



Sex industry exposure over the life course on the onset and frequency of sex offending



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Research has examined pornography use on the extent of offending. However, virtually no work has tested whether other sex industry experiences affect sex crime. By extension, the cumulative effect of these exposures is unknown. Social learning theory predicts that exposure should amplify offending. Separately, the developmental perspective highlights that the timing of exposure matters.

Methods: Drawing on retrospective longitudinal data, we first test whether exposure during adolescence is associated with a younger age of onset; we also examine whether adulthood exposure is linked with greater frequency of offending.

Results: Findings indicate that most types of adolescent exposures as well as total exposures were related to an earlier age of onset. Exposure during adulthood was also associated with an overall increase in sex offending, but effects were dependent on “type.”

Conclusion: There are nuances in the effect of sex industry exposure on offending patterns. Implications of results are discussed.

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Introduction

The effect of the sex industry on sexual violence is not clearly understood. Some scholarship finds that sex industry exposure, such as pornography use, increases the propensity to offend (e.g., Russell, 1993; Silbert & Pines, 1984; for a review, Kingston, Fedoroff, Firestone, Curry, & Bradford, 2008). Other work has revealed null effects or has found exposure to be associated with cathartic benefits to offenders resulting in reduced sexual aggression (e.g., Neutze, Seto, Schaefer, Mundt, & Beier, 2011; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006; for a review, Ferguson & Hartley, 2009; see also, Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000 finding conditional effects of pornography use). Complicating matters are two large research voids. First, most extant work has examined the impact of only one type of industry exposure—pornography use (see generally, Mancini, Reckdenwald, & Beauregard, 2012; Bauserman, 1996 for a review). Second, and by extension, the timing of these experiences on the extent of sex offending remains a “black box.”

This focus is largely moot if say, only a small proportion of the public uses sexually explicit goods and services. On the contrary, over the last three decades sex industry services have proliferated, appealing to a wider market of consumers than in prior years (Hanna, 2005;

Schlosser, 1997). As but one example, national estimates find that 30% of men report occasionally visiting strip clubs and 14% of American males regularly attend (Fetto, 2003). Indeed, strip club services—just one component of a much larger industry—garner on average \$15 billion in annual revenue (Thompson, Harred, & Burks, 2003). Other types of erotic services—such as the sale of sexual objects—also generate millions of dollars in revenue (Tibbals, 2013) directly signaling that a large swath of the public is exposed to such aides.

With few exceptions, the sex industry remains a legal enterprise. Citing the First Amendment privilege to free speech, the U.S. Supreme Court has prohibited outright restrictions of strip club services and the sale of erotic objects (see, *Renton v. Playtime Theatres*, 1986). Legal challenges to prohibit pornography—even computer-generated images depicting children engaging in sex acts—have also been largely unsuccessful. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld the manufacture and sale of pornography and virtual child pornography (with the exception of actual child pornography) in a series of cases (*Ashcroft v. Free Speech*, 2002; *Reno v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 1997).

Certain groups, however, are denied access to the sex industry. Minors, for example, are prohibited from purchasing sexually explicit goods or services. Separately, as a typical condition of probation or parole, registered sex offenders are also restricted from purchasing these types of sexual services and aides¹ (English, Colling-Chadwick, Pullen, & Jones, 1996). Such restrictions thus stem from the notion

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that the sex industry promotes deviant sexual values and lifestyles. Under the social learning perspective, the frequency and variety of these types of experiences would be expected to initiate the start of a criminal sex career, and also, amplify the extent of sex offending in adulthood. Relatedly, as posited by developmental theorists the timing of such exposure may be critical to its effects on offending. As an extension of prior scholarship, this study tests the effect of diverse types of sex industry exposure including use of pornographic movies, pornographic magazines, strip clubs, erotic objects/services, and prostitution—as well as their cumulative effect—on the onset of sex offending and the frequency of sex crime convictions.

Sex Industry Exposure

Weitzer (2010) defines the sex industry as “sexual commerce involving both legal and illegal varieties . . . [specifically] sexual services, performances, or products for material compensation” (p. 1). Several estimates indicate that the sale of sexually explicit services and objects is a multi-billion dollar business. One ABC News account indicates that the sex industry generates greater annual revenue than many other recreational industries, such as the National Football League (see e.g., “*Porn profits: Corporate America's secret*, 2004; see more recently, Tibbals, 2013). To be sure, the precise revenue estimates nationally for illegal services such as prostitution are virtually unknown. The one exception involves Nevada, where certain counties permit brothel prostitution. Here, annual profits are estimated to be around \$50 million (Friess, 2009).

Perhaps not surprisingly given its annual share of profits, consumption studies indicate wide use of the sex industry, particularly among males. According to a large survey of college students, over 70 percent reported viewing pornography online prior to age 18 (Sabina, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2008). Adult males also report frequent use (Weitzer, 2010). Research suggests that strip club use is a less prevalent experience than pornography exposure, but also, that it is not atypical among American men. A national study conducted by Fetto (2003) found that at least one in three men report having attended a strip club in the past. One other study conducted by the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (2004) drawing on a convenience sample of males frequenting “high-volume bar areas” in diverse areas of Chicago reported nearly 80% admitted to having been to a sex trade venue (e.g., “strip club,” “strip club with physical contact,” “escort service”) at least once in their lifetime. Per this same study, on average users reported visiting two sex trade venues. Notwithstanding a sparse literature, the available evidence highlights that a significant number of boys and men are exposed to the sex industry annually.

Cao and Maguire (2013, p. 189) underscore that the sex industry is often associated with “unconventional behavior or lifestyle[s] that [are] deemed by some as abnormal, sinful, or wicked”; these associations “[stem] from our society's historical attempt to control sexual expression.” Put differently, despite the sex industry's popularity, it is simultaneously regarded by the public as a deviant enterprise. To illustrate, one large national study ($n = 1,500$) reported that 82% of the public disapproved of legalizing prostitution (see, May, 1999). McCaghy and Cernkovich (1991) discovered similar results in a study evaluating support for legalized prostitution in Ohio. In that investigation ($n = 413$), only 5% of the public endorsed the position that “prostitution should be legal like any other business with no special government controls” (p. 113). A more recent poll of New Yorkers also revealed minority support for decriminalizing prostitution. In particular, 62% of residents opposed legalized prostitution involving adults and approximately two-thirds believed that prostitution is not a victimless crime (Chan, 2008). Additionally, national poll data demonstrate that nearly 50% of American women support a blanket ban on pornography, compared to 30% of men (General Social Survey, 2013).

Far fewer studies have examined views related to other aspects of the sex industry—such as public approval and perceptions of strip

clubs or the sale of erotic services. Here again, though, based on the small handful of investigations that exist, most Americans are not supportive of these services. Weitzer (2010) in a review of extant research reports that nearly half of the public approve of criminalizing strip clubs and nearly three-quarters believe phone sex services should also be prohibited (p. 3).

At the same time, the national implementation of restrictions for convicted sex offenders, which typically exist as a condition for parole or probation (English et al., 1996), provides further evidence that the sex industry is thought to be criminogenic. South Carolina's “Standard Sex Offender Conditions” policy is illustrative. Under South Carolina law, sex offenders must agree that they “will not purchase, possess, or use any sexually stimulating or sexually explicit material or device, nor enter, loiter, or work within one thousand (1,000) feet of any place where such material or device is sold or presented as entertainment” (South Carolina Department of Probation, Parole, and Pardon Services, 2013). Indiana incorporates a similar law for released sex offenders (Indiana Department of Corrections, 2013). In short, the prevailing view is that the sex industry promotes deviant lifestyles and increases sexual violence and victimization. Further, exposure is perceived as particularly dangerous for convicted sex offenders by undermining their efforts to reform. We turn now to the social learning theory and its propositions for understanding how the sex industry may affect offending.

Social Learning Theory and the Sex Industry

Social learning theory has been applied toward understanding the nature and extent of sex offending (see generally, Burton, Miller, & Shill, 2002; Hunter, Figueredo, Malamuth, & Becker, 2003; Kingston, Yates, & Olver, 2014; Bauserman, 1996; Veneziano, Veneziano, & LeGrand, 2000). To illustrate, some scholars argue that the sexualization of women and children—expressed, for instance, in pornographic films and media—in contemporary society has led to a “rape culture”—one that rationalizes sexual violence, in turn teaching men that it is acceptable to sexually victimize others (for a review, see Bronstein, 2011). Under this perspective, the sex industry conveys messages that females are submissive, “valued only as sex objects, and enjoy sexual aggression” (Bauserman, 1996, p. 406), and as Diamond (2009, p. 308) underscores, “desensitizes men to women's needs and devalues [women] in general.” Additionally, there is evidence that children are becoming increasingly sexualized by the sex industry. For example, the creation of virtual child pornography² means consumers can legally purchase sexually explicit images that appear to depict children engaging in sex acts.

Some work finds indirect support for the notion that use of the sex industry amplifies violence among users, or that it imparts an “imitation effect” among them. In a survey of victims of intimate partner violence, Simmons, Lehmann, and Collier-Tenison (2008) found a correlation between prior sex industry use of batterers and the extent of physical, sexual, and total abuse scores experienced by their partners. However, Simmons et al. (2008) drew on a very broad measure of “sex industry.” That is, the victimization survey specified: “Does your partner utilize the sex industry?” Thus, the measure relies on victims' recall of offenders' exposure. At the same time, individual components of the industry are not included in Simmons et al.'s (2008) measure.

Other work indicates that sex workers face a significantly greater risk of sexual victimization and violence compared to women working in other professions (Farley & Barkan, 1998; Farley & Kelly, 2000). This strand of literature thus highlights how sex industry consumption can lead to sexual violence. A study conducted by Holsopple (1999) examining female exotic dancers revealed that almost half reported that men threatened to harm them. Of this proportion, victimization included attempted vaginal penetration with fingers (61%), penetration with objects (33%), and attempted rape (17%). These percentages far exceed national estimates of sexual violence for women in the general

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