Summary of Recent Academic Research on Ending Demand

The following is a brief list of current research on ending demand for commercial sex. While this list is not meant to serve as a comprehensive literature review, it does identify many widely-used sources in the field.

The listed resources are divided into three primary categories of research:

- Policies and Legislation Targeting Demand
- Strategies for Ending Demand
- Who Creates the Demand and How to Deter Them

Policies and Legislation Targeting Demand


This article looks at the history and the principles behind the Swedish legislation against prostitution and human trafficking. It discusses the law, which criminalizes demand for purchased sex, including all forms of sexual services, whether purchased on the street or “inside,” and provides money and assistance to women who have been prostituted. Following the passage of the law, it was estimated that the number of women involved in prostitution decreased by about thirty to fifty percent, and that women were no longer being recruited. Also, one study reported that the number of women in prostitution decreased from about 2,500 to 1,500 between 1999 and 2002, and was no more than 500 by 2004. Denmark, by comparison, which does not have legislation prohibiting the purchase of sexual services, had about 2,000 women in Danish street prostitution in the 1990’s and about 5,500 – 7,800 in 2004. When buyers risk punishment, this article argues, the number of men who buy prostituted women decreased and the local prostitution markets become less lucrative to traffickers and pimps.


This study looks at interviews with law enforcement officers in Denver, Colorado to learn about their assumptions about who buys and sells sex, their protocols and punishments involved in prostitution-related offenses, and their motivations to engage in enforcing laws against prostitution.

This article looks at the role of men in the purchase and abuse of women in prostitution. It argues that the consequences of legalizing prostitution is the expansion of the sex industry, as evidenced in Victoria, Australia and New Zealand in which brothels increased in number and expanded in size after the passage of the legislation. It briefly addresses who the men are who form “demand” for purchased sex and then discusses programs and policies that address demand.


This article looks at the justifications for the Swedish law and what has happened since its passage in 1999. It argues that potential customers’ fear of getting caught has led to an increasingly difficult environment for pimps and traffickers to operate—thus the decrease in demand has led to a decrease in women in prostitution. This contrasts with Denmark, which has legalized prostitution and significantly higher numbers of people in prostitution. The article also discusses challenges to effective implementation of the Swedish law including a critique of the language of the law and provides ideas for how these challenges might be remedied.


This article is the completed version of the 2010 Working Paper above.

**Strategies for Ending Demand**


This chapter argues that the primary goal of law enforcement with regards to human trafficking should be reducing the demand for prostitution as a preventative measure to sex trafficking. The author argues that potential buyers can be deterred with the real threat of arrest. Many laws that criminalize buyers exist, both in other countries and in many states, and these laws should be strictly enforced such that potential sex buyers know they could legitimately face consequences. He argues that there should only be exceptions for cooperation with law enforcement to track down pimps and other patrons. Other strategies for reducing demand include charging related crimes, using reverse electronic stings, establishing a police presence through undercover visits or by stationing police cars outside of known venues with sexual activity, naming and shaming sex buyers, creating john schools, and using media campaigns to explain the harms in prostitution.

This brief report looks at “John Schools” as one potential method for reducing sexual exploitation by focusing on demand. A John School is a rehabilitative and educational program for men who have been arrested for patronizing, or attempting to patronize, prostitution. Similar to drug rehabilitation programs or traffic school, men who have been arrested can opt to attend a John School as either part of their sentence or in lieu of a criminal sentence. There are numerous programs that exist throughout the United States and abroad, and the report describes various John School programs as well as research on the efficacy of those programs. Most programs include educational material about the harms of prostitution to the women involved and to the communities in which it exists as well as potential dangers of engaging in prostitution. The report includes a lengthy appendix of information about different John Schools throughout the U.S.


This article briefly summarizes information about who the demand is for purchased sex and their motives for purchasing sex acts. Next it reviews a variety of strategies for addressing the demand side of trafficking and prostitution—including the criminalization of purchasers of sex acts through legislation, car confiscation programs, John schools, community efforts to reduce demand such as neighborhood safety organizations, naming perpetrators on billboards, publishing men’s names in “black books,” faith-based initiatives focused on treatment and healing for men, and awareness campaigns about child sex tourism.


This article summarizes the anti-sex trafficking movement, including the analysis of various non-profit organizations and political groups. It argues that the victim-centered approach to fighting sex trafficking has failed to focus attention on the perpetrators of trafficking crimes and presents this new approach.


A brief guide to big questions about demand, prostitution, and trafficking—including definitional questions, questions about policy debates, and about how demand interacts with the policy analysis.


This was a report commissioned by the Hunt Alternatives Fund to conduct a landscape analysis of existing programs aimed and demand and to recommend a strategic plan of action to eliminate sexual slavery and exploitation. The landscape analysis included a review of programs and practices currently used to combat demand, a review of federal and state laws and policies, and summaries of lessons learned from social marketing campaigns.
The researchers recommended three broad frameworks within which to combat demand: public education and awareness, training and providing assistance to law enforcement, and prevention education.


This is an evaluative report on the First Offender Prostitution Program in San Francisco, implemented by the San Francisco District Attorney’s office, San Francisco Police Department, and Standing Against Global Exploitation (SAGE). The program is designed to educate men who have been arrested for soliciting prostituted women about the harms of prostitution. This evaluation found that the program was well conceived, was implemented as intended, was organizationally stable and sustainable, cost-effective, transferable, and was effective in reducing recidivism rates among men who had been arrested for solicitation. It also provided suggestions for program improvement including curriculum development, aftercare, reverse stings via the Internet, and areas for future research.

**Who Creates the Demand and Deterrents to Demand**


This study looks at arrest records from numerous jurisdictions, particularly in Colorado Springs, Colorado, between 1970 and 2000. They try to answer the following questions – 1) whether arrest acts as a specific deterrent to patronizing a prostituted person; 2) the prevalence of clients overall and the subset of clients who are violent toward prostituted persons; 3) how clients differ with the general population of men in terms of demographics and geography; 4) and how clients who are violent toward prostituted women differ from clients overall in terms of demographics, geography, and criminal history. While this study made some interesting findings, it should be noted that because the results were based only on arrest records, there is some bias based on who was actually caught and arrested for patronizing.


In this study, researchers interviewed 159 men in nine popular Chicago bars and asked them questions regarding the purchase of sex, their interactions with law enforcement, and their understandings of the women and children involved in the sex industry. Of the 159 men surveyed, eighty-one percent had been to a sex trade venue at least once in their lifetime, and there were no significant differences in demographic characteristics between users and non-users of the sex trade industry. Only four of the 129 men who admitted they visited sex trade venues said they had any contact with law enforcement, and many of the men seemed indifferent to the harms to the women from whom they had purchased sex acts.

The report recommended that there be an increased community focus on sex buyers and establishments where illegal sex trade activity is ongoing, that there be additional research on prevention and intervention programs targeting potential and actual sex buyers, and that there be additional research on other deterrents to sex buyers.

Researchers interviewed 113 men in Chicago who buy sex and were recruited through the “Erotic Services” section of Craigslist, the Chicago Reader, and Chicago After Dark. The ages of the men ranged from twenty to seventy-one years, and most of the interviewees had attended some college or had a college or graduate school degree (seventy-nine percent). Most of the interviewees also said they had a regular sex partner, either a girlfriend or a wife (sixty-two percent). The study reported on findings about how the men located women in prostitution, when they had first purchased sex, their perceptions of women in prostitution, and their knowledge of the harms to women in prostitution, including that perpetrated by pimps. Finally, eighty-seven percent of the interviewees said that some form of public exposure, such as the publication of their name or photo in a newspaper, would serve as a deterrent to buying sex. Eighty-three percent said jail time would deter them and seventy-nine percent said that a letter sent to their family would be a deterrent.

This report also gave recommendations on prevention, community action and education, and intervention which included the development of curricula to educate youth, particularly boys, public awareness campaigns for community members and community collaboration with law enforcement, and the expansion of John Schools and batterer intervention programs to provide more intensive counseling to men who have been arrested for purchasing sex.


Study compared 101 men who buy sex with one hundred men who did not buy sex, matching them by age, ethnicity and education level. Each participant was interviewed by trained interviewers in a structured setting. The study found important distinctions between the two groups: sex buyers had many more sex partners in their lifetimes, both prostituted and non-prostituted, engaged in significantly more criminal activity than non-sex buyers, and were more prone to engage in crimes of violence against women. Their attitudes regarding prostitution and empathy for prostituted women varied significantly as well, with sex buyers exhibiting far less empathy and less acknowledgement of the harms women in prostitution suffer. The sex buyers represented men ranging in age from twenty to seventy-five, income levels from less than $20,000 to more than $140,000 per year, education from less than a high school diploma to graduate and professional degrees, and varied ethnic groups.


This study looked at the attitudes, behaviors and demographics of 110 men who purchased sex in Scotland. Researchers reported that the men who most frequently used women in prostitution were also likely to have committed sexually aggressive acts against non-prostituting women; they were also more likely to use pornography more frequently than men who used women less frequently. The men
who were interviewed also tended to accept rape and prostitution myths, such as the idea that there is no such thing as “rape” in prostitution since the women have been paid. Those interviewees who tended to endorse the most myths about rape and prostitution also tended to be those who rated the highest on the hostile masculinity identification scale, which measured the extent to which their identities as men were based on their psychological and sexual dominance of women. Men’s perceptions about women’s experiences in prostitution differed greatly from the actually reported experiences of women in prostitution from other studies, demonstrating an inability to empathize and understand the women they were purchasing for sex. The men said that deterrents would include public exposure or jail time if they believed the laws would actually be enforced.

The men included in this study ranged in age from eighteen to seventy-seven, average thirty-seven, were largely White Scottish (seventy-seven percent). About half of the men reported a family income of less than $27,600, thirty-six percent reported between $27,600 and $55,000, and eleven percent reported more than $55,000.


This study reported on the interviews of 103 men who described their use of trafficked and non-trafficked women in prostitution and their awareness of the harms that exist in the sex industry. Many of the men said they were aware of pimping, trafficking and other forms of control exerted over the women as well as of the risk factors that often lead to entry into prostitution for women. They said that deterrents to buying sex include time in prison, public exposure, and being issued an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO).


This report looks at information gathered by the John Schools in Portland, Oregon, San Francisco, California, Las Vegas, Nevada, and Santa Clara, California about the men who had participated in their programs. Information was gathered about background characteristics, attitudes, and reported behaviors of these participants, all men who had been arrested for purchasing prostitution. The final report presents findings on characteristics of the arrested clients, their sexual attitudes and behavior, motives for seeking prostitution, attitudes and beliefs about rape myths, sexual commodification, and rates of recidivism.