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SEX BUYERS: THE “DEMAND SIDE” OF SEX TRAFFICKING

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Thank you, I’m really pleased to be here. What I’m going to do today is share some findings from a recent study that we just completed on sex buyers. Before I get into it [the presentation] I also want to thank—I know he had to leave—but Representative Pinto. He provided a great context. And I hope that as I’m talking, you’ll think about, and just keep in your minds the context that he provided. What I’m going to do is pivot a little bit to talk about a different part of the market that we know a lot less about, and that is sex buyers. Most of my work has been working with people who are victims in sex trafficking and people who are involved in sex trading, so this was a new shift for me as well. Before I get into it, I also want thank and acknowledge that this report that we’ve completed on sex buyers at UROC (Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center) could not have been done without the support of lots and lots of people across the state. It’s a statewide study; we had help from hundreds of people, we had funding from the Women’s Foundation of Minnesota, and we had a team of 18 research staff who helped us do this project that I’m going to tell you about.

So, just a quick overview, essentially what our study does is attempt to address a very significant gap in research policy and practice about the people who purchase sex. This is often referred to as the “demand side” of the commercial sex market. There’s some basic questions about the demand side that we don’t yet have good answers for. This study was an attempt to try to develop some of that. The basic questions that we looked at were who purchases sex in Minnesota – because as Representative Pinto talked about, the focus has been primarily on people who are selling sex, not people buying sex.1 There’s a great deal of just really basic stuff to know about who’s purchasing sex. We wanted to know where sex buyers live and where they purchase sex, because there have been some misconceptions across the state that this is an urban problem, or this only happens in certain places.2 We wanted to get a statewide sense of where this is happening. Then we wanted

2 Id. at 42.
to understand how sex buyers encounter the marketplace, and how they approach it. We know a lot about how traffickers and other people engage in this marketplace – and I think Representative Pinto showed a really helpful image – but how do sex buyers know about the marketplace and enter it? And then we wanted to know a little bit about what it is that sex buyers are seeking to purchase. That helps us understand, what’s happening a little bit more in the marketplace. These questions are really critical, I think, for understanding: the scope and scale of the commercial sex market in Minnesota; the role of trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation within that market; and how we look at identification of strategies and things like that to combat sex trafficking and exploitation within this marketplace. So, if we don’t know the basics about the “demand side,” how are we going to develop policy and practice that are going to prevent harm?

This study builds on previous work that UROC did in partnership with Othayonih Research. Sandi Pierce is a researcher in Minnesota, and we worked together on a study called “Mapping the Market for Sex With Trafficked Minor Girls in Minneapolis.” In this study, we were trying to understand, within Minneapolis, what are the operational structures and how trafficking works. I’m not going to go into a whole thing about that study, but I did want to highlight just a couple of points from that study because it provides a context and it tells you how we came to looking at the “demand side.” So, what our study [Mapping the Market] did was examine the marketplace from the perspective of sex trafficking operations. We documented the use of exploitation, violence, manipulation, and things like that, to develop a supply of juvenile victims. I think Representative Pinto talked a lot about this in the previous presentation. I want to highlight just a couple of points from that study because they are relevant when we think about the “demand side.” Our focus in this previous study was on juveniles. We saw a significant overrepresentation of juveniles of color as victims in sex trafficking – primarily African American and American Indian kids, and girls living in poverty. Some of the factors that make young people vulnerable are displayed in this diagram. Poverty, homelessness, cognitive delays, drug abuse, not having a supportive adult – these are the things that are going on in these young people’s lives. Things like, peers and other kids – some working for traffickers, some not – are helping people connect to the market. Rape and gang rape are significant strategies that traffickers use to

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4 Martin and Pierce, supra note 3.
5 Id.
6 Id. at 4.
7 Id. at 2.
break girls and bring them into operations.\textsuperscript{8} We found a significant amount of violence going on in that part of the marketplace.\textsuperscript{9}

Finally, if we think about traffickers and victims as a unit or an operation, we were able to identify how those operations connected victims to sex buyers.\textsuperscript{10} That’s how we identified escort, brothel and brothel-like establishments, and street-based and closed sex buyer networks. So, this is from the juvenile side of things. We also found that traffickers and victims tend to live in the same neighborhoods, and those tend to be neighborhoods with very high rates of poverty.\textsuperscript{11} When we looked at sex buyers that had been identified by the Minneapolis Police Department, we found that they live all across the metro. They’re not living in the same neighborhoods that traffickers and victims are living in.\textsuperscript{12} Because our focus was on Minneapolis, we weren’t able to really visualize who’s purchasing sex – even in Minneapolis. So, that’s when we realized: “Okay, we really have to expand this focus.” We can’t just focus on one city; we have to focus on a much larger geographic area. But of course this creates a huge problem in terms of data, and how we get information about this.

The framing of our study for mapping the demand – and we really look at this as a marketplace – can be hard to do because we’re talking about people. But it’s important we do that, because that’s the logic happening within trafficking and commercial sex. So, when I say “commercial sex,” what I’m talking about is trading sex acts or sexual contact for anything of value, including money, food, shelter, drugs, or gifts.\textsuperscript{13} And when I’m talking about the overall marketplace, I’m going to refer to that as the “commercial sex market,” or the marketplace for sex. Trafficking and exploitation are part of a larger marketplace. And when I use the term “sex buyer,” I’m talking about a person who obtains sex or sexual activity with money or a trade of something of value. And then when we think about the “supply side,” there are people who provide the sex act to the sex buyer - as we’ve just talked about, there’s a great deal of exploitation that goes on there. We use the composite term “provider/victim” [in our report] because we are trying to talk about that role, and we want to highlight that many people in that role are victims of exploitation and trafficking. But I think it’s important to note that not all people in that role see themselves as victims and some people in that role see themselves as choosing this. That’s when we start to move into the full commercial sex market and understanding sex buyers. We have to grapple with the many different experiences that “provider/victims” come to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
    \item[\textsuperscript{8}] \textit{Id.} at 2.
    \item[\textsuperscript{9}] \textit{Id.} at 4.
    \item[\textsuperscript{10}] \textit{Id.} at 3.
    \item[\textsuperscript{11}] \textit{Id.} at 2.
    \item[\textsuperscript{12}] Martin et al., supra note 1.
    \item[\textsuperscript{13}] 22 U.S.C. § 7102 (2018).
\end{itemize}
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that marketplace with. Then there’s the distribution role, I think we know
what that means.

Just a little bit about what other research has said [about sex buyers]:
this is the least well-understood part of this marketplace. But, there has been
some research.14 We know that there is a lot of different experiences of
“provider/victims” in the marketplace and a lot of different things that bring
them there.15 There has been a lot of research around two segments of sex
buyers that are not representative of the whole population. First, sex buyers
who have been arrested by police in street-based sting operations – there’s
been a lot of research there, because often times they get to referred to what
is called a “John school.”16 Researchers have connected with “John schools”
and connected with those sex buyers,17 but they are really not representative
of the broader group of men who are purchasing sex. The other group is
almost the opposite group, and it’s a group of people who call themselves
“hobbyists” – meaning that it is their hobby to purchase sex.18 They are part
of an online community; there is a website called “The Erotic Review.”19
People who subscribe form a group, talk about this [sex buying], and share
information.20 As I said, they refer to themselves as “hobbyists,” so there has
been a lot of research with them. Again, they are not representative of most
sex buyers in terms of wealth levels and their interactions in the marketplace,
so these are two very different subgroups of people who purchase sex.21 We
do not have any good research on the general population of sex buyers, and
we do not have good research about how different market segments – and
how people who participate in different market segments – interact and who
they are.22 Then, in terms of prevalence, there are some wildly variant ideas
about the prevalence of sex buying. In our research, we were really only able
to find one study that used a representative sample of how many men actually

14 Martin, et al., supra note 1.
15 Lisa Fedina, et al., Risk Factors for Domestic Child Sex Trafficking in the United States, J.
INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE 1, 3 (2016); Martin and Pierce, supra.
16 Michael Shively, et al., A NATIONAL OVERVIEW OF PROSTITUTION AND DEMAND REDUCTION
17 Id.
18 Christine Milrod & Martin A. Monto, The Hobbyist and the Girlfriend Experience: Behaviors
and Preferences of Male Customers of Internet Sexual Service Providers, 33 DEVIANT
BEHAVIORS 792 (2012).
19 Martin, supra note 1, at 56.
20 Id. at 27.
21 Id. at 85.
22 Id. at 110, 111.
purchase sex. They found that about 14% of men in the U.S. have purchased sex, and about 1% of men in the U.S. have purchased sex in the previous year to that study. One percent of men in Minnesota is about 26,000 people – just to give a sense of the scale.

So, a teeny bit about methods of our study: our study was not a prevalence study. What we tried to do in our study was use community-based and mixed methods to collect data from across the state, particularly to surface knowledge from stakeholders across jurisdictions, professions, and geography. We talked to people in small towns and urban areas all across the state. We interviewed 157 people – about half were criminal justice professionals, and about half were social service providers and advocates. These are individuals who have direct contact with the marketplace. We did not want to talk to sex buyers or “provider/victims” at this point, because we wanted to get more of a “lay of the land.” It can be quite traumatic to talk with people who are involved in the commercial sex market as “provider/victims.” It can be traumatic for them, so we did not want to go there. If we talk to sex buyers, we do not know yet how to place people within an overall marketplace. We would not know where the people we were talking to would fit [in the overall marketplace], so we wanted to first surface this kind of community-based knowledge. We also looked at law enforcement records, which are very incomplete, even in terms of the Minnesota Court Information System (MNCIS). These are people who were charged. We realized the advantage of that data set is that it is statewide. The disadvantage is that most local police departments do not actually refer information to MNCIS. I will just give you an example: the Minnesota Court Information System says that about two people in Duluth have been charged with prostitution, but when you talk to the Duluth Police Department, it is actually more like seventy-one; there’s a real data problem here.

23 Martin Monto & Christine Milrod, Ordinary or Peculiar Men? Comparing the Customers of Prostitutes With a Nationally Representative Sample of Men, 58 INT’L J. OF OFFENDER THERAPY & COMP. CRIMINOLOGY, 802 (2014).
24 Id.
25 Martin et al., supra note 1, at 103.
26 Id.
27 Id. at 3.
28 Id. at 18.
29 Id. at 17.
30 Id.
31 Martin et al., supra at 17.
32 Id. at 23.
33 Id.
34 Id. at 24.
We also looked at print news media coverage, because interestingly, news coverage about sex buyer stings actually provides us more information about people purchasing sex and people who have been arrested than the Minnesota Court Information System does. All data sources have inherent strengths and weaknesses, so we try to get as many different sources together for this study as we can – again really trying to build a “lay of the land.”

Alright, I will highlight some key findings. I realize I have spent way too much time building it up and I have not even gotten to the findings. I am going to just basically go through this: who, where, how, and what and just share a little bit about our findings. Generally speaking, who purchases sex? Well, what we found is representative of the men in Minnesota. Eighty-five percent of the state of Minnesota is white; therefore, most sex buyers in Minnesota are white. They range in age from 18 to 70, from the people who have been identified, so it is kind of the whole spectrum of men. They are demographically similar to the communities that they come from. We found a huge range of occupations, including CEOs, truckers, farmers, businessmen, and police officers. Any profession that you can think of, we found people who are purchasing sex.

As I described the data problems on sex buyers, information on where they live is really difficult to come by. We used the law enforcement data and the data from the print news media because, as I said, this turned out to be a really solid source. Print news media covered not only sting operations; they actually would list the people who were arrested, where they were arrested, and where they were from. It was actually a very handy source for us to use. What we found in it, in talking to law enforcement and others, is that: first of all, people purchase sex across the whole state; it is not [just] an urban problem; and most people do not purchase sex in the place where they live. Travel is a constituent part of sex buyer behavior, and we found that most sex buyers travel on average of thirty to sixty miles. In the Twin Cities, the travel is a flow from the suburbs to the first ring suburban or downtown areas. In small towns, it is a flow from one small town to

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35 Id. at 43.
36 Id. at 23.
37 Martin et al., supra at 32.
38 Id. at 34.
39 Id. at 3.
40 Id. at 34.
41 Id. at 42.
42 Id. at 43.
43 Id. at 44.
44 Id. at 49.
45 Id. at 105.
another – because in a small town, if you’re purchasing sex, you do not want to do it in your hometown.\textsuperscript{46} This travel is really an important part of sex buyer behavior. The reasons people travel are anonymity, privacy, variety of experience, and convenience.\textsuperscript{47} The most common pattern of travel that we found is anchored around the workday – people driving to work, home from work, and over the lunch hour.\textsuperscript{48} That is the most common area that we found. We also found lots of people purchasing sex during business trips and vacations.\textsuperscript{49} As I mentioned, in rural Minnesota, buyers move from one town to another.

Then there are some sex buyers who travel specifically to purchase sex.\textsuperscript{50} These are sex buyers that are looking for something very specific. They might be looking for a juvenile. They might be looking for something that our interviewees called “unusual.”\textsuperscript{51} Depending on whether something is available in their local sex market, they might travel somewhere else. These sex buyers will travel much longer distances than the thirty to sixty miles to purchase sex.\textsuperscript{52}

So, briefly on how: we identified three ways that sex buyers approach the marketplace\textsuperscript{53} – and I want to just emphasize this marketplace is extremely complex and varied. Everybody that we talked to emphasized [that] a sex buyer could, in theory, purchase anything that they wanted to buy.\textsuperscript{54} There is a market for almost anything. What I’m going to be talking about is what we identified as a primary marketplace, where most sex buyers participate.

We identified three ways to access the marketplace: internet-aided solicitation, direct solicitation, and word-of-mouth. Obviously there’s been a lot of attention to internet-aided solicitation, such as “Backpage.com,”\textsuperscript{55} where a “provider/victim” posts an ad (and there might be a trafficker involved in that as well), and then the sex buyer sees the ad and connects that way.\textsuperscript{56} While there’s a lot of attention on “Backpage,” we found 37 other websites that function exactly the same as “Backpage.” I’m sure there’s way more than what we identified, those are just the ones that we happened to

\textsuperscript{46} Id. at 42-43, 105.
\textsuperscript{47} Id. at 102.
\textsuperscript{48} Id. at 46.
\textsuperscript{49} Martin et al., supra at 46-47.
\textsuperscript{50} Id. at 41.
\textsuperscript{51} Id. at 48.
\textsuperscript{52} Id.
\textsuperscript{53} Id.
\textsuperscript{54} Id.
\textsuperscript{55} Backpage.com
\textsuperscript{56} Martin et al., supra at 48.
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learn about. So this is not a “Backpage” problem per se, it’s more how the internet functions. I also want to highlight the social media component, something we learned a lot about. This is an area where sex buyers directly try to target young people under the age of eighteen, through social media apps and things like that.57

There is also direct solicitation, which would include street-based tracks and other areas, and word-of-mouth networks.58 Although hidden, we found word of mouth networks at every economic level. In this instance, it’s very clear that sex buyers know what’s going on because usually a word-of-mouth network is constructed with and around a sex trafficker. Sex buyers work quite closely with a trafficker to obtain what it is that they’re looking for.59

What our data shows is that, in most instances, the marketplace is actually designed to obscure trafficking. In most ways of accessing the marketplace, a sex buyer interacts directly with a person they perceive to be an independent provider and the “provider/victim” presents themselves as an independent provider.60 When a sex buyer approaches soliciting sex in that way, they aren’t necessarily seeing all the exploitation and the trafficking.61

From what our data suggests, they’re not necessarily asking questions or looking very hard. The “provider/victim” might even say or give signals that they’re not trafficked or that there isn’t exploitation involved.62 This was particularly strong with internet-aided and direct solicitation where the mode of entry into the marketplace is the sex buyer connecting directly with a “provider/victim.”63 But there are areas in this marketplace where sex buyers clearly know that the person is trafficked. We found lots of evidence of sex buyers specifically connecting with traffickers to obtain a juvenile, and we know that some sex buyers connect with traffickers to obtain other things as well.64

Okay, so what do sex buyers seek in the marketplace? Generally, when we talk about this, we will say that sex buyers are purchasing a person.

58 Martin and Pierce, supra at 38.
59 Id. at 57.
60 Id. at 54.
61 Id. at 53.
63 Martin et al., supra at 61.
64 Id. at 52.
We found, it seems, that what sex buyers are looking to purchase is an experience, and that the person is part of that experience.65

It’s a subtle difference, but it’s important because what that experience is really about is shaped by the ability to use money. So it’s power and control derived through purchasing power. What the experience entails widely varies depending on what that sex buyer is looking for, but that power and control from purchasing power is what shapes the experience.66

We identified a really broad range of commonly sought sexual experiences. The most common one was quick, anonymous sex, or the “quickie.”67 We found all different kinds of sex acts represented in the marketplace. The purchasing is really skewed towards young “provider/victims.” Most sex buyers are interested in young people – not necessarily juveniles, but people who are younger.68 Most of the people we interviewed – and the data that we collected – suggests that most sex buyers are actually looking for young adults over the age of eighteen, but many would be willing to purchase sex from a juvenile if a juvenile was offered instead of an adult.69 Some sex buyers would say no to that [purchasing sex from a juvenile]. We also saw that, as I mentioned earlier, some sex buyers do specifically seek out juveniles.70 Some sex buyers seek sexual experiences and acts that really are designed to harm and humiliate the person that they’re purchasing.71 These include derogatory language, racial slurs, and defecation and urination as part of the sexual experience that they’re purchasing.72 We saw that was a very strong theme, particularly with young people who are being purchased. We saw rough sex, violence, sexual assault, rape, and in some cases, attempted murder and murder.73 Some of the people we interviewed said people do get killed in these encounters.74 We saw evidence of some sex buyers entering this marketplace [for sex] because they have a specific hatred of a particular group or class of people – whether it be homophobia, transphobia or racism. They go into the marketplace to seek a “provider/victim” to enact their specific hatred of that group of people.75

65 Id.
66 Id.
67 Id. at 36.
69 Martin and Pierce, supra at 57-58.
70 Kotrla, K., at 181-187.
72 Martin et al, supra at 92.
73 Id at 82.
74 Id. at 97.
75 Id.
So many of these behaviors that I’m talking about right now are fully illegal outside of the commercial sex market. But because the victims are people engaged in a stigmatized and hidden activity, most “provider/victims” don’t seek legal recourse because the police don’t believe them or they might be arrested for prostitution. This is a problem for many of the harms that occur in this marketplace; people are not able to seek legal recourse.

When we look at the supply and the demand as broad categories – and I think Representative Pinto talked about this as well – we see really deep structural inequalities fueling this marketplace. What we saw in our study is that racism, sexism, and ageism are constituent parts of the marketplace, and are actually baked into the marketplace in terms of pricing structures. When you look at the price of an experience based on who the provider/victim is, people will pay more for a younger person and they’ll pay less for a person of color. What we’re seeing, I think, is an amplified version of what we see more generally in society. Again, if we think about this kind of supply and demand writ large, when we think about supply, we’re looking at poverty, lack of basic needs, and living on the streets as substantial “push-factors” for people to be engaged in the commercial sex market. In many ways, the demand (if we want to call it the demand) is filling those needs.

So this is really a perverse thing that’s happening in our society – having vulnerable people who aren’t being supported by our society, and people purchasing sex who are, in many cases, filling basic needs. I think this is a really troubling trend and it should give all of us great pause in thinking about what we’re doing in our society. So, if we’re going to try to end demand – because there’s a lot of talk about ending demand – what is that going to mean for young people and marginalized people who are in this marketplace? I’m not saying that we shouldn’t end demand or anything like that, but I think we really have to grapple with this.

So, in conclusion, really what our study was trying to do was surface empirical evidence about this “demand side” that we know so little about from the perspective of sex buyers. I’ve talked a lot about, I think, some very troubling things. I just want to emphasize that this is a very diverse marketplace with lots of different factors. Not all sex buyers are the same; there’s no one-size-fits-all. We’re going to have to grapple with [how] we address this in a nuanced way.

77 Martin et al., supra at 77.
78 Id.