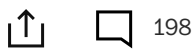


## Is opening more strip clubs one way to reduce sex crimes?

Study examines relationship between adult entertainment businesses and sex-related offenses

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In theory, adult entertainment businesses — including strip clubs and escort services — could either increase or decrease sex crimes. By teaching men to treat women as sex objects, they could foster the kinds of attitudes that lead men to commit rape and sexual assault. On the other hand, such establishments might provide substitutions for sex crimes: Men otherwise inclined to commit assaults might instead spend more time in strip clubs or hiring escorts.

In a forthcoming [study](#) in the *Economic Journal*, we found evidence for the second theory: In New York City, over the period from Jan. 1, 2004, to June 30, 2012, the opening of an adult entertainment business in a police precinct decreased sex crimes by 13 percent in that precinct.

This did not seem to be because police presence increased in those precincts when strip clubs appeared: Other crime rates — involving drugs and theft, for example — were not affected, something we'd be unlikely to see if more police were patrolling these neighborhoods. Nor was it because women (including street prostitutes, who are often the victims of sex crimes) avoided the areas around such businesses: If that were true, we'd expect to find sex crimes increase in neighboring precincts; the crimes might simply be relocated.

All of that suggests that the substitution explanation may be true: People inclined to commit sex crimes may be less likely to do so if they have an outlet for sexually explicit entertainment (which may include, at some clubs, illegal prostitution). Strengthening the case for this conclusion is the fact that the effect we found was more powerful at night, when these establishments do most of their business.

To explore the important question of the relationship between sexual violence and adult businesses, we combined two types of data. The New York City Police Department's "stop and frisk" data set includes information about every police stop made, including crimes officers witness and those brought directly to their attention. The crime categories we took note of were sexual assault, sexual abuse and sexual misconduct. We focused on the period from Jan. 1, 2004, to June 30, 2012. (Later there were legal challenges that curtailed the stop-and-frisk policy; stops that included no crimes were not relevant to our study.)

The data set is especially useful because these are police-reported crimes: Therefore, we can avoid the problem of inconsistent self-reporting of sex crimes. We combined that information with data from sources including the Yellow Pages and New York's Department of State to determine when adult entertainment businesses had opened and where. In our definition of that category of business, we included strip clubs, "gentlemen's clubs" and escort

services, but excluded explicit movie houses and bookstores. (In 2004, there were 76 businesses meeting our definition in New York City; by 2012, that had risen to 280.)

Our crime data is very granular: at the daily — even hourly — level. And the study assumes that the opening date of an adult entertainment business is an essentially random event with respect to the sort of crime considered in our study: There's no connection between the date such businesses open and rates of sex crime in the precinct. That element of randomness makes this study a kind of natural experiment, allowing us to isolate the effect of the openings themselves.

While rates of sex crimes varied across the city, overall they were very low: We found 0.03 such crimes per precinct per day. During the period we examined, there were 7,478 stops by police that involved sexual crimes. The relationship, however, between these crimes and the presence or absence of adult establishments in the same precincts was clear and consistent.

Because the stop-and-frisk data set — despite its advantages in other respects — does not take into account many self-reported sex crimes, such as those taking place behind closed doors, we also analyzed data on sex crimes from NYPD's historic-complaints files, over the same period. When we did so, we found the same relationship between crime and the opening of adult entertainment establishments.

Research on crime prevention tends to focus on interventions involving law enforcement. This study suggests an alternative path, at least where sexual crimes are involved: Making available activities that suppress such crimes. Our work has parallels with several other studies that find that decriminalizing prostitution — either in a U.S. state (Rhode Island) or in certain districts of the Netherlands — can lead to lower sex-crime rates. But it suggests that liberalizing sexually explicit entertainment can reduce crime even when prostitution remains illegal, as it is in New York.

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