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**The Supply Side of the On-Line Commercial
Sex Market in Massachusetts:**

A Data Mining Study

January 2016

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THE STUDY

Regardless of your position towards the sex industry, we hope that this report will educate while it provides tools to contribute towards a movement of compassion.

INTRODUCTION

The systematic quantification of the number of people sold online for sex is a critical step in documenting local commercial sex markets in Massachusetts or in any community anywhere in the world.

By analyzing patterns within these markets, important inferences can be made about sex selling and buying trends such as the size of the

commercial sex market and the faces of the people whose bodies and sex are available in the market. Research that interviewed 71 pimps across seven major U.S. cities found that 49% reported using online ads to attract business (Dank, 2014).

The commercial sex industry is complex for everyone involved – sex buyers often consume in secret, transacted people are hidden in plain sight, traffickers benefit financially, and people that survive abuse in the industry and exit describe experiences that violate basic human rights. The online sex market has further complicated the sex industry. Dank (2014) concludes, “The spatial limitations that once governed the underground economy are gone. Now people who once would not have ventured to their city’s stroll in search of commercial sex are able to anonymously connect with [sex workers]” (p. 10).

Regardless of your position towards the sex industry, we hope that this report will educate while it provides tools to contribute to a movement of compassion. As you read, we ask that you keep two considerations in mind:

- the millions of dollars (Dank, 2014) exchanged in the United States for the sexual gratification of others;
- that anyone’s sex is for sale at the push of a button, at the call of a buyer, at the flex of a market that is not concerned with people’s

dignity or humanity, because the sex industry is focused on profits.

The Power of Many

For over a decade many organizations, public servants, advocates, providers, survivors, and concerned citizens across the Commonwealth have addressed the commercial exploitation of people. These efforts started years prior to the passing of anti- trafficking state legislation in 2011. Some of the established groups include the Boston Police Human Trafficking Unit; MA Prostitution Prevention Project; My Life My Choice; Kim’s Project (now the EVA Center); Trafficking Victims Outreach Services Network (now Matahari Eye of the Day); and the SEEN Coalition among others. Shortly after the passing of anti- trafficking law, Attorney General Martha Coakley convened a task force of interested leaders that produced the state’s first report on human trafficking (2013) titled Findings and Recommendations. Quantifying human trafficking was a pressing need identified in the report, which partly served as an inspiration and justification for RIA House’s data mining study on commercial sex.

Collaborating Across Disciplines

The study that generated this report was made possible because of the collaboration between a group of academics (William James College), research assistant volunteers*, and anti-trafficking organizations (RIA House & The Imagine Foundation) who pooled their resources to develop a study to attempt to identify trends in the Massachusetts online sex market.

Following Weitzer’s (2014) rationale for microlevel studies of human trafficking and issues related to the crime, such as commercial sex, this group of

¹ Dank, M. (2014). The Hustle: Economics of the Underground Commercial Sex Industry. Urban Institute: Washington, D.C. retrieved from <http://apps.urban.org/features/theHustle/index.html>

collaborators agreed that a study of the local online sex market was a desirable first research project to potentially contribute to anti-trafficking efforts in Massachusetts. Unlike macro-level studies, which attempt to generate findings about the prevalence of human trafficking, the group of research collaborators agreed that a micro level study could provide information about the local nuances of the crime. Some of the potential benefits of microlevel studies outlined by Weitzer that relate to this data mining study include: 1. more accurate victimization numbers; and 2. potential to identify trafficking “hot spots.”

Study Methodology

The study was reviewed and approved by William James College’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). From March 1, 2015- May 31, 2015 ten research volunteers from RIA House and William James College collected daily data from the Escort, Male Escort, and Transgender sections of the adult services listings on the website www.Backpage.com for the geographic areas of Boston and Worcester. Research assistants entered specific categories of information in a secure, shared spreadsheet within 24 to 72 hours of ad postings.

The Imagine Foundation provided the online spreadsheet, which has been used to run similar data gathering projects in other US cities. Information in the shared document included the following fields: unique posting identification numbers for each listing as generated by Backpage.com; phone number; primary geographic location; secondary and tertiary locations; gender; race; number of people advertised in each listing; face shown or not shown in ad; price by hour; and a “notes” field where researchers were trained on entering any unusual body markings or text in the ad, and/or if a photo appeared to be that of a minor based on personal assessment.

Additionally, to determine the accuracy of numbers of ads logged, a separate RIA House volunteer developed

a web crawler computer program to automatically search every listing every hour within the Massachusetts region on Backpage.com. The program was run from May 15th 2015 to September 1st 2015. From May 15th 2015 to June 15th 10,085 postings were found within the Boston region. For the same time period 15,159 postings of ads were found across all regions (Boston, Cape Cod, South Coast, Springfield, and Worcester). From May 15th 2015 to September 1st 2015, 82,672 postings of ads for sex were found across all regions.

Volunteers were trained prior to collecting data, and met at the mid-point for additional advisement and support. All volunteers had daily access to the study’s director through telephone and email. To decrease the likelihood of volunteer burnout, data entry was limited to one day of the week for those logging Boston data, and those entering data in Worcester (less volume) did so on multiple days of the week.

If a research assistant suspected that a listing showed a minor child, a child that looked under the age of 18 years old, that posting was flagged and the study’s director reported it to the national center for missing & exploited children through a protected web portal.

At the request of the research assistant volunteers, a final appreciative inquiry debriefing group was conducted by the study’s principal investigators. The volunteer group gave permission for the debriefing to be recorded. Preliminary results of their reactions to the experience of reviewing and entering data will be provided at the end of this report.

RESULTS

A Robust Market & Many Faces

During the research period, research assistants gathered information on more than 18,000 advertisements. Ads without telephone numbers were excluded from results, leaving a total of about 16,997 postings to analyze. Our final tally included roughly 15,500 individual advertisements for the Boston area and 1,447 for the Worcester area. Of this total, several hundred ads were reported into the National Missing and Exploited Children secure web portal, as minors.

Online Posting By Race

When considering all postings, we found that Whites comprised about 43% of all advertisements, while Blacks made up about 18%, Asians about 17% and Hispanics about 14%. Approximately 8% of postings were comprised of various racial minorities.

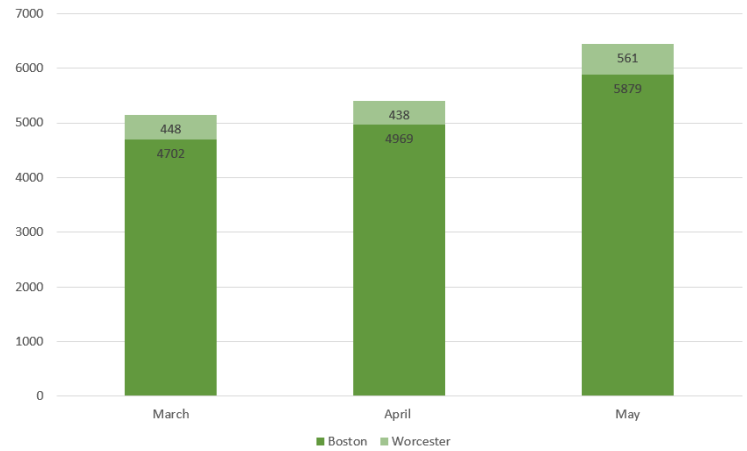
Among the categories of escorts, we found that Whites represented between 44%-50% of the female and male escorts in both Boston and Worcester regions. In Boston, the remaining advertisements for females were 18% Asian, 16% Black, and 12% Hispanic.

In Worcester, the non-white female escorts were 23% Hispanic, 19% Black, and 7% Asian. In Boston, the non-white male escorts were 19% Black and 19% Hispanic. In Worcester, non-white male escorts were 30% Black and 20% were noted as being Other.

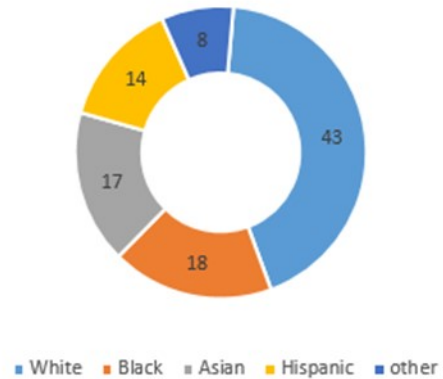
Online Posting By Gender

Of the Boston postings, 14,021 (90%) were female, 342 (2%) were male and 1,187 (8%) were transgender. The Worcester postings were proportionally similar: 1,386 (96%) were female, 10 (1%) were male and 51 (3%) were transgender.

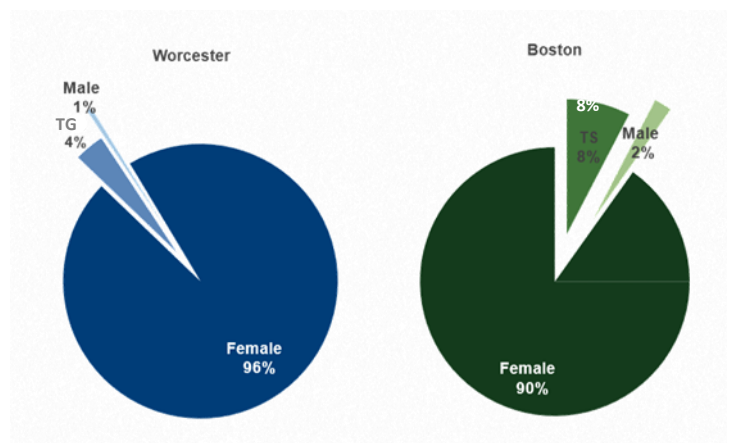
Total Number of Ads By Region By Month



Total Online Postings by Race, Worcester & Boston



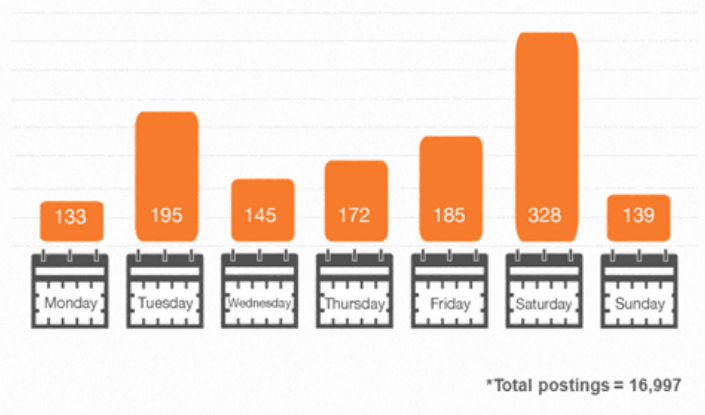
Total Online Postings By Gender



Demand By Day of the Week

While the total number of advertisements in Worcester were similar in March (448) and April (438), the number increased to 561 advertisements in May. The number of postings in Boston increased during each month of our study with 4,702 in March, 4,969 in April, and 5,878 in May. We found that more advertisements were placed on Saturday than any other day of the week. When we combined the numbers of advertisements for both Boston and Worcester, we found that Saturdays averaged 328 postings. The average number of postings for other days, were in descending order, Tuesday (195), Friday (185), Thursday (172), Wednesday (145), Sunday (139), and Monday (133).

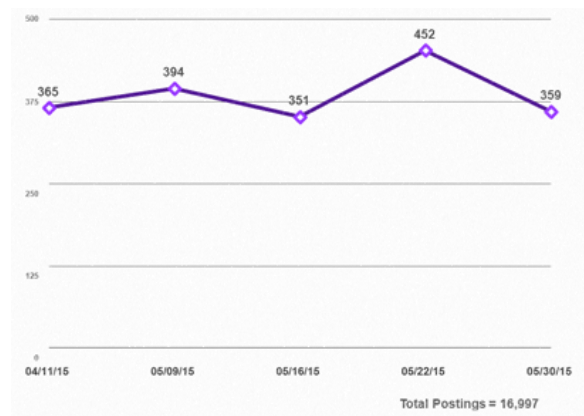
Demand By Day of the Week



Holiday Demand

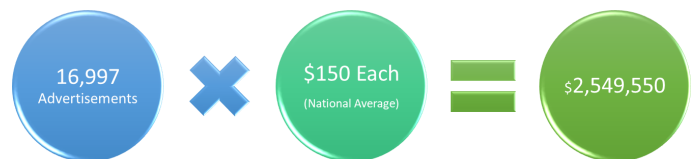
Spikes in numbers of advertisements occurred on several days. There were 365 postings on Saturday, April 11. On Saturday, May 9, the day before Mother's Day, there were 394 postings. Saturday, May 16 had 351 advertisements. The start of the Memorial Day weekend, Friday, May 22, showed 452 postings, which was significantly higher than any other day during our research period. Saturday, May 30 had 359 postings.

Spikes in Advertisements by Date



The Pain Quotient: The Cash Flow of the Commercial Sex Industry

The prices were predominantly in the \$200/hour range for female and transgender individuals. Male escorts in both Boston and Worcester tended to be in the \$150-\$180/hour range. The approximate cash flow generated for the period studied, if but one transaction had been generated per advertisement, was \$2.5 million US dollars.



All Over the Map

One common myth about the commercial sex industry is

that it thrives in high crime and poverty-stricken neighborhoods. An assumption that may be partially true in the case of street prostitution. In contrast, the online sex industry analyzed for this study, low crime and high-income parts of the city garnered the highest number of advertisements.

Now You See Me, Now You Don't

Spikes A review of all postings (16,997) revealed that in 49% of postings a person's face was shown while in 51% of the face was either not shown or just partially shown so that the individual could not be identified.

We found that 40% of the advertisements for Whites or Blacks showed the individual's face. In advertisements for Asians, 90% of the faces were shown. Faces were shown about 50% of the time when the race was categorized as Hispanic. Faces were shown in about 70% of the advertisements for Pacific Islanders, about 80% in listings for individuals from the Middle East, 55% of the time for those identified as Indian, and about 18% in postings when the race could not be identified.



SUPPORTING TRAFFICKING

RESEARCH TEAMS

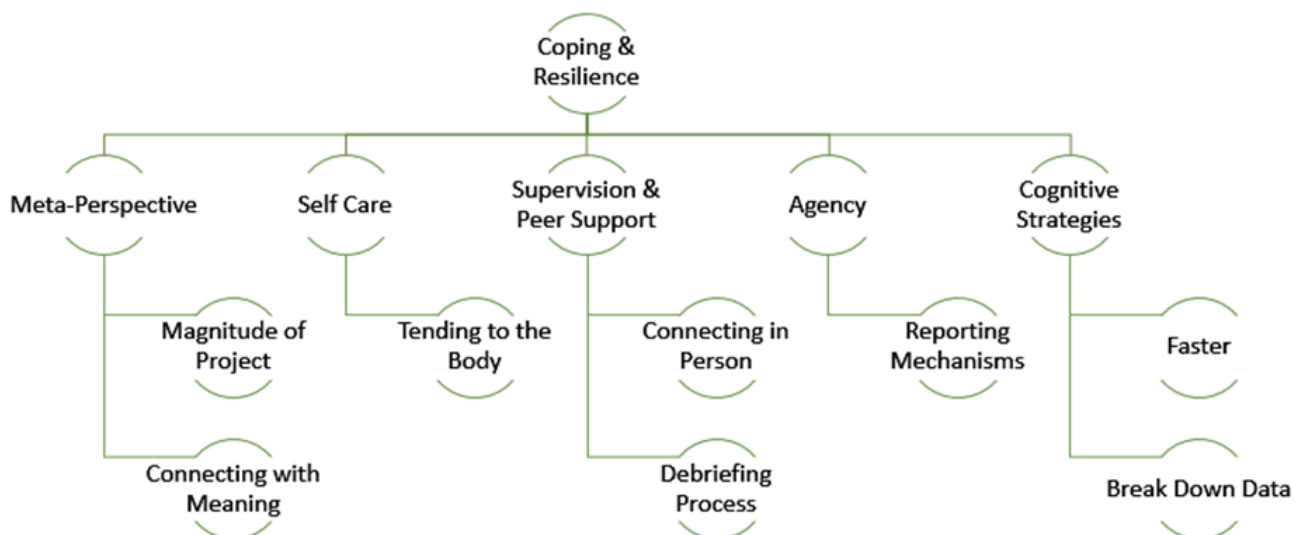
Because we were aware that the research assistant group would be exposed to potentially disturbing material during data entry, the research directors took several measures to attempt to regulate their experience (see full description in methodology). Additionally, the group of research assistant volunteers were invited to debrief their experience of data entry for this study. They agreed for the researchers to tape record the conversation, which was guided by questions inspired in appreciative inquiry format. Thereafter, one of the research assistant volunteers coded for themes that described the research assistants' reactions during the experience, and the resources they used to cope with difficult experiences. We will present preliminary findings of the interview in this report. Major reactions to the data entry experience reported by the research assistant group include:

- Dysregulated biorhythms
 - * Difficulty sleeping
 - * Rumination about image
 - * Physically unsettling

- Feeling burdened by
 - * Quantity of ads
 - * Long hours of data collection
- Difficult feelings
 - * Anger
 - * Sadness
 - * Futility
- Experiencing isolation
 - * Family/Friends don't understand
 - * Difficulty asking for help

Opportunities to empower, normalize the experience, and validate difficulties regulating reactions appeared to be helpful. Also helpful was the feeling camaraderie with peers and the research directors. And reminders about the larger objectives of the project appeared to help the research assistants locate purpose and meaning in their work, thus decreasing the feeling of overwhelm that could lead to burnout.

The chart below outlines the coping and resilience resources that the research assistant group indicated they used to regulate the experience of data entry.



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Data Analysis

Because we were aware that the research assistant group The research team recorded data from over 18,000 Backpage advertisements posted for the Boston and Worcester sexual services section over the three month duration (March- May 2015) of this study. After a descriptive analysis of the data the following patterns were identified:

GENDER. The majority of advertisements were for women (Boston, 90%; Worcester, 96%);

AGE. Several hundred ads were reported into the National Missing & Exploited Children secure web portal. Most ads appeared to be between 18-25 years old;

RACE. Whites comprised 43% of all advertisements; Blacks 18%, Asians 17% and Hispanics 14%, and various other racial minorities 8%;

SUPPLY & DEMAND. Saturday yielded the highest number of sex advertisements, which is likely responding to high demand for sex buying. Holidays that yielded an unusually high number of sex ads included the Saturday before Mother's Day, and the start of Memorial Day weekend;

CASH FLOW. Two and a half million dollars was the conservative estimate of monies generated during the three month period that sex ads were documented;

LOCATION. Low crime and high income cities garnered the highest number of advertisements;

FACE SHOWN/NOT SHOWN. 49% of postings a person's face was shown while in 51% the face was not shown. However, when the face shown/not shown variable was reviewed by race there were larger differences. For instance, 40% of advertisements for Whites or Blacks showed the individual's face, 60% did not show their face. Whereas, in advertisements for Asians, 90% of the faces were shown.

Research Team Coping

Research assistant volunteers reported that factors that helped them cope were: mechanisms to report suspected abuse during data entry, supervision and peer support, cognitive strategies, information about the contribution of similar studies in other cities, and caring for self.

Recommendations

Based on the patterns identified in this study about the Boston and Worcester sex markets on Backpage.com during three months (March-May 2015) the following recommendations can be made:

- Sex ads were largely targeted towards high income and low crime cities, which suggests that these are areas that should be targeted to identify potential victims of sex trafficking trapped in the sex industry;
- While women were the largest group represented in the sex advertisements reviewed for this study, men and transgender persons were also advertised. Therefore, while women are still the most vulnerable group, persons of all genders participating in the sex industry should be screened for potential signs of human trafficking;
- Large differences were noted across races and gender with regard to advertisements where the person's face was shown/not shown. Such patterns should be further studied to determine if they may reveal signs of coercion.
- It is suggested that our 3-month sample is a gross underrepresentation of the on- line commercial sex market across all genders, races, and locations in the Commonwealth. Further and longer-term studies are warranted to understand trends and other logic.
- The robust sex markets suggest that first person interviews would help us understand the need for and type of services wanted by the diverse population involved.

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