In Our Midst

Meredith Dank '99 has uncovered some surprising truths about the illegal sex trade—and policymakers are starting to take note.

By Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

For two years, from 2010 and 2012, Meredith Dank '99 traversed the United States, visiting police departments, prisons, and social service agencies. She met with pimps, sex workers, local law enforcement officers, and federal investigators.

She was on a quest to shed light on one of the most shrouded areas of modern American life. Just how much money is generated by the illegal sex economy in the United States? What are its business practices? And to what extent does it overlap with the most coercive forms of commercial sex known as sex trafficking or sex slavery?

A senior researcher at the Urban Institute, Dank was working on her biggest project yet at the Washington, D.C., think tank. She arrived at the institute in 2009, fresh out of the doctoral program in criminology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Since then, Dank, an expert on labor as well as sex trafficking, had been part of multiple studies on these subjects, as well as on juvenile justice reform and teen dating violence.

This time, however, she was in the lead. She'd won a grant from the National Institute of Justice, a division within the Justice Department, to estimate the size of the unlawful commercial sex economy in the United States. The institute had heard over and over again from law enforcement and policymakers about the need to know just how large a beast they confronted. Whether the need was for financial information or numbers of participants, the call for research proposals didn't say. "It was a very vague solicitation," Dank recalls. "We overdelivered."

In a final report released in March 2014, Dank and her team, including an economist, a mathematician, and multiple researchers at the Urban Institute, produced estimates of the profits generated by all forms of illegal commercial sex activities in seven cities across the United States. Critics were disappointed that Dank hadn't produced a national estimate. Others praised the study for its methodology and declared its estimates the most reliable yet. Predictably, a media flurry ensued, egged on by the Urban Institute's own release, "The Hustle," a summary of the report, illustrated with a chart of glaring red bubbles showing dollar totals. Nearly $40 million in Denver. Nearly $300 million in Atlanta. And five more cities generating profits somewhere in between.

On the evening the report was released, Dank appeared on the PBS *NewsHour* to discuss what else the report had revealed. Not satisfied simply to deliver figures, Dank had delved into the practices of the industry. She portrayed a sophisticated economy built on well-established norms in the areas of marketing and recruitment, online

IN THEIR FOOTSTEPS: Dank stands on a pier jutting out from Hudson River Park in Manhattan. Dank has conducted extensive field work around the pier, which is known as a site where sex trafficking and other aspects of the illegal commercial sex economy of New York City thrive.

SHANNON TAGGART FOR *ROCHESTER REVIEW*

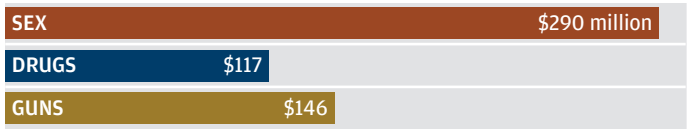
BY THE NUMBERS

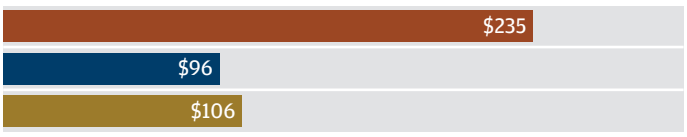
A City-by-City Comparison

Dank and her team chose eight cities as sites for their research based on a variety of factors. One of those factors was the availability of data on the illegal drug and weapons trade.

The data were important pieces in a complex system that Dank, working with Bilal Khan, professor of mathematics and computer science at John Jay College, used to derive estimates of profits from the illegal commercial sex trade. The data also had the advantage, of course, of helping reveal how profits in the sex trade have compared to profits made in the drug and weapons trade, for seven of the eight cities included in the study.

As it turned out, Kansas City, Missouri, supplied plentiful data on the drug and weapons trade, but was missing other data on which Khan and Dank needed to rely. It remained a source of qualitative data, however. —Karen McCally '02 (PhD)





and in-person communications, employee policies and incentives, price structures, and special deals with legal businesses such as hotels, rental car services, and cell phone companies.

"There have been some other studies of the underground commercial sex economy in the past," says John Picarelli, a program manager and specialist on organized crime, trafficking, and terrorism at the National Institute of Justice. "But this is one of the more advanced and detailed ones to arise in recent years."

The media frenzy quickly dissipated. But the implications of the study will play out over the course of years, say other researchers studying the sex trade and sex trafficking.

"We've had a lot of studies that have looked at *a* city, or that have looked at commercial sex work from the perspective of individuals who are prostituted," says Amy Farrell, associate professor of criminology and criminal justice at Northeastern University. "This is really one of the first studies that comprehensively examined the commercial sex economy from a variety of different angles at once."

One might assume that the business known as the world's oldest profession would operate in similar fashion, regardless of the locality. But Dank revealed some significant variations that could prove helpful to law enforcement as they work toward greater collaboration across regions and nationally. For example, she found significant overlap between sex and drug traffickers in some cities, but not others; variations in the ethnic make-up and countries of origin of facilitators and sex workers in "niche market" brothels and massage parlors depending on the city.

She was able to sketch out some well-worn sex trafficking circuits; reveal details of how money exchanges hands; show how online social networks bleed easily into recruitment, taking prostitution beyond urban enclaves and into the suburbs.

Bill Woolf, a 30-year veteran detective with the Fairfax County, Virginia, Police Department, joined with Dank in calling the study "a blueprint that can help inform strategic resource allocations, intervention, and prevention efforts."

Dank grew up in northern New Jersey, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan. Like many teenagers, she was drawn to crime dramas. Among her favorites was the television series *Twin Peaks* and the blockbuster thriller *Silence of the Lambs*, both cultural milestones of the early 1990s.

She harbored no dreams in her adolescence of a career either investigating or reporting on crime. In school, her main interest was languages. "I'd studied both Spanish and French," she says. "Picking up languages was something I did really well." When she got to Rochester, she decided to study Japanese.

"Japan was pretty much at the height of the economic bubble at that point. I thought Japanese would be a really good language to learn." She spent a year studying abroad in Japan, and when she

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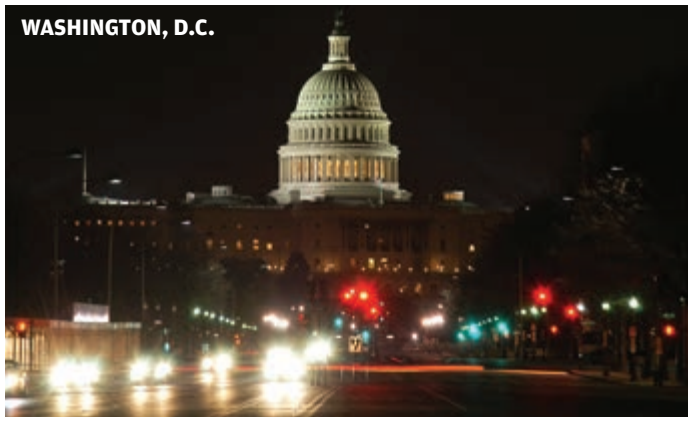

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returned, wrote a senior honors thesis on bullying in Japan, an early instance of what she calls her lifelong interest in victimization.

When she graduated, she found a job tracking steel purchases for a Tokyo-based commodities trading firm. "It was so boring," she told *Bloomberg Businessweek*, "I can't even really remember what I did."

After a brief stint working for a record label, she decided to apply to the doctoral program in criminology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, which she passed daily on her route to work. Recalling her affinity for crime drama, she describes the move as "a gut reaction."

"It wasn't something I really researched. I knew I wanted to stay in New York. It was a CUNY school, and I knew I wouldn't go into too much debt."

She was accepted, and entered the program in the fall of 2003. It was just a few years after passage of the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, a landmark law that acknowledged the existence of modern forms of slavery, within the United States, and classified trafficking as a federal crime. The problem of trafficking had been receiving more media attention, and in January 2004, the *New York Times Magazine* published a cover story by Peter Landesman called "The Girls Next Door." Dank remembers the article as a turning point.

It told a harrowing tale of sexual slavery, in which four teenage girls, all immigrants, lived in bondage, serving clients back-to-back, taking breaks only for an occasional trip to the corner store. What shocked many readers, including Dank, was how brazenly transparent the operation seemed. And yet, run out of a nondescript house on an unremarkable street in the bedroom community of Plainfield, New Jersey, the business had carried on while almost no one had thought that anything was amiss. "I guess I grew up somewhat sheltered," she says. "Just the fact that this was going on here in the United States, in particular. It just kind of sparked something in me."

For a young doctoral student like Dank, trying to pinpoint a focus for her future research, the timing of the article couldn't have been more opportune. "In reality, little has been done to document sex trafficking in this country," wrote Landesman.

In the weeks and months after the publication of Landesman's article, criticisms arose. Despite having called attention to the lack of information on sex trafficking in the United States, Landesman proceeded to publish numbers that critics called unreliable. One *Boston Globe* reporter wondered if the entire piece had been "exaggerated." The critics only underscored the problem Landesman had already identified: no one knew much of anything about sex trafficking in the United States.

As the controversy played out, Dank began working with the chairman of John Jay's anthropology department, Ric Curtis, on a study of commercial sexual exploitation of children in New York City. Curtis had just won a grant from the National Institute of Justice and Dank became the project's manager. She'd found her dissertation topic—and her calling.

THE STROLL: While much sex work is now facilitated online, Danks says meet-ups still occur in plain sight, on streets like this one, in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan.

The months ahead would be wrenching—"emotionally, mentally, physically," she says, recalling the project. The aim was to determine just how many children and adolescents were trading sex in New York City. Working with social service agencies, Dank and Curtis tapped into the network of youths trading sex by offering coupons, redeemable for cash, in return for anonymously participating in the project. "I spent a year-and-a-half interviewing young people in New York City about their experiences in engaging in the commercial sex trade," Dank says. "What they go through just to survive really opened my eyes up, and I knew that this was something that I wanted to continue to focus on."

It would be her first foray into the kind of controversy she says she's continued to encounter. When she and Curtis had completed the study and published their conclusions, law enforcement officers as well as victims advocates were shocked, and not altogether pleased, according to a lengthy article about the research that appeared in the *Village Voice* newspaper in 2011. From their sample of 200 youth sex workers, they extrapolated an estimate of 4,000 children and adolescents trading sex citywide. They found that about 45 percent of the population were boys; that 90 percent worked independently, without the involvement of a pimp; that 90 percent were also native-born American citizens; and that 95 percent said they sold sex as a way to support themselves.

"The typical narrative was that there are these little girls who are being lured into this by traffickers and pimps," Dank says. "We came out and said, 'Listen, a lot of the young people who are engaging in this are doing it for survival. There isn't necessarily this third party exploiter who's forcing or coercing them into doing this. Many of them are doing it because they've been kicked out of their homes, they've run away, they're being abused. Or even if they're with their families, their families can't afford to put food on the table,'" Dank says. Poverty, the study showed, was the problem. "I can't tell you how many times kids have said that they literally have nothing to eat."

Law enforcement and advocacy groups alike "had built all of this support around one narrative," she says. The *Village Voice* reported that Dank's and Curtis's study had failed to make much traction outside the Justice Department—and charged that advocacy groups were invested in a narrative that had proven potent in attracting media attention and funding.

The narrative certainly is potent. It has united lawmakers who can agree on virtually nothing else. And Dank, too, knows its power. It's what drew her into a career dedicated to researching trafficking.

"We know what to do when someone's doing bad. We can find them, we can arrest them, we can prosecute them, and put them in prison," she says. But when kids sell their bodies to survive, policymakers have had fewer clear responses.

Dank's March 2014 study went well beyond the scope of trafficking. Formally titled "Estimating the Size and Structure of the Underground Commercial Sex Economy in Eight Major U.S. Cities," the report considered all forms of prostitution as well as child pornography. Child pornography was taken out of the commercial equation, however, when Dank discovered that images appeared to be overwhelmingly traded for free.

According to Farrell, some of the most illuminating aspects of the study concerned structure rather than size. "Some of the most valuable work out of that study is the qualitative work," she says. "The hundreds of hours that Meredith spent, along with her junior colleagues, interviewing—particularly individuals who are facilitators of commercial sex—from that we learned a lot about those networks."

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Farrell says Dank has a gift for getting people to talk about difficult subjects. "She has no pomp about her," says Farrell, who's conducted interviews with Dank in the past.

"I think it helps a little bit that I look a lot younger than I am," says Dank. She's been mistaken for a student—"even though I say right off the bat that I'm not," she says. "I actually heard a couple of people say they were helping a student with her paper for class."

It's also the case that most pimps who are tied up in the criminal justice system, and most sex workers, aren't used to being asked about their lives in the neutral way that Dank, as a social scientist, does. Or to being approached as human beings to whom you'd extend the usual courtesies. "We made sure, when they walked into the room, to smile," Dank says. "What I heard particularly from people I interviewed in prison is that they hadn't seen somebody smile at them in a really long time."

Drawing on interviews that lasted as long as 90 minutes each, Dank produced a 300-plus-page social science study with some unusually rich and nuanced portraits of the people involved in the sex trade. And as in her 2008 study of New York City's child sex workers, she found her subjects didn't necessarily conform to prevailing stereotypes.

Among the most surprising and controversial findings was that few pimps seemed to use physical force against their employees. One might assume many of those pimps were simply lying, were they not so detailed and forthcoming in their descriptions of the various forms of psychological manipulation they relied on to recruit, maintain, and get the most they could out of their employees. The lengthy chapter in which Dank detailed these techniques muddied the waters for advocates of sex workers who tend toward two poles: those who view all sex workers as victims of exploitation and those who see all adult sex workers as active agents.

Can a sex worker be called a victim if she doesn't see herself as such? Who determines what counts as indoctrination? Is psychological manipulation a form of coercion?

None of these questions has a simple answer. "We found a lot of gray areas," Dank says.

Dank acknowledges that she's been "hit from both sides."

"It's a very difficult line she's trying to walk," says Farrell.

To the extent there's been discontent with Dank's study, it's mostly been centered among the advocates of sex workers, who argued that she hadn't interviewed enough sex workers and that the pimps she interviewed were all either facing charges or incarcerated. *The Washington Post*, for example, included a blog post from Maggie McNeill, a self-described retired call girl, who urged readers to imagine "a report on restaurants which treated the opinions of failed hot dog stand operators as the basis for broad statements about every kind of food business, from convenience stores to food trucks to McDonald's to five-star restaurants."

Dank argues that critics such as McNeill have misinterpreted her study. "We were very clear that this was not a prevalence study," Dank says. In other words, the study did not attempt to draw statistical conclusions about the prevalence of any one aspect of the sex economy. Rather, the qualitative information presented in the report served the function of showing noteworthy trends, distinguishing among the sex economies of various cities, and highlighting exactly where the gaps in knowledge are. Dank notes that she chose sex workers who had worked in more than one city and who had been in the industry for long enough to yield important information about how the industry has changed, and continues to change, over time.

Dank acknowledges that for both ethical and practical reasons, she was not able to include pimps who had eluded law enforcement. She says it's a genuine limitation. But, she adds, "in empirical research, limitations do not imply bias."

Few social scientists purport to offer the final word. Often, the most successful studies are those that clarify further lines of questioning. Dank says there's a lot left to learn. "When looking across [underground commercial sex economy] venues," she wrote in her final report, "it appears the cases least likely to be investigated may also be those that are more organized, generate more money, are more likely to be run by foreign national groups, and have client bases that are the most closed ethnically or socioeconomically. . . . Findings from offender interviews suggest that the UCSE extends far beyond the cases investigated and prosecuted by law enforcement."

But her study did attract immediate attention from lawmakers. In the months following its release, she appeared on Capitol Hill to be part of a panel discussion sponsored by the Senate Caucus to End Human Trafficking. She was invited to brief the Values Action Team, a group of senators with an interest in international human rights inspired by their Christian faith.

She also appeared at the Justice Department to present her findings to representatives from agencies including the Internal Revenue Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the National Security Council, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Department of Homeland Security, and the State Department.

Many of the policy recommendations she offered in the report are priorities that nonprofits and law enforcement groups have previously advocated, or in some cases, had already begun to implement. Chief among those are campaigns to educate the public in how to identify potential trafficking victims; programs to educate kids on healthy relationships and how to avoid falling prey to some of the sophisticated recruitment tactics of pimps; and improved training for law enforcement officers who investigate and question people who are potentially involved in the sex trade. Dank's study buttresses the case for those kinds of initiatives.

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But in gauging the size and scale of the illegal sex economy, Dank has also shown, beyond reasonable doubt, that profits from the trade exceed those made in the illegal drug and weapons trades in many cities. As a result, she makes a solid case that law enforcement will need more resources to identify and prosecute sex traffickers, and more guidance from lawmakers about where the line is to be drawn between voluntary and coerced participation in the sex trade.

In the end, there may be only one major aspect of the illegal sex trade she leaves untouched. She's often asked about buyers.

"There's a whole movement to end demand. And I'll be honest. I don't really touch the demand issue," she says. After a pause, she explains why. "When you ask [sex workers] what they need to get out, they don't say, 'Well, let's arrest the people who are giving me money.' It's 'How are you going to help me get housing? How are you going to help me get livable wage employment?'" The sex trade, she says, "has to do with so many failures with the structures of the communities and of society. And if we don't address that, then we're never going to properly address this issue."