

Testimony Regarding Prostitution and Sex Trafficking in Vermont

Michael Shively, Ph.D.

Michaelshively95@gmail.com

Senior Advisor to the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, Street Grace

Member of New Englanders Against Sexual Exploitation

March 18, 2026

For more than 35 years I have conducted crime victimization research and evaluations of criminal justice law and policy. Across more than 20 years I had a continuous series of eight grants from the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. State Department to conduct research on exactly the issues addressed by this hearing, including studies of prostitution and sex trafficking victimization and prevalence, and the motivations and traits of human traffickers.

Decades of conducting original research and reviewing thousands of studies about the sex trade in the U.S. (including Vermont), lead to me to strongly oppose efforts to decriminalize prostitution.

The sponsors and supporters of bills such as Vermont's [H.568](#) (2020) and [S.54](#) (2025), and the repeal of local ordinances in **Burlington** (2021) and **Montpelier** (2022), argue that “consensual sex work” is relatively harmless and that most of its negative impacts are the result of its criminalization, and not from the inherent risks of exchanging money for sex. This is demonstrably false.

The record of harm caused by the sex trade right here in Vermont is compelling, and consistent with evidence from throughout the world. The full decriminalization of prostitution would expand the number of victims of sexual exploitation, and undermine efforts to prevent sex trafficking, pursue and punish traffickers, and provide trafficking victim support. I can provide details and documentation regarding the vast body of evidence in favor of prohibiting prostitution, but briefly:

1. *Contrary to the assertions of advocates for legal prostitution, efforts to manage the sex trade by full decriminalization, “de facto” decriminalization through policies of declining to prosecute, and legalization have all failed* to achieve their promised benefits of improved public health, public safety, and destigmatization. *The rate of failure across more than 50 years in the U.S. and abroad is 100%.*
2. *Over 90% of Vermont’s population* resides in a city or county in which local *harms* of prostitution are well-documented. Men have been arrested on a charge of misdemeanor prostitution for buying sex from adults in at least **23 of Vermont’s cities and counties**.
 - a. In **100%** of those communities, prostituted persons have been *sexually assaulted*, and local residents and businesses have *complained to police* about prostitution.
 - b. In **65%** of those communities, there has been documented *sex trafficking of children*.
3. Men have been arrested for buying access to *children for sexual abuse in at least 15 Vermont cities and counties*, and the average age of the minors they have attempted to purchase for abuse is **13 years**.
4. *No evidence* has been presented showing non-enforcement of prostitution law in **Burlington** and **Montpelier** has led to improved outcomes or greater emphasis on pursuing human trafficking.
5. *Since 2021 in Vermont, no arrests have been made for purchasing prostitution, indicating “de facto” decriminalization.* During that time, more than **79 new sex trafficking victims have been identified**, but there has been **just 1 arrest for sex trafficking**. Reducing prostitution enforcement does **NOT** produce an increase in success pursuing sex traffickers.
6. **100% of convicted human traffickers interviewed said that sex trafficking would be much easier if prostitution were decriminalized.**
7. **Full decriminalization** of prostitution without instituting regulations (which DSW and others have opposed) **would institute the nation’s largest legal tax evasion scheme.**