

# Introduction of Craigslist increased prostitution across U.S., study says

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Credit: University of Minnesota

As Craigslist expanded across the United States, the free classifieds website also bolstered the sex industry, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Minnesota Carlson School of

Management and the New York University Stern School of Business.

The research, forthcoming in *Information Systems Research*, shows Craigslist's entry into a county led to a 17.58 percent increase in [prostitution](#) cases.

"This estimate, we believe, is likely to be a very conservative one," says Jason Chan, assistant professor of Information & Decision Sciences at the Carlson School.

In analyzing data from 1999 to 2008, Chan and co-authors—Professor Anindya Ghose of the Stern School and Probal Mojumder from the Carlson School—found Craigslist's arrival in a market also led to both an increase in transactions by existing sex workers, as well as prompted recruitment and coercion of new ones.

"The prostitution market facilitated by Craigslist is made up of both independent sex workers and workers operating under commercial vice groups," says Ghose, the Heinz Riehl Professor of Business at the Stern School. "Craigslist's entry increases prostitution in both counties that have existing prostitution trends and those that do not, although the former set of counties experience a larger growth relative to the latter."

According to Chan, this led to greater exploitation of vulnerable populations. "The increased demand and profits that Craigslist's online marketplace created motivated crime rings to increase their sex-trafficking efforts and dragged more individuals into the sex trade," adds Chan.

Even after Craigslist shut down its adult services section in 2010 a multitude of websites such as Backpage continued to facilitate prostitution transactions. Chan attributes that to dated Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, which protects websites from being

liable for information posted by third parties.

Since the research was published online, Congress passed and the President signed the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, allowing state law enforcement officials to go after sites knowingly hosting sex trafficking content.

"The Digital Sin City: An Empirical Study of Craigslist's Impact on Prostitution Trends" was based on analysis of national panel data for 1,796 U.S. counties from 1999 to 2008. The paper is the continuation of a line of research by Chan and Ghose that explores the dark side of the internet. Previous studies have demonstrated the rise in HIV transmission as a result of Craigslist's expansion and explored the relationship between internet access and racial hate crimes.

**More information:** Jason Chan et al. The Digital Sin City: An Empirical Study of Craigslist's Impact on Prostitution Trends, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2017). [DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3057722](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3057722)

Provided by University of Minnesota

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