

How the Internet Fuels America's Underground Sex Trade

[America has always had an underground sex trade](#), and for decades most pimps followed the same general script: they'd recruit sex workers on the street, in bars and in strip clubs.

But over the past 20 years, [the internet has become the major marketplace for the sex trade](#), with online advertisements and recruitment through social media sites greatly expanding the reach and enhancing the elusiveness of pimps.

Given the level of deception inherent to the underground sex industry, its size can be difficult to fully assess. [A 2007 Urban Institute investigation](#) in eight large American cities, for example, estimated its worth at US\$39.9 million to \$290 million.

In response, government and law enforcement officials are trying to fight back.

In August, as part of its investigation of online sex trafficking, the [Senate subpoenaed the CEO of Backpage.com](#), a website commonly known for online solicitation of sex workers. This happened after [law enforcement officials](#) demanded that Backpage and Craigslist terminate personal ad sections that facilitate the illicit sex market. Meanwhile, [sting operations routinely take place](#), increasing the odds that the activities of pimps and their customers will be exposed.

Despite successful government stings, pimps nevertheless continue to adapt, operate and thrive.

As social scientists, we wanted to learn how they're pulling it off; we hoped to build on studies about how various

criminals perceive and respond to the threat of arrest.

So we went to the source: the pimps themselves.

Getting pimps to talk

To recruit interviewees, we placed the following advertisement in the survey, escort and massage sections of Backpage:

“Research team seeks to interview men 18 years or older about their experiences as managers in the erotica industry. Confidential in-person interviews last approximately one hour. Convenient (Chicago/Atlanta) location. Will pay \$60 for completed interviews. For more information to see if you qualify, call ... or email.”

Pimps who were interested either called our prepaid mobile phone or the email account attached to the project; they were then screened to see if they qualified. In Chicago, three interviewed pimps were paid \$20 for each of the two additional pimps that they referred to us. A 25-year veteran sex worker referred three pimps.

Pimps had several reasons for agreeing to the interviews. Some wanted their story in an academic book, while others believed the advertisement was actually a sex worker seeking a manager. Some simply thought the pay was worth an hour of their time.

We ended up interviewing 71 pimps: 29 of them from April to June 2013 in a private university conference room in Atlanta and the rest from April 2013 to June 2014 in a Chicago public tea shop. Most lasted for about an hour and took the form of a casual conversation.

The findings from these interviews – described in [two studies](#) published earlier this year – highlighted the various ways that pimps were able to subvert the law using language and technology.

Of those we interviewed, 67 percent used the internet to solicit clients, and all but six of these pimps continued to use Backpage or Craigslist even though they knew law enforcement was targeting these outlets.

Yet most continued to operate unabated. The secret, we discovered, was in the approach.

Avoiding detection

Ten years ago, [a study](#) described how sex clients would often use code words to avoid being targeted by stings.

After each sting, however, widespread media coverage often exposed the ways in which sex workers solicited clients – including the slang. It's now generally known that “roses” is used to indicate the amount of money charged. For example, an ad might state 80 roses for BBBJ, which means \$80 for a blow job without a condom.

Many of the pimps followed the media coverage and discovered which code words the police had learned. To continue using these words, they realized, was obviously unwise. Most stopped using the known code words. A few pimps in the Chicago sample switched to hiding their advertising of underage girls with common, objectifying code words – “doll,” “sweet girl” – that are still often chauvinistically used to describe adult women in the United States. (Most pimps, however, didn't use minors as sex workers to avoid the long prison sentence, if caught.)

In addition, the pimps didn't exclusively use the sites most frequently targeted by law enforcement. Many would diversify their ad placements, using sites on the deep web – sites that can mask original IP addresses and don't appear on standard search engines. Others advertised on specialty dating or pornography websites that catered to gay men or heterosexual adults.

Sites like Backpage also have a number of different sections; the primary place for ads selling sex are in the “adult” sections. Not surprisingly, these are the ones the police are most likely to monitor. So some pimps told us how they would move ads on Backpage from sections that the police trolled to other sections such as “services” or “dating” that received less scrutiny. Meanwhile, those still posting on Craigslist told us how they used the “casual encounters” section when the “adult services” section was removed.

Pimps also tended to use a number of additional strategies to avoid detection like avoiding references to location, using fake pictures of sex workers and minimizing written communication through text or emails. Technology like Google Voice, prepaid mobile phones and software that wipes data from hard drives were also used to hide their identities.

Hiding in plain sight

[Other social scientists](#) have found that drug traffickers and other criminals use strategies of “hiding in plain sight” and “trustworthy connections” to avoid detection.

The pimps we interviewed were no different. Many learned how to avoid getting arrested by simply bribing officials in the system. In fact, one-third of the pimps interviewed in Chicago said they had paid either a lawyer or police officer for information about how to lower their chances of detection and conviction.

Pimps were more likely to say they have an inside legal expert if they earned over \$100,000 or managed at least nine sex workers. Some of these inside legal experts were corrupt police officers who could pass along information about undercover operations that were being planned. Other pimps kept lawyers on retainers and were confident that the lawyer could successfully help them avoid having an arrest turn into a conviction. Some of these lawyers [would even advise their](#)

[clients on how to tell whether an encounter is an undercover sting.](#)

Another strategy involved crafting a veneer of legitimacy. Pimps often claimed to run massage parlors or modeling agencies, using photos with props from these professions to show they were running an actual business.

Finally, pimps used a number of tools to verify that clients and potential sex workers were trustworthy – and not undercover police officers. Clients needed to register on verification websites.

Meanwhile, rating systems for both sex workers and clients were used to minimize violent or confrontational situations that might attract police attention. There are many websites that [review escorts](#) and [clients](#), using both descriptive terms and rating scales. For example, a sex worker might give a client a low rating if the client tried to avoid paying or was too aggressive; likewise, a client might give a sex worker a low rating if the sex worker acted like she didn't want to be there.

As players in the service economy, pimps have learned to embrace the online marketplace and seem to be staying one step ahead of the law. Adapting to evolving technology and paying attention to the news is crucial.

But when that doesn't work, there's still old-fashioned bribery.

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[Loretta Stalans](#), Professor of Criminal Justice and Criminology, [Loyola University Chicago](#) and [Mary Finn](#), Director of the School of Criminal Justice, [Michigan State University](#)

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