

When it comes to underage sex trafficking, pimps may not be the problem

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Media portrayals of underage sex trafficking include pimps luring girls into prostitution and then controlling, exploiting, and brutalizing them as if they were slaves, but just how representative are these images? A new study finds that pimps are only responsible for luring minors into sex work in a very small number of cases, and that they are not the reason why young prostitutes stay in the industry. This study was published in a new article from the May issue of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.

In one part of their study, the researchers analyzed the largest dataset ever collected in the U.S. from minors working in the [sex trade](#), and found that only 10% of the minors had a pimp at the time of research, only 1.6% lived with a pimp, and 47% reported not knowing a single pimp. Furthermore, pimps were responsible for initiating only 8.1% of the minors into sex work; minors were initiated by their peers 47% of the time and by customers 23% of the time.

While 87.2% of these young sex workers reported wanting to leave their line of work, none of them stated that a controlling pimp was their reason for staying. Instead, the most popular issue was economic status with challenges, including finding other employment, restricted educational opportunities, and housing – 61.4% of those responded were self-described as homeless.

"We argue that the narrative of pimp trickery and coercion distorts reality in three ways," the researchers wrote. "First, it overestimates the

role of pimps in street sex markets; second, it overemphasizes the impact of the initial recruitment stage on subsequent practices; and third, it masks or simplifies the difficult and complex choices and contingencies faced by minors who sell sex."

In a total of three separate studies, researchers Anthony Marcus, Amber Horning, Ric Curtis, Jo Sanson, and Efram Thompson analyzed data collected from active pimps, underage prostitutes, and young adult sex workers from New York and New Jersey.

"We recognize that situations of oppression and captivity do exist among this population," they wrote. "However, they were rare enough in a statistically representative sample in New York City and an intensive ethnographic census in Atlantic City to question the degree to which the dominant narratives of underage [sex trafficking](#) and resultant policies can protect the majority of vulnerable youth engaged in commercial sex markets."

More information: This new study is part of a special issue from The ANNALS titled "Human Trafficking: Recent Empirical Research," edited by Ronald Weitzer and Sheldon X. Zhang.

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