



New Research Reveals Studies Linking Prostitution to Sex Trafficking are Fatally Flawed

San Francisco, Ca – Today, the Sex Workers and Erotic Service Provider Legal, Educational and Research (ESPLER) Project is promoting a [research article by Ronald Weitzer PhD.](#), of George Washington University, that systematically dismantles widely cited studies that claim that the legalization of prostitution leads to an increase in sex trafficking.

The analysis, "Flawed research on the impact of law reform," argues these widely cited studies suffer from "fatal flaws" in their design, data, and conclusions, and have dangerously misinformed public policy, court decisions, and media narratives.

Dr. Weitzer's research explains how these problematic findings have become "conventional wisdom," influencing legislative debates from Oregon to the United Kingdom, a Canadian constitutional challenge, and U.S. Congressional bills – despite studies' authors acknowledging their underlying data may be of "bad quality" and "unsatisfactory in many ways".

Among the most serious criticisms is a **"striking and severe mismatch" between the studies' variables**. The studies used aggregate national data from the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) that combines labor, organ, and sex trafficking to draw conclusions specifically about prostitution laws and their effect on the sex industry. This approach is highly misleading, as organizations like the International Labor Organization report that forced labor, not sex trafficking, constitutes the vast majority of human trafficking cases worldwide. The UNODC itself explicitly cautioned against using its figures for cross-national comparisons due to unstandardized data collection methods.

Furthermore, the studies fail to account for a crucial factor: **detection mechanisms**. Countries with legalized and regulated prostitution often have superior government oversight, such as the periodic, unannounced inspections of erotic businesses conducted in the Netherlands. This enhanced enforcement makes it more likely that trafficking will be *identified and reported*, which can give the false impression of an increase in trafficking when it is actually an increase in detection.

"The conclusion that legalizing prostitution increases trafficking is built on a house of cards," said Ronald Weitzer, author of the research note and professor emeritus at George Washington University. **"These influential studies suffer from a severe mismatch of variables, using total trafficking numbers to make claims about sex trafficking, and they completely ignore that legal systems are often better at detecting and reporting abuse. This misinformation is actively harming policy discussions and leading to laws that are based on fear, not facts."**

The research notes that multiple other high quality research shows that criminalization exposes sex workers to greater risks of assault, control, and lack of freedom, while legalization can significantly reduce exploitation and violence by affording workers rights and protections.

"Dr. Weitzer's research confirms what advocates have seen for years – **policy based on flawed data and moral panic endangers sex workers,**" said Maxine Doogan of ESPLER. "Basing policy on bad research **drives the industry further underground,** making it harder for workers to report violence, and for authorities to identify actual trafficking. We urge policymakers and journalists to consult rigorous, evidence-based research that centers the health and safety of people who trade sex."

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The Sex Workers and Erotic Service Provider Legal, Educational and Research (ESPLER) Project is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to research, policy, and legal advocacy to protect the rights, privacy, and safety of individuals in the sex industry. For more information and to access research resources, visit esplerp.org.

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