretical proposition was the specific goal of this study, we believe that this type of holistic analysis allowed us to effectively describe the response themes presented by participants.

Our later experiential question resulted in an expansion of our understanding of commercial sex venues within the Wichita area. In addition to street prostitution and escort service work, which we were already aware, we added brothel services and strip club services. Brothel services we had not even considered as a category within Wichita, and strip clubs services we had originally framed as being outside the focus of our research project. Yet officers repeatedly demonstrated that they viewed these four venues as being outlets for prostitution. Police interactions with these four venues include traditional ordinance enforcement by patrol officers, prostitute stings, john/customer stings, development of confidential informants, and rehabilitative projects and opportunities.

Concerning perceptions of the time and resources expended on dealing with prostitution, the general themes included (a) insufficient resources to effectively control prostitution within their area through ordinance enforcement and sting operations, (b) current operations only result in temporary geographic displacement, and (c) that they are frustrated with the understanding that criminal prosecution of prostitution is a revolving door.

With respect to the social harms perceived to be associated with commercial sex work, general themes included (a) the vectoring of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), (b) concomitant usage of illicit drugs and interpersonal violence, (c) enablement and accommodation of other criminal endeavors, and (d) disruption of familial relationships.

In terms of decriminalization or legalization, themes included the belief that (a) legalization or decriminalization does not fit the moral framework of the community, (b) frequency of harms present in illicit sex work would be reduced with presence of some legal venue for the activity, (c) doubt concerning the elimination of illicit sex work due to the economic stratification of the four venues previously listed, and (d) breaking the connection between sex work and illicit drug markets would not be accomplish with such a change in disposition.

### **3. Conclusions**

Qualitative research methodology allows a mode of exploration which is extremely valuable in understanding our social world. This study has allowed the researchers to better understand the categories of sex work and interactions occurring within the community, which allows for the development of more robust studies for evaluating the relationships between individual action and the structuring of the social world.

Further research is sorely needed in order to more effectively understanding the nature of economic stratification within the local commercial sex work industry. Such information will allow policy makers and community members to better inform any changes they might employed. This research demonstrates that heightened levels of community interaction are needed in order to adequately address the social harms associated with these activities in an era of underinvestment in community law enforcement. Finally, since elimination of sex work is impossible, efforts need to be made to help policy makers more readily view their work as “regulation” rather than “elimination” as the later appears to be an unrealistic goal.

### **4. Acknowledgements**

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[1] Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

[2] Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13(1), 3-21