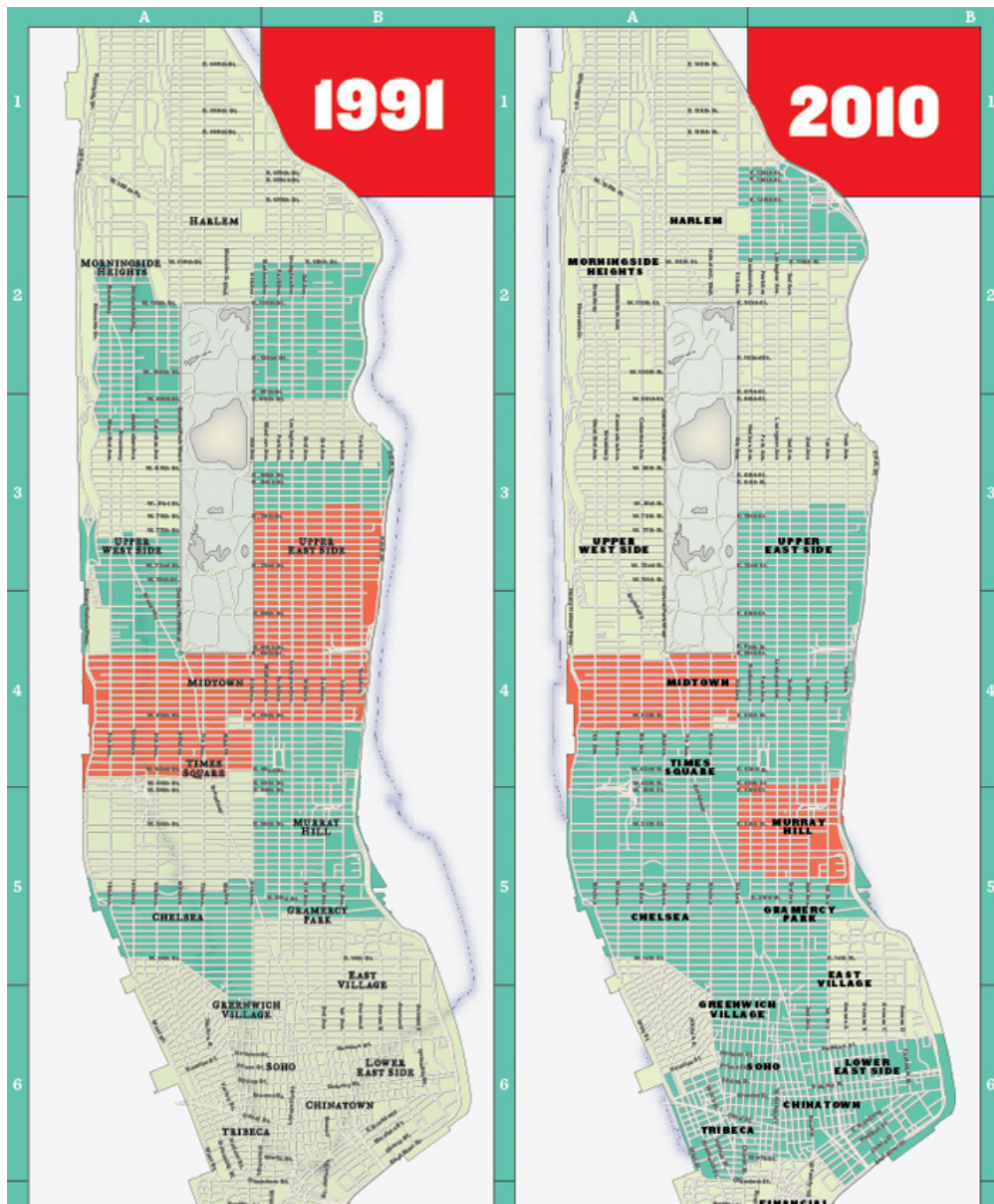
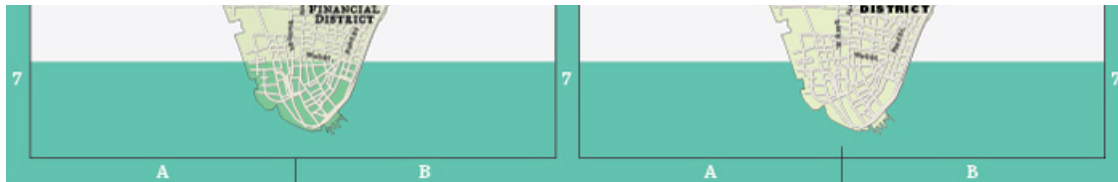


SUDHIR VENKATESH MAGAZINE 01.31.11 12:00 PM

# HOW TECH TOOLS TRANSFORMED NEW YORK'S SEX TRADE





### Sex in the city: Then and Now

Red-light districts were commonplace in big cities throughout the 20th century. But in recent years, New York City has seen the midtown areas with high concentrations of sex workers empty out. The trade has moved indoors and diffused into more-upscale districts downtown.

### Distribution of Prostitution

**Low Density**



**Medium Density**



**High Density**



**What is it like to be a prostitute?** The answer depends on whether you work out of a client's car or a \$500-a-night hotel room. In 1999, I set out to study the effects of efforts to bring the suburban middle class back to New York City. The gentrification of Times Square made for a unique social experiment: What happens to sex workers when they are pushed off the streets and into the outer boroughs? I had little idea at the time that I'd be documenting the rise of an entirely new, upper-end "indoor" market, in which streetwalkers have given way to a professional class.

The economies of big cities have been reshaped by a demand for high-end entertainment, cuisine, and "wellness" goods. In the process, "dating," "massage," "escort," and "dancing" have replaced hustling and streetwalking. A luxury brand has been born.

These changes have made sex for hire more expensive. But luxe pricing has in turn helped make prostitution, well... somewhat respectable. Whereas men once looked for a secretive tryst, now they seek a mistress with no strings attached, a "girlfriend experience," and they are willing to pay top dollar for it.

Technology has played a fundamental role in this change. No self-respecting cosmopolitan man looking for an evening of companionship is going to lean out his car window and call out to a woman at a traffic light. The Internet and the rise of mobile phones have enabled some sex workers to professionalize their trade. Today they can control their image, set their prices, and sidestep some of the pimps, madams, and other intermediaries who once took a share of the revenue. As the trade has grown less risky and more lucrative, it has attracted some middle-class women seeking quick tax-free income.

I followed 290 women, 170 of whom made enough (at least \$30,000) to separate them from streetwalkers. I spent at least 12 months earning their trust, trying not to ask a lot of prying questions. Once they realized I wasn't a cop or social worker, they usually told me their stories. I focused on financial questions first, because it made them feel validated as workers. How much did you earn this week? What expenses did you have? Do you save any money?

The figures on the next page highlight some of the contrasts between old-world prostitutes and new-age sex workers. Yet they also suggest that some things haven't changed: Even women who don't work on the street report hiding their activities from their families and being abused.

#### LOCATION

### Indoor vs. Outdoor Sex Work

Streetwalkers...	Escorts...
Earn \$75 per typical transaction	Earn about 50 percent more per transaction
Are jailed at least twice a year	than a streetwalker
Are beaten an average of four times a year	Rarely interact with police
Carry a small pocketknife as a security measure	Are beaten twice a year, on average
Keep working to support	Try to deduce a client's place of employment

#### FREAKONOMICS

### What sex workers charge (and keep) for traditional intercourse

**Streetwalker** Charges an average of \$100 but her pimp gets a 25 percent cut (30 percent on weekend)

**Self-employed** \$150, and she keeps it all but she has to pay for online marketing, transportation, bribes to shopkeepers, and tips for clients.

**"Blue-collar" agency** The agency charges \$350 on average, and the worker gets 60 percent of that. The agency pays for advertising and security officers. The client pays for the hotel room and drinks.

**Upscale agency** The agency charges \$500 on average, and the worker gets 70 percent of that.

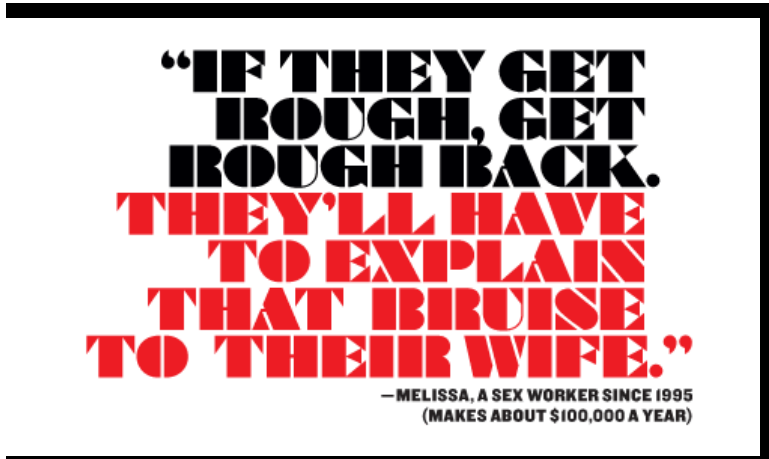
drug habits as a security  
 Pay measure  
 shopkeepers Keep working  
 to hold their to pay for  
 cash for them clothing and  
 shoes  
 Form  
 Subchapter-S  
 corporations

worker are paid separat  
 gets the standard \$2,00  
 gets the same. The clien  
 expenses.

### The Cost of a Particu Depends on the Part

	Wall Street/ Tribeca	Chinatowr SoHo
hand job	\$225	\$175
ménage a trois (each woman)	\$750	\$500
mommy role-play sex	\$400	\$400

\* Plus a shot at the bar



### The Agency Trap

More than 60 percent of women in the high-end trade have worked with escort agencies. Men like going through the

### Education and Day Jobs

Of the escorts I talked to, 63 percent had moved to New York City from another state after high school. But people rarely come to the big city to become prostitutes: Nearly all have held a legitimate job, but not necessarily the glamorous one they

### Top Up

“You’ll mak percent mo good boob ; woman said things that a sex worke

agencies because it feels less dirty and because they can often write off the expense. (For example, the agency might give them an “entertainment” receipt that includes dinner, hotel, and other seemingly legitimate costs.) But many sex workers hate agencies because they take a cut without providing much security or support. So a lot of women self-incorporate and create a fake agency web page with swiped photos that make it appear as though they are part of a bigger operation.

came to New York to get. Three worked as street vendors. Two appeared on daytime soap operas.

## Their Education

**86%**  
High school diploma

**53%**  
Some college

**19%**  
College degree

## Their Day Jobs

**47%**  
Food services (catering and restaurants)

**11%**  
Arts (dancing, acting, or musical performance)

**43%**  
Retail sales

**9%**  
Publishing (copywriting, proofreading, administrative work)

*Numbers exceed 100% because of overlaps in work experience.*

power:



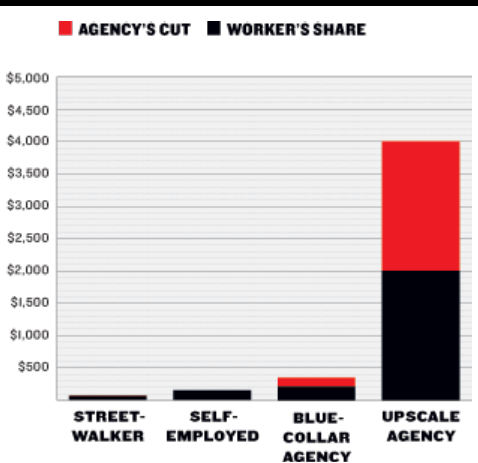
1. Dying blond.
2. Befriending hotel clerks to obtain free upgrades to suites.
3. BlackBerry clients, the symbol of professional success suggests a worker in a position of power and disempowerment.

**TWO GRAND TO YOUR MONTHLY BUDGET, BUT THE INVESTMENT IS WORTH IT. MEN LIKE YOU TO KEEP THEM ON WHILE THEY GET LAID."**

—CAITLYN, 24 (MAKES ABOUT \$75,000 A YEAR)

## What About the Pimp

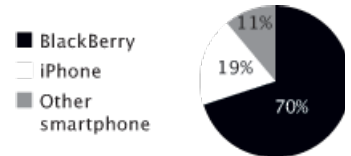
It's hard out there for a pimp—e Changes in the sex industry have superfluous. I met 11 pimps work midtown Manhattan in 1999, and work within four years. One enli military; two have been homeless has a full-time job, working as a charter school. I asked one of the experience helps him in the legit learn one thing," he said. "For a man will do just about anything. with that knowledge? I have no i



## High-End Escorts

They might maintain four to six clients—each of whom pays at least \$20,000 a year. They often rent an apartment just for sessions.

## Sex Worker Mobil Device Usage



## Tools of the Trade

A SEX WORKER ALWAYS CARRIES:



Two cell phones. Guys sometimes grab a woman's mobile to gain a sense of power and control.



Extra panties. "Always bring them—men pay for souvenirs."



Band-Aids and cortisone cream for rashes, rawness, and bruises.



Gum (Orbit and Trident are favorites). Some swear by those dissolving Listerine strips.

## BUSINESS DEVELO

## Where The /

## Is

Of the women I talk percent said they've craigslist, mostly fr advertising. But ev the crackdown on t adult-services sect workers were turni Facebook: 83 perce Facebook page, and that by the end of 2 Facebook will be th



Condoms and lubricant. If the client wants to skip the condom, there's usually a 25 percent surcharge.

**A SEX WORKER NEVER CARRIES:**



A cell phone with any form of contact information.



Any form of ID. They sometimes have fake state IDs with an alternate address.



Bank cards or credit cards (or anything a client could use to find out where they live).



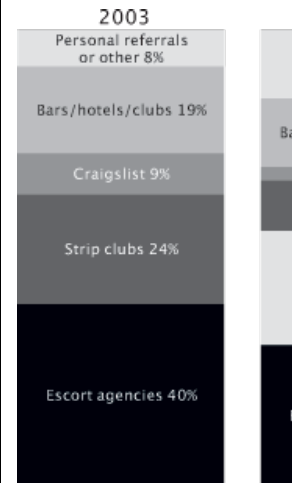
Large bills. "Men dumb enough to pay in hundreds don't deserve change."



Small bills. A john who wants change for a \$20 bill will want to rob you.

on-line recruitment

**SOURCE OF REGULAR CLIENTS**



*Sudhir Venkatesh (sudhirvenkatesh.org) is a professor of sociology at Columbia Univ book Gang Leader for a Day.*

*Illustrations: Kate Francis; map compiled by Fletcher Haulley and Sudhir Venkatesh*