

“We Get a Lot of Crack Whores”: Official Perceptions of Rural Prostitution in Four Rural Counties

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Abstract

While there is a well-established literature on prostitution in sociology, the lion's share of it treats prostitution as an exclusively urban phenomenon. Given the paucity of knowledge on rural prostitution, our exploratory study attempts to shed light on perceptions of the sex trade in several rural counties. The current study employs the use of semi-structured interviews with law enforcement officers and with social service agency workers in four rural counties in Appalachia. Our informants shared their perceptions on the prevalence, distribution, and accomplishment of rural prostitution and lend understanding to the omission of the rural sex trade from most official sources of crime data. Law enforcement officers and social service agency workers also discussed the manner in which they are trained to understand and respond to prostitution in rural areas. Our data hint that prostitution may be far more common than official statistics suggest. Far from being unaware of prostitution, both law enforcement and social service providers have detailed understandings of prostitution, yet they differ in their perceptions regarding its frequency. Some see it as an economic strategy women use to deal with the tremendous unemployment and poverty in the region, but also as related to drug use. Finally we discuss the ways in which prostitution is accomplished and transacted and how rural prostitution may be similar to and different from urban prostitution.

Keywords: Rural prostitution, indoor prostitution, rural sex trade

1. Introduction

It is hard to imagine that the “oldest profession on earth” hasn't somehow gained purchase in rural America. But while there is a long rich literature on urban prostitution in sociology, investigations into the forms, frequencies, and functions of rural prostitution are few and far between. A few studies have examined prostitution in rural areas of third-world countries such as Southeast Asia as well as how women are trafficked into the United States for sex work (Vanwesenbeeck, 2001; Raymond & Hughes, 2001). There is also a tradition of research in public health and substance abuse ethnographies that addresses sex work in non-urban areas that is useful, however the focus is primarily on drugs and secondarily on the nexus of drugs and sex (Draus & Carlson, 2009), so prostitution is not the primary focus. While useful, past studies have focused almost exclusively on urban settings. Thus, investigation into prostitution in rural areas of America is virtually nonexistent. According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report, rural prostitution arrests make up less than 2 percent of the total annual arrests for prostitution. Since the rates for other offenses are similar across urban and rural areas, our first question is why measures for rural prostitution are comparatively low. Is this a result of prostitution being detected and not reported, or is prostitution truly less common in rural areas? How do those responsible for compiling official data (law enforcement officers) understand or frame prostitution? What insight can social service providers bring to the table and do they understand prostitution differently than law enforcement? Finally, if prostitution exists, it was important to search for insights on how it is accomplished and transacted.

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2. Trends in Prostitution

Official data on prostitution in America suggests that the sex trade is almost exclusively an urban phenomenon. For example, the 2004 Uniform Crime Report (UCR) reported over 90,000 total arrests for prostitution in the United States with only 162 of those arrests occurring in non-metropolitan areas (Uniform Crime Report, 2004). The focused concern on urban "streetwalking" is further apparent in recent efforts by the Department of Justice to mobilize law enforcement against urban prostitution and commercialized vice and to provide funding opportunities to researchers interested in finding solutions to this urban scourge. Despite this clear emphasis on urban forms of prostitution, officials are aware that the sex trade transcends our city centers. The Department of Justice's Office of Community-Oriented Police Services (COPS), for example, published a guide to aid law enforcement in controlling "street prostitution" while acknowledging that "street prostitution accounts for perhaps only 10 to 20 percent of all prostitution" (Scott, 2002: p. 1). According to Scott (2002), police agencies should continue to emphasize the control of urban prostitution since it has "the most visible impact on the community." Other researchers note that controlling street prostitution is an important goal since urban residents often list prostitution as one of the main problems plaguing city living. In her report of another COPS-funded study, Weisel (2004) stated that over 34% of Raleigh, North Carolina residents listed the need to clear the streets of homelessness, prostitution, and drugs as one of their top three priorities. According to law enforcement, then, prostitution appears to be a problem only when it is "visible." Thus arrest statistics are likely to represent acts of prostitution deemed to be crimes against the public order. Finding ways to explore and investigate the "dark figure" of prostitution (i.e., prostitution not captured by official data) is, therefore, an important exercise to more fully understand the phenomenon. In this context, the current study is an attempt to fill a gap in the empirical literature on prostitution by investigating officials' (law enforcement and social workers) perceptions and understandings of prostitution in several rural counties in Appalachia.

3. Methods

Law enforcement officers and social service providers were recruited for intensive, open-ended interviews. These groups were selected because both law enforcement and social service providers have a unique and distinct relationship to the communities they work in, they contribute to official statistics about crime, and presumably they are aware of community dynamics. Moreover, social service workers have an exceptional window into the behaviors and survival strategies of families involved in the welfare system. It is important to note, however, that we were and are aware of the limitations of interviewing agency workers and law enforcement. Specifically, we fully understand that interviewing these particular individuals produces knowledge based on "the most visible participants (such as street workers)," including those in crisis, whereas others, such as those who work in indoor venues of various kinds, are either not included or are under sampled." (Miller, 2009: p. 552). However, given the exploratory nature of this work we were confident that this was a good first step. To that end we chose to ask questions of law enforcement officers and social service providers that were designed to help typify, categorize, and explain their knowledge of rural prostitution. Consequently, the questions that guided our research were as follows: How often does prostitution take place (in the county in question)? Why does the respondent think prostitution is taking place in his/her county of work? How and where is prostitution accomplished (location, what forms of currency or trade are exchanged, and how are agreements made between the actors involved in rural prostitution)? And, finally, what types of training (if any) do officials receive regarding prostitution?

3.1 Rural Location

It is important to note that although there appear to be several definitions of rurality, the counties from which we sampled are defined as rural by the USDA guidelines. Specifically, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) said in June 2008, "The term "rural" conjures widely shared images of farms, ranches, villages, small towns, and open spaces. Yet, when it comes to distinguishing rural from urban places, researchers and policymakers employ a dizzying array of definitions. The use of multiple definitions reflects the reality that rural and urban are multidimensional concepts, making clear-cut distinctions between the two difficult." (Cromatrite & Bucholtz, 2008)

Three of our counties easily fit the definition of rural or nonmetropolitan and one is close to a metro area of less than 250,000 in an adjacent state. As can be seen in the following table which summarizes our sample, none of the towns/cities we sampled from were larger than 22,000.

Table 1: Description of Counties and Towns in the Sample

County 1 - Urban rural continuum* code 4 which is a Nonmetro county with urban population of 20,000 or more, adjacent to a metro area 62,223.

Town 1 had a population of 21,342 with 6,715 housing units; a land area land area of 8.34 sq. miles; a water area of 0 sq. miles; and a population density of 2,560.44 people per sq. mile for Census 2000.

Town 2 had a population of 5,230 with 2,273 housing units; a land area land area of 4.97 sq. miles; a water area of 0 sq. miles; and a population density of 1,051.93 people per sq. mile for Census 2000.

County 2 – Urban rural continuum* code 6 which is a Nonmetro county with urban population of 2,500-19,999, adjacent to a metro area 28,241

Town 1 had a population of 6,704 with 2,948 housing units; a land area land area of 3.08 sq. miles; a water area of 0 sq. miles; and a population density of 2,175.15 people per sq. mile for Census 2000.

County 3 - Urban rural continuum* code 6 which is a Nonmetro county with urban population of 2,500-19,999, adjacent to a metro area 23,072

Town 1 had a population of 1,966 with 1,041 housing units; a land area land area of 3.24 sq. miles; a water area of 0.05 sq. miles; and a population density of 607.52 people per sq. mile for Census 2000

County 4 - Urban rural continuum* code 3 which is a county in metro area of fewer than 250,000 population 63,251

Town 1 had a population of 14,515 with 6,609 housing units; a land area land area of 8.31 sq. miles; a water area of 0.26 sq. miles; and a population density of 1,747.00 people per sq. mile for Census 2000.

* Urban rural continuum codes defined by USDA <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Rurality/RuralUrbCon/>

3.2 Sample

Our sample consists of 8 individual social service providers, 2 group interviews (one interview was 11 persons, the other was 15 persons), and 4 law enforcement representatives (i.e., a spokesperson for each county). We gained our initial entry into social service agencies by contacting government officials previously known to us. These personal contacts introduced us to the appropriate persons who were either willing to be interviewed or who directed us a more suitable point of contact. Additionally, one of us was invited to attend a monthly meeting for The Ohio Family & Children First Coordinators Association that included directors or coordinators for all the social services agencies for the county (all of which are either state funded or are non-profit programs) to make a presentation about our research and ask for participation. Several agency directors volunteered to be interviewed by us and/or provided assistance in contacting their workers. Two large group interviews (11 and 15 people) with social service agency workers were conducted as well as 8 individual interviews. Social service agency workers were primarily females (23 of 26), although there were a total of 5 males in the group interviews. The social service workers all had a Bachelor's degree or higher. Their years of experience ranged from 2 to 30 with an average of 9 years. All the respondents were Caucasian, and the class of the respondents is unknown, although the educational level suggests that their socio-economic status is probably middle class. In rural areas it is common for social service and law enforcement agencies to be small and those in our sample were no exception. We interviewed one law enforcement officer from each of the four counties and in 3 of the 4 cases, the Sheriff or Police Chief chose to represent his agency's point of view on the topic of prostitution; the fourth was the Sex Crimes Unit Commander. The four law enforcement officers were all male and Caucasian and their educations were mostly 2 year or 4 year college with police academy training. Their years of experience ranged from 21 to 30 years, with an average of 24 years.

3.3 Data

The data is comprised of semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted using an "active interviewing" approach (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). Most interviews were face-to-face, however, two were conducted as group interviews and two interviews with law enforcement were conducted by phone. All interviews except the two done by phone were audio recorded. Whether we used a face to face or a group interview was dictated by our need to accommodate the time constraints of our respondents were conducted by phone rather than a face-to-face interview. However, what remained relatively constant was the semi-structured interview guide that was used with our probing themes as they emerged in the data and interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006). We used the same semi-structured interview guide (see above) in all interviews. The interviews ranged from as little as 20 minutes to more than an hour.

4. Analysis and Findings

Data were analyzed following Strauss and Corbin's (1990) analytic induction guidelines which proceeded through the use of open, axial and selective coding for each question asked of respondents. Appropriately, emergent themes provided the basis for our empirical and theoretical conclusions. We now turn to the findings for each question.

4.1 Perceptions of Frequency and Explanations for Prostitution

Our data make clear that law enforcement officers did not think prostitution was very common in their areas. Prostitution was most often described as an "oddity" or very "rare." One respondent said: "It's not really something we can do enforcement on...this is a tight-knit community...and it's really rare. I've been here for 17 years and I've only seen a few cases." "With prostitution, we don't proactively enforce it. It's more of a reaction to reports. There's just not a lot of it here." Another respondent said, "We don't have it (prostitution) in the rural areas." Overall, law enforcement officers did not see prostitution as a problem in their areas and described it as an uncommon event. This is quite different from the responses of the social service agency workers interviewed. In contrast to the law enforcement officer's responses, social service agency workers reported that prostitution was a very frequent occurrence. One respondent said, "out of 100% of cases, 45% of them are engaging in prostitution." Another respondent said that prostitution is "very common in the area" and out of her caseload of 23 clients, "10 of them were involved in prostitution." Thus, social service workers characterized the frequency of prostitution very differently than law enforcement. Although the law enforcement officers interviewed suggested that prostitution was rare, they still acknowledged its existence and gave a variety of responses to explain why prostitution is taking place in their area. For example, some officers saw multiple contributing factors with one stating, "it's done as a necessity...it's need." Another respondent said, "It seems to be mixed with unlawful narcotics" while at the same time saying that "There is a disproportionate number of people on government subsidy, it's got to be a difficult situation, I'm not condemning it." However, other officers were more quick to connect this activity solely to drug use. One such officer stated over and over again that prostitution seemed to be linked to illegal drug use. He said, "With the proliferation of drugs, we get a lot of crack whores..." He went on to explain that women prostitute themselves "because they have a habit and are in it to fund their habit." A clear category that emerged in explaining prostitution from a law enforcement angle was drug use. While only a couple law enforcement respondents mentioned economic need as the rationale for women to engage in prostitution, all mentioned drug use.

Although social service agency workers also gave varying responses in terms of why prostitution was occurring in their areas, the rationale that was mentioned the most frequently was economic need. In fact, several respondents equated the involvement in rural prostitution directly to economic necessity. For example, one respondent said it is "a normal response to their economic condition" when speaking of the women in her caseload who are involved in prostitution." Other respondents described their clients' involvement in prostitution as "doing what I [the client] had to do" or part of "the underground economy." Interestingly, this notion of an "underground economy" came up many times during the social service providers' interviews and was clearly a theme. Close to this notion of an underground economy, another respondent said, "...there are no jobs in the area so women do this (prostitution)." Once again, another social service worker said that prostitution serves as an "economic strategy." Another respondent summarized the situation of Appalachian women in detail, saying, "...you've got a county that unemployment is off the charts, they're gonna use what means they have...They have to make ends meet.. "And like I said with the high unemployment around here, it's horrible. I do wish they would stop (prostituting), and I work with self esteem and try to improve it and show them there are other areas, but uh some women think it's OK and they love it and think it's the best way to make money so I don't know." In contrast to the law enforcement's responses, only one social service agency worker thought that prostitution was related directly to drug use. Although many respondents talked about the women's drug use, they did not appear to link their involvement in prostitution solely with drug use. Thus, for social service agency workers prostitution was a strategy women use for basic economic survival.

4.2 Where and how?

One of the goals of our research was to find out just how officials believed prostitution was taking place in rural areas in order to find out if it is different and unique from urban prostitution. During coding it became clear that we needed to collapse questions about how prostitution is accomplished, specifically, the question of “where does it take place?” and “how are agreements made between actors?” because many respondents answered these as together. Law enforcement officers’ responses revealed that they believed that one key meeting place for prostitution was local bars. This was mentioned repeatedly in interviews. One respondent, when talking about a woman who was working out of a Winnebago said, “They went in and found clients in the bar and brought them out to the trailer...The bars are well visited during deer season.” Law enforcement officers also mentioned repeatedly that a popular meeting/transaction site for prostitution was a private dwelling, specifically the home of either the prostitute or the client. For example, one officer said of an elderly participant, “The meetings were at his home. His wife was deceased. Everyone was comfortable with the arrangement of meeting at his home.” Another respondent simply said, “It’s happening in private dwellings.” He also went on to say, “college kids have apartments and parties” suggesting that transactions might be taking place at some of these private parties as well. Despite knowledge about location, law enforcement officers had essentially no information on how agreements between actors are made.

In contrast, social service providers had extensive knowledge regarding how prostitution is accomplished. Like law enforcement, social service providers also identified bars and participants’ homes as key meeting places for transactions to occur. One respondent said that women tend to start recruiting clients “through the bars” and then after the client base has been established, might work from a home or other private dwelling. She went on to say “...you’re looking at home parties and bars especially.” Also, this respondent commented that if you want information about how to find the services of a prostitute in the area that “you ask the bartender.” Many women advertise from their homes or take men to their homes to carry out transactions. One respondent even speculated on how location can play a direct role in the detection of prostitution, “You just sell out of your home... that’s why I don’t think we have the busts – because it’s not out on the streets, it’s not in people’s faces.” The same respondent also said that women sometimes in her community “sit on the steps down here on the corner and they live in the apartments above” as a way of advertising. Social service providers also identified a variety of other places where transactions occurred, such as rest stops, state parks, truck stops and public parking lots. One respondent who was discussing a specific area in a small town said, “...just go in a beat up truck and sit in the parking lot. They’ll knock on your window. There is a lot being transacted in parking lots.” Finally, transactions were also described as taking place in hotels and motels.

A somewhat surprising category that emerged when discussing the transaction of prostitution was the schools. One respondent talked about “BJ’s (oral sex) [being traded] for cigarettes...It’s a huge problem in the high school.” She went on to say that “the problem is even in the middle schools now.” Elaborating on this problem she said, “There is one guy that has been trading cigarettes for oral sex for years at the high school. They found out when they began to talk to the girls and investigated – they talked to older girls (who) said that he had been doing this when they were in high school 10 years ago.” Another finding that emerged from our data is that prostitution is increasingly accomplished via the Internet. In fact, it was discussed in both group interviews and more than half of the face-to-face interviews with social service providers. One worker said “when I first worked here women met men over the CB, now it’s the Internet.” Other workers said that it is really common for it to be transacted via such “places like Mozilla, Craigslist, and other sites. It is how women “hook up” with men.” Another worker related that, “One woman has a web page and she’ll pose etc.” The accessibility of the internet posed problems for some agency workers as they commented on the difficulty of convincing some young women and girls to get jobs. One girl asked her social worker why she should get a job because she couldn’t make as much at McDonalds as she can online. The workers expressed frustration that sometimes parents encourage girls to do this, “We are now seeing parents posting pictures of their kids over the Internet for money. Then kids enjoy what they can buy.” One worker reported a mom said, “It’s just like a job.” Another agency worker said that they also “have problems because kids go to chat rooms and the kids don’t know boundaries.” Additionally, some social service providers talked about increasingly seeing teen-aged girls using webcams to make money. These discussions were not limited to a single county as workers in all the counties we sampled discussed this trend. Workers themselves saw this as a widespread practice. One worker commented, “We have one family who got in trouble in (a large nearby city) for posting pictures of their kids and they have moved here and I hear they’re doing it again.” In the group interviews agency workers agreed that it is indeed a common practice.

The use of the internet is a theme that has emerged in the literature on prostitution (Bernstein, 2007a; Castle & Lee, 2008; Parsons, Bimb, & Halkitis, 2001; Parsons, Koken, & Bimb, 2004; Pruitt, 2005; Sharp & Earle 2002). Although data for these works come primarily from urban areas, our findings suggest an interesting parallel that should be explored further. It is clear that prostitution is being transacted in a variety of places.

4.3 What is Exchanged?

Since the literature on prostitution tends to focus on stereotypical urban prostitution (i.e. street prostitution), we wanted to find out if and how rural prostitution differs from urban prostitution. To get at this question, we asked respondents what exactly was being exchanged for sex. Law enforcement officer's responses focused on drugs as a major factor in the sex trade in rural areas. Almost every respondent went into detail about this topic. One respondent said, "We hear of people exchanging sex for drugs. Or sex for a small amount of money so they can buy drugs. You happen to know somebody who says this girl will do stuff for drugs or money." A separate officer said, "I have heard about cases where women trade sex for drugs...none really for money." Another went quite in depth when talking about this matter. When asked what his definition of prostitution was, he said, "Someone selling their body...in sales, we think of cash, but that's not always the case...to barter your body I guess in exchange for narcotics, alcohol, other vices." Still another officer described a certain type of woman who trades sex for drugs, calling them "crack whores" during his interview. He described a small college town near his area of enforcement, "We see a lot of females who are selling their bodies for crack and other drugs. We find out about it through different intelligence routes that we have. Sometimes the women tell us through their own admission. These aren't people they would normally associate with but because of drug transactions they end up meeting people and getting involved with sex for drugs. Because we are in a college community, we have people who come from decent families and hook up with dealers. Some who deal in the sex trade...because they have a habit and are in it to fund their habit...We call them crack whores."

All law enforcement officers in this study linked rural prostitution to drug use or funding a habit. Additionally, they all indicated a belief that prostitution is not just sex for money, but sex for other items, in this case drugs. Social service providers offered a richer explanation of this topic. They recognized a connection between prostitution and drugs but also linked it to many other things, primarily poverty. One group of respondents talked about the numerous factors that could link a woman to prostitution. These included: "drugs for sex, and sex for housing, food, transportation, and cigarettes." They believed that sex is not just being exchanged for money but many other necessities or goods. One respondent said, "...It's not just monetarily, um, rent, we see that a lot where they prostitute for housing." The same respondent went on to say, "Drugs is a huge one. There is a new case in intake, I just called over to see if they had any new referrals that would pertain to this (topic) and um they have one where the dad (of the family) is very, very angry and he called in on mom because he said that she was, and this is his quote, 'she was selling her pussy for money, for cocaine.'... Now in [nearby big city] it was different, because it was more of a prostitution for straight up drugs, down here it is interesting to see that you've got the rent or there was one girl, I forgot about her, that wanted to get cab rides so she hooked up with this married cab driver and would have sex with him in order to get to all of her HRS appointment, her [agency] appointments or her visits with her kids..."

Another respondent from a different agency talked about similar occurrences. She said of one woman "I'm not sure exactly what happened, but her rent was paid." She went on to say, "They (female clients) trade (sex) for pot, for diapers, for food, for rent, etc. You know that they don't have any money but somehow the rent gets paid and they have stuff so you kind of know where it comes from." Another social service agency worker said, "They trade sex for drugs, BJ's (oral sex) for cigarettes." Another respondent gave in depth responses about her clients and how they made money and how they told her about their lives. She said that: "Uh, actually during the [intake] assessment she was very up front about what she – how she made her living, how she made her drug money. And a lot of times you know prostitutes, prostitution goes in hand with drugs and alcohol and usually they are high or loaded during, you know the performance of sex. So it sort of goes hand in hand almost. Now you have other girls that are just loose and no money, but you know they are getting something. Either all their alcohol is being bought or their drugs are given to the... Now I do have some girls that, and to me its prostitution (but) some of them don't consider it but they will trade their sex for drugs even for pot, even for alcohol, they'll do that. Or a case of beer they'll have sex with someone and oral sex a lot – I hear about oral sex a lot."

Both law enforcement and social service providers agreed in defining prostitution as more nuanced than a simple exchange of sex for money. Specifically, women are trading sex for items such as diapers, rides to various appointments, food, clothing, or rent, which doesn't match the stereotype of the typical money/sex exchange. While the officials in this study were clear regarding the definition of prostitution, some social service providers indicated that their clients might in fact not view these exchanges or their behavior as prostitution. For instance, one respondent related that a client had told her, "Money is just left, not taken, so its not prostitution – I didn't ask for it, it was left there and I just took it." Another respondent talked about a similar type of vague transaction that sometimes occurs. She said, "The girls that I've actually dealt with – the one girl it took her a couple of years before she actually, she... uh she's alcoholic so she would you know, get in these blackouts and she'd wake up and there'd be money on her stand and stuff so she sort of got into it (prostitution) a little more subtly and not realizing and so she's not real sure when that turning point came in her life, but uh there was trading going on." It would indeed seem as though the women involved differ in their definition of prostitution.

4.4 Seeing is Believing: Do Officials See Prostitution?

Lastly, we wanted to try to understand what kinds of training, if any, officials in this study received regarding prostitution in rural areas. As stated previously, both law enforcement officers and social service providers defined prostitution as more than the simple exchange of sex for money. This question allows us to begin to understand how officials in the county of study perceive prostitution and whether they see it as a problem. When asked about training one law enforcement respondent said, "Our officers go through the police academies...like the [State]Peace Officer's Academy at (local college). They don't specifically learn any methods for dealing with prostitution because it's just not a priority. We've got bigger problems like drugs..." A second respondent went on to specifically describe what kinds of training he and his officers received about prostitution, "I would say that most are told initially (before they are on the street)...they are given definitions of these offenses; how it's carried out, the mechanics of it, how it takes place are not really covered. Most places don't give or provide any additional education or training. We go where the problem is. Sexual assaults and abuse involving children is what we seek out...what we focus on. So that is where our training goes. Sexual assault and abuse training is more common." It is apparent that law enforcement officers in this rural area are not receiving extensive training (if any) about prostitution. Most of them described the need to focus on a problem that they perceived to be more pressing than prostitution. As illustrated by the quote above, one officer specifically said that sexual assault and child abuse were the problems that they focused on and for which they received training. Most of the officers also stated that it was not a high priority within the department. One respondent noted that prostitution is not "proactively enforced," meaning that the police force does not seek out prostitution, but "reacts to reports." A second respondent said almost the same thing, "I have heard about cases where women trade sex for drugs, but it's not an organized thing and we don't really look for it." Social service agency workers undergo a tremendous amount of training on everything from confidentiality to drug use and even sexual abuse, as well as how to report these issues. However, it seems that law enforcement and social services have something in common here: the fact that they both don't seem to receive any training on prostitution.

One respondent, when asked about her training on prostitution said, "Um, well, I went to school for social work, I have a BASW and um they just touched briefly on certain subjects, so...But in [nearby big city] and down here you have to have some 30 hours of training every year so we've dealt with a lot of sex abuse issues and sort of general issues but basically you learn as you go as scary as that is." A second respondent replied, "I'm thinking, not in actual training, as, you know, getting, getting girls off the streets getting girls to turn to a different trade...no I can't recall any training, but now a days the schools and what they teach now are totally different. Because when I went through my social work there was no drug and alcohol even, you know what I mean as in this is there might be something, but I've not come across any training. In my experience it's just working with the girls that come in." A third respondent said that she and her workers receive training and always have, but when questioned further, she also said "it's on the job training."

5. Discussion

To return to our original questions, one of the aims of this research project was to determine if and how often prostitution occurs in the rural area under study. Law enforcement officers said that arrests or incidents of prostitution in their area were "rarities" or "oddities," and one said that in his 17-year tenure, that he had "only seen a few cases." When comparing their responses to the UCR data, these statements seemed to be consistent..

However, although law enforcement officers said it did not occur they typically went on to speculate why it happens and had notions of how it was transacted. Social services agency workers, on the other hand, saw it as relatively common. They consistently said that many of their clients were involved in prostitution, and one respondent even said that half of her clientele at the time were participating in prostitution. Although there seems to be significant differences in the perspectives law enforcement officers and social service providers regarding the prevalence of prostitution, we believe some the differences can be explained by the nature of relationship that women may have with each type of respondent. Given that prostitution is an illegal activity, it makes sense that women involved in it do not tell the police about it. Law enforcement does not know (or may not care) because since it is not visible no one complains. However, when women see their social service caseworkers, they are more likely to tell that person what is going on in their life. In fact, we asked many social service respondents how they knew that their clients were involved in prostitution, and their responses were "because they tell us!" Moreover, once one enters the social services system their life is opened to surveillance. Our data suggest that social service providers are more likely to know about their clients' involvement in illegal activities due to the nature of their job and their relationships with clients than are law enforcement officers.

In terms of explaining why it occurs, law enforcement officers' responses tended to follow one theme when explaining why women were participating in prostitution: drug use. Every officer interviewed cited drug use or some kind of participation in illicit drug activities as the reason why women were participating in solicitation. Despite this focus on drug use, some officers did make connections to the women's' economic situation. For example, one respondent mentioned the disproportionate number of people on government subsidy in the area. Both social service providers and law enforcement officers mentioned that the economy in the area was meager. Social service agency workers unequivocally articulated a link between economic need and prostitution and saw it as a strategy women used to deal with poverty, in fact that was the main reason given. Respondents mentioned repeatedly throughout their interviews that women in the area of the study did not seem to have much choice in terms of what kind of occupation they were going to have. One respondent said that it could be seen as "a normal response to their economic condition." Respondents also went into detail about the notion of an underground economy that women are participating in to make extra money. We also learned that women are not trading sex only for money but for many other items, some which are necessities. This also points to the fact that the clients the respondents mentioned are trying to survive. This is consistent with the literature in which links prostitution to poverty. Low potential for female labor market earnings is often taken to be an important reason why women go into prostitution, and in any society a higher proportion of poor women prostitute themselves (Edlund&Korn, 2002.) Edin and Lein (1997), in their study of U.S. welfare mothers, found prostitution to be the most lucrative side income available to the low-skilled women they studied. Farley (2005) and Farley and Kelly suggest, "The economic vulnerability and limited career options of poor women are significant factors in their recruitment into prostitution. In the authors' view, poverty is one precondition for prostitution, in addition to female gender" (2000: p.12). This clear articulation also supports theoretical conceptions of prostitution as work (Weitzer, 2007a; 2007b; 2009).

What is less clear--and is an area for further investigation--is the issue of social class. Our sample provided a class bounded view of prostitution based on social service agencies that deal more with economically disadvantaged people. We think being able to interview the women who prostitute themselves may provide information that is more in keeping with Bernstein's (2007a) findings that middle class women are participating in prostitution based on complex economic considerations. Equally as important as class is location. Prostitution in the rural area we studied is probably best characterized as indoor prostitution taking place in primarily private homes, although initial transactions may also take place in bars. We feel this is the single biggest explanation for the disparity in arrest numbers for prostitution in urban versus rural areas. Law enforcement officers really saw prostitution as linked to drug use and as a way to trade for drugs. Social service agency workers, on the other hand, saw prostitution as being bartered for a wide array of goods, services, money, and things like rent. Our finding that social service providers consistently reported that prostitution is transacted via the Internet parallels recent literature and is suggestive of an area for further research. Weitzer (2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2009) has called for research into indoor prostitution. This research is a preliminary step in that direction. We join Weitzer in his call, and also call for more work that focuses on rural prostitution and sex work. We feel there is much to be explored here with regard to the lived experiences of these women and how they may differ from women in more urban areas.

Without the voices of these women, a portion of our data can only be speculation. Luckily, many of our respondents were willing to work with us in recruiting women who engage in prostitution for a potential future study. Only by speaking to the women involved will we be able to gain more accurate insight into the prevalence and other nuances of the trade.

6. Conclusion

One key finding of this study is that, yes, contrary to official data, prostitution appears to be occurring with surprising regularity in the rural counties we looked at. Another key finding is that social service providers and law enforcement officers had vastly different impressions regarding the prevalence of prostitution in their counties. They also had greatly different understandings of how and where prostitution was transacted. We believe this is a function of how various officials come into contact with women involved in prostitution. Since much of what law enforcement officers prioritize is a result of what garners public attention, and rural prostitution largely takes place indoors, police are not well suited to gain insight into this phenomenon. Social service providers are in a unique position to gather information on the prevalence and practice of prostitution in rural America. A third key finding, perhaps stemming from the second, is that law enforcement and social service providers had drastically different understandings of the motivation for prostitution. While all law enforcement saw drug use as a central factor, social service agency workers attributed the behavior mostly to economic conditions; they spoke about limited job opportunities in the area and one worker stated that it was “a normal response to their economic condition.”

A fourth key finding of this study centers on definitional, or legal, understandings of prostitution. While both social service providers and law enforcement defined these women's actions as prostitution, the women involved may not. Recall this quote, “Money is just left, not taken, so its not prostitution – I didn't ask for it, it was left there and I just took it.” It appears as though the women the social service providers spoke of may be engaging in techniques of neutralization. While initially applied to juvenile delinquency, techniques of neutralization are clearly at play in these quotes offered by the social workers. This criminological theory extends the notion of social learning as a basis for criminal behavior. In essence, the individual learns ways of rationalizing their behavior. In this way they do not abandon society's norms and may still condemn others for similar actions. Sykes and Matza argue that delinquency is “based on what is simply an unrecognized extension of defenses to crimes, in the form of justifications for deviance that are seen as valid by the delinquent but not by the legal system or society at large” (Cullen, Agnew, & Wilcox 2014: 225). Another social worker recalled, “she's not real sure when that turning point came in her life, but uh there was trading going on.” While these rationalizations typically come after the behavior in question, “there is also reason to believe that they precede deviant behavior and make deviant behavior possible” (Cullen, Agnew, & Wilcox 2014: 225). Again, it would be necessary to speak to women who engage in rural prostitution to further flesh out these connections but techniques of neutralization may be able to offer an alternative explanation for the occurrence of prostitution in rural areas. What is clear is that, yes, prostitution occurs in rural areas and this behavior is a socially constructed activity that emerges from the context in which these women find themselves. With this in mind we view our study as a preliminary step toward an understanding of the phenomenon that is rural prostitution and the sex trade more generally.

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