



**WHY SEX
BUYERS
MUST BE
STOPPED
AND HOW
TO DO IT**



NATIONAL CENTER ON
SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Is ending sexual exploitation possible? Yes, but only by addressing the root cause: the sex buyer. Without those who choose to buy other people for sex, there would be no prostitution and no sex trafficking. Yet sex buyers are often left unchecked and as a result inflict incalculable harm on individuals and society. Here are evidence-based reasons why sex buyers must be stopped and recommendations on how to stop them.

1. Sex buyers inflict grave physical and psychological harm on those they purchase for sex. Survivor experience¹ and research reveal that sex buyers are responsible for **serious psychological harm,**² **as well as sexual assault,**³ **rape,**⁴ **and murder.**⁵ For example:

- Survey data from more than 10,000 men and 3,000 women across six countries showed sex buying was strongly associated with non-partner rape and using physical violence against female partners.⁶
- Data from five countries found men who reported ever buying sex were more likely to report engaging in sexual violence compared to men who never purchased sex.⁷
- In a matched sample of 101 sex buyers and 101 men who had not purchased sex, sex buyers reported committing more crimes including felonies, misdemeanors, crimes associated with violence against women, assaults, crimes with weapons, crimes against authority, burglaries, and substance abuse-related crimes.⁸



- Sex buyer harms persist even when purchasing online.⁹

2. Enforcing laws against sex buyers holds the right people accountable. Prostitution law enforcement practices traditionally have been biased against those sold in prostitution versus sex buyers. For instance, analysis of 53,240 total prostitution arrests between 1997-2010 in Harris County, Texas, revealed that **68% of arrestees were female while only 28% were male.**¹⁰ Among those arrested for first-time prostitution offenses, women were more likely to receive jail sentences than men who disproportionately received probation and fines.¹¹ Shifting law enforcement's limited resources from arresting people in prostitution toward arresting sex buyers¹² corrects this imbalance and holds those responsible for inflicting abuse and harm accountable.



3. When sex buyers are penalized, consumer-level demand is constrained. This reduces the scale of the sex trade and curtails sex trafficking.

Sex buyers do not want their behavior found out and use a variety of methods to ensure anonymity and avoid arrest.¹³ Research suggests that laws and perception of risk have an impact on sex buying behavior. For example:

- A study of adult U.S. men found that of those who purchased sex, nearly one-quarter strongly agreed that “the risk of arrest is so high I might stop.”¹⁴
- Researchers explored whether legalized prostitution expands prostitution markets thereby increasing demand for sex trafficking, or not. Their analysis of data comparing up to **150 countries** found that countries with legalized prostitution have larger international human trafficking inflows.¹⁵
- A cross-national study of **39 countries** investigating the relationship between a country’s prostitution laws and transnational sex trafficking inflows found that **sex trafficking is most prevalent in countries where prostitution is legalized.**¹⁶
- A study comparing the effect of criminalization of sex buying on the amount of sex bought in **Denmark** (sex buying is legal), **Norway** (sex buying criminalized in 2009), and Sweden (sex buying illegal since 1999), found that **purchasing sex is most prevalent where it is legal and least prevalent where it is illegal:** 2.6% of Danes had purchased sex in the past six months, compared to 1.7% of Norwegians and 0.5% of Swedes.¹⁷
 - » In Norway, research found that knowing someone who purchased sex dropped by more than 30% after its law criminalizing sex buying came into force.¹⁸
 - » This same study noted that the risk of arrest, punishment, or the loss of reputation are factors most likely to deter people from sex buying.¹⁹
- Street prostitution **decreased by more than 50%** since the implementation of the Swedish Sex Purchase Act in 1999.²⁰
- In 2002 **Germany** legalized prostitution. In 2006, Germany’s population was 10 times larger than that of Sweden, the number of people in prostitution in Germany was estimated to be 60 times higher and its number of trafficking victims nearly **62 times more than Sweden’s**, where sex buying has been illegal since 1999.²¹
- Sex buyers overwhelmingly support legalization of prostitution.²²

4. Sex traffickers are difficult to deter due to market incentives created by sex buyers. The full spectrum of sex traffickers—including peers,²³ family members,²⁴ and those in positions of power (e.g., police, clergy, institutional caregivers)²⁵—are motivated by money, and every dollar in the global sex trade originates from sex buyers. **Every victim was purchased by a sex buyer**—typically multiple sex buyers per day.²⁶ Further, “A very small portion of pimps and traffickers are ever arrested. . . . they [traffickers] are likely to be replaced as long as demand remains strong and there is **profit to be made.**”²⁷

5. Sex buyer deterrence tactics are well documented and widely implemented. At least 15 types of distinct demand reduction tactics have been used in more than 2,400 U.S. cities and counties to identify, sanction, and deter people from buying sex.²⁸

6. Demand reduction efforts work.

When implemented rigorously and consistently, demand reduction efforts are effective at curbing prostitution.

- An evaluation of a **San Francisco, CA, “john school”** sponsored by the National Institute of Justice reported a more than **40% reduction in sex buyer recidivism.** The drop was immediate and sustained for following decade.²⁹
- In a controlled experiment in **Jersey City, NJ**, a comprehensive effort which **included reverse stings targeting sex buyers reduced prostitution by nearly 70%.** Researchers concluded that the reduction was not attributable to displacement effects and likely lead to a **diffusion of crime control benefits** in surrounding areas.³⁰
- A comprehensive campaign to deter street prostitution in Ipswich, England, which included high profile police presence in prostitution hotspots, as well as a “zerotolerance” approach to sex buyers involving police cautions and arrests resulted in an **“almost complete disappearance of kerb-crawlers [i.e., sex buyers] from Ipswich streets.”**³¹
- An evaluation of a program to educate sex buyers arrested for prostitution offenses in British Columbia, Canada, **found significant, positive, attitude changes** among participants **regardless of their prostitution experience level** (i.e., “first timers,” “novices,” “sex-trade veterans”).³²

7. Demand reduction efforts are cost-effective.

- An offender education program in San Francisco operated at no cost to taxpayers.³³ The fees paid by the offenders between 1995-2007 exceeded \$3.1 million covering:
 - » all direct costs of the education program
 - » all administrative costs of the program

- » 88% of the police department’s costs for processing arrestees
- » approximately one-third of reverse sting operations
- » nearly \$1 million that supported programs for survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking.³⁴
- A comprehensive program combating sex buying that provided support for people in prostitution in the UK reduced costs to the criminal justice system by 55%.³⁵
- A US national assessment of demand reductions efforts noted that most anti-demand tactics are cost neutral and that some generate revenue through fees and fines.³⁶

8. Stopping sex buying is primary prevention.

Within criminology, “primary prevention” efforts are those directed at modifying the physical and social conditions which provide opportunity for, or precipitate, crime.³⁷ Robust efforts aimed at curbing demand for paid sex such as maintaining, strengthening, and enforcing laws that deter sex buying creates a culture that prevents harm before it happens.

9. Sex buyers are not representative of all men—buying sex is not inevitable.

- While many men have purchased sex, most have not. Of 8,201 adult males surveyed from across the US, only 6.2% bought sex within the past 12 months, while only 20.6% did so at least once in their lifetime. Among currently active sex buyers, 64% indicated “**I would like to stop buying sex.**”³⁸
- About 25% of active sex buyers reported buying sex weekly or monthly. The transactions of these **high-frequency buyers** accounted for nearly **75% of the prostitution market.**³⁹ Only about 6% of those men who purchased sex illegally reported ever being arrested for it.⁴⁰
- A separate US study of a nationally representative sample of 2,525 adult males found that 1 out of every 25 (4%) bought sex in the past 3 years.⁴¹
- A study of online sex buying analyzing data from 15 US cities estimated that 1 out of every 20 males over the age of 18 in each city was soliciting sex via online sex ads.⁴²
- The characteristics and motivations of sex buyers are not a mystery.⁴³ Sufficient information concerning sex buyers and sex buying behavior exist for targeted and proactive interventions by law enforcement agencies, policy makers, and communities to discourage demand.



HOW TO STOP SEX BUYING

Gender-based violence is endemic and decried by social movements and human rights organizations, so it makes sense that sex buyers and the gender-based harm they inflict must be stopped. Below are several recommendations aimed at achieving this vision. Recommendations A - G derive from the 2018 report *Who Buys Sex? Understanding and Disrupting Illicit Market Demand* by Demand Abolition.

- A. Shift law enforcement's finite resources from arresting and adjudicating prostituted persons toward arresting and adjudicating sex buyers
- B. Make available federal short-term funding programs to support state and local law enforcement agencies ready to make demand-reduction reforms
- C. Implement mandatory minimum fines on adjudicated sex buyers to help offset costs of survivor exit services, effective long-term sex buyer education programs, and law enforcement operations
- D. Create increasingly severe penalty structures for repeat buyers, while ensuring that sanctions are consistent with the nature of the offence and not unfairly punitive
- E. Counter messages that normalize sex buying through interventions in education and public health sectors
- F. Create and enforce employer policies prohibiting sex buying

G. Implement targeted prevention campaigns and focus deterrence communications on behavioral “nudges” such as:

- Targeted deterrence and prevention campaigns that focus on how much “safer” it is for men to engage in consensual relational sex compared to buying sex
- Scalable communications programs, especially those deployed digitally, that focus on nudging men away from exploitive sexual experiences that are highly correlated with sex buying
- Contributions from the health sector which can help reduce demand on multiple fronts
- Involvement of physicians and mental health counselors to communicate sex buying is a risky activity

H. Civil prosecutions against “sex tourists” and sex buyers⁴⁴

I. Prosecution of buyers as conspirators to sex trafficking⁴⁵

J. Prevent childhood exposure to pornography⁴⁶

K. Develop and refine existing demand reduction strategies to target the most active and privileged buyers⁴⁷

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- ² Tara S. Beattie, Boryana Smilenova, Shari Krishnaratne, and April Mazzuca, “Mental Health Problems among Female Sex Workers in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *PLOS Medicine* 17, no. 9 (2020): doi: [10.1371/journal.pmed.1003297](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1003297); W. Rössler, U. Koch, A-K. Hass, et al., “The Mental Health of Female Sex Workers,” *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 122, no. 2 (2010): 143-152, doi: [10.1111/j.1600-0447.2009.01533.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0447.2009.01533.x); Winnie Wing-Yan Yuen, et al., “Psychological Health and HIV Transmission among Female Sex Workers: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *AIDS CARE* 28, no. 7 (2016): 816–824, doi: [10.1080/09540121.2016.1139038](https://doi.org/10.1080/09540121.2016.1139038); Ju Nyeong Park, et al., “Cumulative Violence and PTSD Symptom Severity Among Urban Street- Based Female Sex Workers,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (2019): 1-22, doi: [10.1177/0886260519884694](https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519884694).
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- ⁶ Emma Fulu, Xian Warner, Stephanie Miedema, et al., *Why Do Some Men Use Violence against Women and How Can We Prevent It? Summary Report of Quantitative Findings from the United Nations Mutli-Country Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific* (Bangkok: UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women, and UNV, 2013), <http://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2016-07-19/RBAP-Gender-2013-P4P-VAW-Report-Summary.pdf> (accessed December 7, 2021).
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¹⁶ Niklas Jakobsson and Andreas Kotsadam, "The Law and Economics of International Sex Slavery: Prostitution Laws and Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation," *European Journal of Law and Economics* 35, no. 1 (2013), doi:10.1007/s10657-011-9232-0.

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²⁰ Endrit Mujaj and Amanda Netscher, *Prostitution in Sweden 2014. The Extent and Development of Prostitution in Sweden*, (Stockholm, Sweden: County Administrative Board of Stockholm, 2015), [www.lansstyrelsen.se/download/18.35db062616a5352a22a1d7a5/1559733783690/Rapport 2015-18 prostitution in Sweden 2014.pdf](http://www.lansstyrelsen.se/download/18.35db062616a5352a22a1d7a5/1559733783690/Rapport+2015-18+prostitution+in+Sweden+2014.pdf) (accessed November 16, 2021).

²¹ Cho et al, *ibid.* Note: Via personal communication Dr. Cho confirmed that these statistics were derived from data which was used but not reported in the ILO report authored by Danailova-Trainor and Belser. For that report see Gergana Danailova-Trainor and Patrick Belser *Globalization and the Illicit Market for Human Trafficking: An Empirical Analysis of Supply and Demand. Working Paper No. 78* (International Labour Office, Geneva, December 2006), www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---integration/documents/publication/wcms_081759.pdf (accessed November 11, 2021).

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