

Topic Page: [Prostitution](#)

Definition: **prostitution** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

(1553) **1** : the act or practice of engaging in promiscuous sexual relations esp. for money **2** : the state of being prostituted : debasement



Image from:

[Prostitute mothers face many struggles. For... in Encyclopedia of Motherhood](#)

Summary Article: **Prostitution**

From *Encyclopedia of Criminal Justice Ethics*

The ethical issues surrounding prostitution are as varied as the profession itself. Prostitution is considered a consensual crime, one in which neither party is acting against his or her own free will; however, there is a strenuous debate over this point, especially in light of the involvement of human trafficking, coercion, and children in prostitution. Prostitution encompasses a wide range of acts and individuals. For the most part, prostitution is defined as the exchange of some sexual act for money, goods, or services and has been referenced since the origins of written history. Prostitutes can be from any socioeconomic background, any gender, and can be children or adults.

Prostitutes exist in a tenuous relationship with the criminal justice system, as their profession gives them reason to avoid or distrust law enforcement, especially if they have been the victim of a crime during the course of their work. Because of the mostly illegal and underregulated nature of prostitution, prostitutes are at a greater risk of criminal victimization from theft, rape, assault, and homicide.

Prostitutes can work alone or in groups, on the street or in a house or brothel; they can be independent or under the supervision of a madam or pimp. Prostitutes can be male or female. They can work for an escort service that provides companionship, frequently of a sexual nature, to the business class. They can work in fetish and strip clubs, or out of clubs in cases where employees are not allowed to engage in sexual acts while on duty, but are not punished by their employer if they make arrangements for sex services outside of the club.

Prostitution has been viewed as everything from easy work to work of last resort. Prostitutes have held positions of power and independence, being permitted to acquire and retain land, inherit property and items of value, as well as speak for themselves in court proceedings in communities where the status of married, widowed, or unmarried women has been near to chattel. Prostitutes have been linked to religion and religious movements. In ancient times prostitution may have been part of rituals and the services of a temple, whereas in more modern times a variety of religious movements have used prostitution of their female adherents as a way to recruit more male members.

Prostitutes have worked in conjunction with military forces, both willingly and unwillingly. Throughout time, prostitutes have seen military installations and military regiments on the move as a ready source of employment, where even at the height of war, soldiers have access to either money or goods of value, clothes, food, alcohol, and other items. Additionally, military forces around the world and throughout history have enslaved women or forced them into brothels for either the personal use of the military or as a means to increase revenue for the war effort. In military and intelligence spheres,

prostitutes have also been used for espionage. Brothels have been the source of a variety of intelligence and counterintelligence operations throughout the history of espionage. Sometimes the espionage has been internal, seeking dissension within a population, and other times external, seeking information from an individual who may speak more freely in the company of a prostitute.

In law enforcement circles, prostitutes have been used as informants, but are also the subject of vice operations, stings, and entrapment. The relationship between law enforcement and prostitutes is a convoluted one. On one hand, because of the tendency of spree, pattern, and serial killers to target prostitutes as an easily accessible population of victims, law enforcement can take a rather protective or paternal interest in prostitutes, advising them of dangers and seeking information about potential suspects. If other crimes are of more political or media interest prostitutes may work for months or years unmolested by law enforcement attention. If, however, media or political pressure is applied to law enforcement regarding prostitution, they are targeted with laser focus. Prostitutes working against their will, such as individuals who have been trafficked into sex work, are under the age of consent, or are otherwise coerced into the situation, are seen as victims. If prostitutes admit or show signs that they have chosen prostitution as a profession, they are viewed with contempt. Entrapment and sting operations work in both directions, focused on the prostitutes themselves and on those who employ them. Undercover cops may pose as prostitutes to attempt to root out individuals who are hiring prostitutes, or they may pose as individuals looking for prostitutes in an attempt to identify and arrest prostitutes.

Prostitutes are linked to a variety of other criminal activities, which can affect their interaction with law enforcement and the courts. Prostitutes may supplement their income through theft or by dealing or smuggling narcotics. In a few cases, prostitutes have been linked to homicide and even serial murder. Prostitutes may use narcotics to gain information or control over a client they do not want to have sex with or whom they wish to blackmail, rob, or turn over to a criminal organization. A variety of criminal organizations have found uses for prostitutes. Organized crime has used prostitution as one of its rackets for acquiring money and information. Street gangs will often use female members or female associates as prostitutes to acquire money, as bait for rivals, in initiation proceedings, to broker deals, or to transport narcotics. Drug gangs have used prostitutes to acquire money, transport or test narcotics, as bait for rivals, as bait for individuals who will be held hostage, or as dealers. Terrorist organizations have also used prostitutes over time to acquire money, as well as hostages, targets, and information.

Risks Involved with Prostitution

Prostitutes are at risk for a wide range of sexually transmitted diseases. Prostitutes who work in a brothel or in association with a club or organization are more likely to receive regular health care and medical attention than those who work on their own. In these cases, a positive test for any venereal or sexually transmitted disease will mean a loss of employment. Very rarely do prostitutes who work with a brothel, club, or organization have an option for unemployment or severance benefits. Prostitutes working alone are at a greater risk for sexually transmitted diseases and are also less likely to receive regular testing and/or treatment.

Unwanted pregnancy, pregnancy termination, psychological issues, as well as physical, sexual, emotional, and psychological violence and trauma are also risks taken by prostitutes in all variants of the profession. Because of the lack of regulation and oversight in most cases, prostitutes are on their own

to handle these issues. While pregnancy termination is a personal decision, a prostitute may not have that control, either because she is informed by her brothel, organization, association, location, or pimp that she cannot work if she is pregnant; or she may be the victim of violence from one of these sources at the first sign of pregnancy in order to coerce her decision. While prostitutes that work with some oversight are protected from some level of violence, they are not protected from all violence, or from psychological or emotional abuse. Mental health resources for prostitutes are relatively limited.

Role, Status, and Legal Position of Prostitutes

Prostitutes have been romanticized in some popular media, films, video games, music, and television shows; however, they have been equally demeaned and dehumanized in the same venues. Positive or romantic portrayals have influenced individuals into deciding that this is a way of making money and an enjoyable profession. Negative portrayals have influenced individuals in the misuse of prostitutes and the subjugation of others into the role of prostitutes for personal gain. Both these practices have increased among younger, and therefore below the age of consent, individuals, both as prostitutes and as pimps. In other cases, famous prostitutes, those who have catered to individuals of status or wealth, have greatly benefited from their notoriety, written memoirs, been immortalized in films, and achieved celebrity that has not decreased with arrest and/or imprisonment. In fact, arrest or imprisonment has in some cases improved their appeal and public fascination.

Changes in technology have also had an impact on the profession of prostitution. While the exchange of money or items or services of value for sex is the primary definition, and the best way for law enforcement to identify prostitution activity, Internet Web sites can allow individuals to pay the prostitute remotely and thereby remove the personal exchange of money from the encounter. In other situations, an individual can pay an individual to perform sexual activities online; through the use of Web cams and other remote access, the individual pays for live pornography, increasing the distance and decreasing the likelihood that either party will be caught.

The role, status, and legal position of prostitutes has changed drastically over time. However, one thing remains the same; the punishment for a prostitute is typically far more severe than the punishment for the individual who employs the prostitute. The punishment for prostitution throughout history and around the world has ranged from fines to imprisonment to corporal punishment to death, while individuals who employ prostitutes are more likely to be punished with fines, community service, and short periods of incarceration. Unfortunately, this decreases the likelihood that prostitutes will report crimes in which they have been victimized.



Soi Cowboy, a red light district in Bangkok in 2005. Prostitutes may work alone or as part of groups. They may ply their trade on the street, or within a house or brothel.

The victimization of prostitutes is an ethical quagmire for law enforcement and the rest of the criminal justice community. The prostitute, in most situations, is a criminal. The prostitute will likely have a long history of arrests and prosecutions. This decreases the appeal of believing the prostitute when he or she reports a crime of victimization. It can influence the behavior of officers during interviews and the taking of statements. Depending on when the victimization occurred, evidence collection and isolation regarding the prostitute's home, place of business, personal effects, or physical evidence on the body can be very difficult. For lawyers, it is difficult to present a prostitute as a victim to juries or to judges; it is difficult to separate the person from the profession. In a corrections setting, prostitutes can be subject to an increase of abuse or misuse from the guards or fellow inmates because of the stigma associated with the profession.

Stigma and shame may stay with a prostitute long after leaving the profession, and it may carry on to their children, whether or not those children were born as a result of professional or personal activity. Prostitutes who have left the profession run a continual risk of blackmail, assault, and rape from former clientele. Their children are looked upon as illegitimate by most members of the community that has knowledge of their parent's profession. Alternatively, children may be used by the prostitute to blackmail clientele as a means to leave the profession. If a former prostitute seeks legal assistance, she may expect disrespect or mistreatment from individuals in the criminal justice system when her previous status is revealed.

Male prostitutes have additional issues with which to contend. Although a male prostitute in general is as likely to be employed with female clients as with male clients, the stereotype is that male prostitutes service other men. There are male prostitutes that only service other men; however, the stereotype brings with it a stigma to nearly all male prostitutes and affects the interactions they have with the criminal justice system, where personal and institutional homophobic prejudices exist. Antihomosexual sentiments are difficult to overcome in the criminal justice system and have a long history, decreasing the likelihood that a male prostitute would seek assistance, perhaps even to a greater degree than his female counterparts.

Illegal immigrants and individuals trafficked into sex work add another layer to the ethical concerns of prostitution. Their dual levels of illegal status, one as not being legally in the country and the other as engaging in an illegal activity, place this group within the prostitute population at an even greater disadvantage than their legal resident counterparts. However, when individuals in this situation are identified, they are more likely to be treated and dealt with in the criminal justice system as victims, despite their criminal activity or status, with the deciding factor being one of perceived choice to engage in prostitution.

Prostitution is pervasive, both throughout history and in the broad spectrum of locations and situations in which it occurs. It has been argued that it is a consensual crime, one that has no real victim; however, despite its mostly consensual nature, there are inherent dangers in the profession of physical, emotional, sexual, and psychological trauma and violence. Coercion and enslavement are real issues in the profession. Interaction with the criminal justice system is on a very uneven playing field, where the prostitute is equally likely to be the target of an investigation or the victim.

See Also: Human Trafficking; Sex Trafficking; Sodomy Laws; Sting Operations; Undercover Operations; Vice; Violence Against Girls and Women

Further Readings

- Davies, Julian. *Hookers: Their Lives in Their Words*. Milo Books Preston UK, 2011.
- Dewey, Susan; Patty Kelly, eds. *Policing Pleasure: Sex Work, Policy, and the State in Global Perspective*. New York University Press New York, 2011.
- Flowers, R. Barri. *The Prostitution of Women and Girls*. McFarland Jefferson NC, 1998.
- Morrison, Todd G.; Bruce W. Whitehead, eds. *Male Sex Work*. Routledge London, 2007.
- Ringdal, Nils Johan. *Love for Sale: A World History of Prostitution*. Grove Press New York, 2005.
- Weitzer, Ronald, ed. *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry*. Routledge London, 2009.

Clairissa D. Breen
Cazenovia College

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Breen, C. D. (2014). Prostitution. In B. A. Arrigo (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Criminal Justice ethics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/prostitution>

 © 2014 SAGE Publications, Inc

 © 2014 SAGE Publications, Inc

APA

Breen, C. D. (2014). Prostitution. In B. A. Arrigo (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Criminal Justice ethics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/prostitution>

Chicago

Breen, Clairissa D. "Prostitution." In *Encyclopedia of Criminal Justice Ethics*, edited by Bruce A. Arrigo. Sage Publications, 2014. <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/prostitution>

Harvard

Breen, C.D. (2014). Prostitution. In B.A. Arrigo (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Criminal Justice ethics*. [Online]. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available from: <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/prostitution> [Accessed 12 November 2019].

MLA

Breen, Clairissa D. "Prostitution." *Encyclopedia of Criminal Justice Ethics*, edited by Bruce A. Arrigo, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2014. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/prostitution>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2019.