

The Daily Beast

The John Next Door

The men who buy sex are your neighbors and colleagues. A new study reveals how the burgeoning demand for porn and prostitutes is warping personal relationships and endangering women and girls.

by [Leslie Bennetts \(/contributors/leslie-bennetts.html\)](http://www.thedailybeast.com/contributors/leslie-bennetts.html) | July 18, 2011 1:00 AM EDT



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Men of all ages, races, religions, and backgrounds do it. Rich men do it, and poor men do it, in forms so varied and ubiquitous that they can be summoned at a moment's notice.

And yet surprisingly little is known about the age-old practice of buying sex, long assumed to be inevitable. No one even knows what proportion of the male population does it; estimates range from 16 percent to 80 percent. "Ninety-nine percent of the research in this field has been done on prostitutes, and 1 percent has been done on johns," says Melissa Farley, director of Prostitution Research and Education, a nonprofit organization that is a project of San Francisco Women's Centers.

A clinical psychologist, Farley studies prostitution, trafficking, and sexual violence, but even she wasn't sure how representative her results were. "The question has always remained: are all our findings true of just sex buyers, or are they true of men in general?" she says.

In a [new study](http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/c-prostitution-men-who-buy-sex.html) (<http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/c-prostitution-men-who-buy-sex.html>) released exclusively to NEWSWEEK, “Comparing Sex Buyers With Men Who Don’t Buy Sex,” Farley provides some startling answers. Although the two groups share many attitudes about women and sex, they differ in significant ways illustrated by two quotes that serve as the report’s subtitle.

One man in the study explained why he likes to buy prostitutes: “You can have a good time with the servitude,” he said. A contrasting view was expressed by another man as the reason he doesn’t buy sex: “You’re supporting a system of degradation,” he said.

And yet buying sex is so pervasive that Farley’s team had a shockingly difficult time locating men who really don’t do it. The use of pornography, phone sex, lap dances, and other services has become so widespread that the researchers were forced to loosen their definition in order to assemble a 100-person control group.

“We had big, big trouble finding nonusers,” Farley says. “We finally had to settle on a definition of non-sex-buyers as men who have not been to a strip club more than two times in the past year, have not purchased a lap dance, have not used pornography more than one time in the last month, and have not purchased phone sex or the services of a sex worker, escort, erotic masseuse, or prostitute.”

Many experts believe the digital age has spawned an enormous increase in sexual exploitation; today anyone with access to the Internet can easily make a “date” through online postings, escort agencies, and other suppliers who cater to virtually any sexual predilection. The burgeoning demand has led to a dizzying proliferation of services so commonplace that many men don’t see erotic massages, strip clubs, or lap dances as forms of prostitution. “The more the commercial sex industry normalizes this behavior, the more of this behavior you get,” says Norma Ramos, executive director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW).

The ordinariness of sex buyers is suggested by their traditional designation as “johns,” the most generic of male names. “They’re the cops, the schoolteacher—the dignified, respected individuals. They’re everybody,” says a young woman who was trafficked into prostitution at the age of 10 and asked to be identified as T.O.M.

Equally typical were the men in Farley’s study, who lived in the Boston area and ranged from 20 to 75, with an average age of 41. Most were married or partnered, like the majority of men who patronize prostitutes.

Overall, the attitudes and habits of sex buyers reveal them as men who dehumanize and commodify women, view them with anger and contempt, lack empathy for their suffering, and relish their own ability to inflict pain and degradation.

Farley found that sex buyers were more likely to view sex as divorced from personal relationships than nonbuyers, and they enjoyed the absence of emotional involvement with prostitutes, whom they saw as commodities. “Prostitution treats women as objects and not ... humans,” said one john interviewed for the study.

In their interviews, the sex buyers often voiced aggression toward women, and were nearly eight times as likely as nonbuyers to say they would rape a woman if they could get away with it. Asked why he bought sex, one man said he liked “to beat women up.” Sex buyers in the study committed more crimes of every kind than nonbuyers, and all the crimes associated with violence against women were committed by the johns.

Prostitution has always been risky for women; the average age of death is 34, and the [American Journal of Epidemiology](http://aje.oxfordjournals.org/) (<http://aje.oxfordjournals.org/>) reported that prostitutes suffer a “workplace homicide rate” 51 times higher than that of the next most dangerous occupation, working in a liquor store.

Farley’s findings suggest that the use of prostitution and pornography may cause men to become more aggressive. Sex buyers in the study used significantly more pornography than nonbuyers, and three quarters of

them said they received their sex education from pornography, compared with slightly more than half of the nonbuyers. “Over time, as a result of their prostitution and pornography use, sex buyers reported that their sexual preferences changed and they sought more sadomasochistic and anal sex,” the study reported.

“Prostitution can get you to think that things you may have done with a prostitute you should expect in a mutual loving relationship,” said one john who was interviewed. Such beliefs inspire anger toward other women if they don’t comply, impairing men’s ability to sustain relationships with nonprostitutes.

Sex buyers often prefer the license they have with prostitutes. “You’re the boss, the total boss,” said another john. “Even us normal guys want to say something and have it done no questions asked. No ‘I don’t feel like it.’ No ‘I’m tired.’ Unquestionable obedience. I mean that’s powerful. Power is like a drug.”

Many johns view their payment as giving them unfettered permission to degrade and assault women. “You get to treat a ho like a ho,” one john said. “You can find a ho for any type of need—slapping, choking, aggressive sex beyond what your girlfriend will do.”

Although sex buyers saw prostitution as consensual, other men acknowledged that more complex economic and emotional factors influence the “choice” to prostitute oneself. “You can see that life circumstances have kind of forced her into that,” said one nonbuyer in the study. “It’s like someone jumping from a burning building—you could say they made their choice to jump, but you could also say they had no choice.”

T.O.M.’s story is a case in point. Her father went to prison when she was 2 years old, and she was 4 the first time her body was exchanged for drugs by her mother, an addict. Growing up in foster-care families, she was abused in every one. When she was 10, a 31-year-old pimp promised he would take care of her. “He was my savior at first—I was stealing food to survive. He said, ‘I’ll be your mom, your dad, your boyfriend—but you have to do this thing for me.’ And then he sold me.”

For the next five years, until he went to jail, her pimp trafficked her all over the Western United States. “I looked very much like a child for the first three years, and that made it more profitable for him,” T.O.M. reports, still diminutive and fine-boned at 21. In Farley’s study, one thing that johns and men who don’t buy sex agreed on was the ease of access to such children: nearly 100 percent of men interviewed in the study said that minors were virtually always available for purchase in Boston.

Trafficked children often have histories similar to that of T.O.M. Research indicates that most prostitutes were sexually abused as girls, and they typically enter “the life” between the ages of 12 and 14. The majority have drug dependencies or mental illnesses, and one third have been threatened with death by pimps, who often use violence to keep them in line.

But the sex buyers in Farley’s study overlooked such coercion and showed little empathy for prostitutes’ experiences or their cumulative toll. Researchers and service providers consistently find high levels of posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, suicidal ideation, and other psychological problems among prostitutes. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s in a back alley or on silk sheets, legal or illegal—all kinds of prostitution cause extreme emotional stress for the women involved,” Farley says.

And yet johns prefer to view prostitutes as loving sex and enjoying their customers. “The sex buyers were way off in their estimates of the women’s feelings,” Farley reports. “In reality, the bottom line is that prostituted women are not enjoying sex, and the longer she’s in it, the less she enjoys sex acts—even in her real life, because she has to shut down in order to perform sex acts with 10 strangers a day, and she can’t turn it back on. What happens is called somatic dissociation; this also happens to incest survivors and people who are tortured.”

Farley is a leading proponent of the “abolitionist” view that prostitution is inherently harmful and should be

eradicated, and her findings are likely to inflame an already contentious issue. “Modern-day prostitution is modern-day slavery,” says former ambassador Swanee Hunt, founding director of the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and cofounder of the Hunt Alternatives Fund, a sponsor of Farley’s study.

But other feminists defend pornography on First Amendment or “sex-positive” grounds, and support women’s freedom to “choose” prostitution. Tracy Quan, who became a prostitute as a 14-year-old runaway, says that many women do it for lack of better economic opportunities. “When I was 16, it’s not like there were great high-paying jobs out there for me,” says Quan, the author of *Diary of a Manhattan Call Girl* (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0609810103/thedaibea-20/>) and a spokeswoman for a sex workers’ advocacy group.

“My view of the sex industry is that if we treat it as work and address some of its dangers, it would be less dangerous,” says Melissa Ditmore, an author and research consultant to the Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center in New York.

And yet even Quan admits she had one customer who tied her up and scared her so badly she thought he was going to kill her. Noting that such men often escalate their violence over time, she starts to cry; there is a long silence as she struggles to regain control. “I always wondered if he went on to kill somebody else,” she says finally.

In response to such dangers, a growing antitrafficking movement is now targeting sexual exploitation both here and abroad. “Before this time, we heard from ‘happy hookers,’ we saw *Pretty Woman* (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B00081U7HC/thedaibea-20/>), the whole country was being fed a pack of lies about prostitution, and sex trafficking was invisible,” says Dorchen Leidholdt, cofounder of CATW. “There is a growing recognition that this is pervasive, that it’s enslavement, and that we’ve got to do something about it.”

No one really knows how many women and children are trafficked for sex in the United States, often through the use of force, fraud, or coercion; the scope of the problem is hotly debated, but many believe it is growing. An array of organizations are now working to combat trafficking by building coalitions to reshape policies and change attitudes in the criminal-justice and social-welfare systems. “I think there has been an amazing evolution in thinking, and the movement is growing by the day,” says Norma Ramos of CATW.

Such efforts have led to the passage of tougher enforcement laws and the growing use of “john schools” that offer educational programs and counseling as an alternative to sentencing for first offenders. Their effectiveness is under debate, however; Farley’s study found that johns themselves viewed jail as a far more powerful deterrent to recidivism, and the strongest deterrent of all was the threat of being registered as a sex offender.

Estimates suggest that “for every john arrested for attempting to buy sex, there are up to 50 women in prostitution arrested,” Farley reports.

But the traditional double standard that punished women and forgave men is also being reevaluated. “It’s been accepted that this is something men will do, without any real thought about the victims,” says New York City Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly, whose department recently started an antitrafficking unit and increased its sting operations against johns. “It was considered a victimless crime. But it certainly isn’t; we realize that young women are being victimized.”

During her years in prostitution, T.O.M. reports that the police often violated her and always treated her “as a criminal, not a victim. This is the only form of child abuse where the child is put behind bars,” says T.O.M., who has escaped prostitution and is now working as a youth advocate in California.

Many law-enforcement officials say such longstanding practices are changing and credit the efforts of the antitrafficking movement. “I’ve seen a huge shift,” says Inspector Brian Bray, commander of the Narcotics and Special Investigations Division of the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C. “When I first started, I didn’t really understand how many of these girls have been trafficked. Now our mindset has changed from assuming the girls are criminals to trying to rescue the victims, provide them the services they need, and get information to lock up their traffickers. Most of our arrests used to be female prostitutes, but now we arrest more johns than we do prostitutes.”

Striking developments abroad are also influencing policies in the United States. In 1999 Sweden decided that prostitution was a form of violence against women and made it a crime to buy sex, although not to sell it. This approach dramatically reduced trafficking, whereas the legalization of prostitution in the Netherlands, Germany, and much of Australia led to an explosive growth in demand that generated an increase in trafficking and other crimes. Sweden’s success in dealing with the problem has persuaded other countries to follow suit. “The Swedish model passed in South Korea, Norway, and Iceland, and has been introduced in Israel and Mexico,” says Ramos.

Despite the struggle to control it, human trafficking is often described as the fastest-growing criminal enterprise in the world, and as second only to drug trafficking in its profitability. With billions of dollars at stake, the campaign against sexual exploitation has also provoked a predictable backlash. Last year Craigslist shut down its “adult” classified-ads section in response to the antitrafficking campaign led by Malika Saada Saar, founder of the Rebecca Project for Human Rights. The Craigslist crackdown increased revenue at Backpage.com, where *The Village Voice* runs its own adult ads.

Clearly worried about growing social pressure, the *Voice* attacked the antitrafficking campaign last month, charging that it has exaggerated the extent of the problem. The most common estimates, oft-repeated by major media, suggest that 100,000 to 300,000 children are trafficked in the United States every year. The *Voice* reported that this statistic identifies children at risk and claimed that the number of those who are actually trafficked is only a fraction of those figures. But the *Voice*’s calculations were promptly dismissed as unreliable; Seattle’s mayor and police chief pointed out that their city alone is estimated to have hundreds of minors exploited for commercial sex, and they accused Backpage.com of acting as an “accelerant” of underage sex trafficking.

The *Voice* also ridiculed Real Men Don’t Buy Girls, the antitrafficking video campaign launched earlier this year by Demi Moore and Ashton Kutcher with a series of public-service ads featuring Justin Timberlake, Sean Penn, Bradley Cooper, and Jamie Foxx. The ads reflect a growing recognition that men are the key to addressing this problem.

Sex buyers are overwhelmingly male, and they purchase males as well as females. Whatever its form, the underlying question posed by prostitution remains the same: should people be entitled to buy other human beings for sexual gratification? If such ancient practices are to be curtailed, both johns and men who don’t buy sex will have to rethink their complicity, according to Ted Bunch, cofounder of A Call to Men, a national organization working to end violence against women and girls.

“This is the first generation of men that’s being held accountable for something men have always gotten away with, and that’s why you have such a backlash,” Bunch says. “Our social conditioning is to see women as objects, as property—that’s what commercial sexual exploitation is all about. It’s a multibillion-dollar industry; it makes more money than the NFL, the NBA, and Major League Baseball combined.”

Fighting that behemoth will require the participation of both sexes. “The system has been set up to blame women for the violence men perpetrate, and this has been seen as a women’s issue, so it’s easy for men not to get involved. But men’s silence about the violence men perpetrate is as much of a problem as the violence itself,” Bunch says. “Men feed the demand, and men have to eradicate the demand.”

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