UNDERSTANDING SEX BUYER BEHAVIOR:
INSIGHTS FROM A SOLICITATION DIVERSION PROGRAM



MAY 2025

Prepared by

Arizona State University's Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research

Authored by

Ezequiel Y. Dominguez, MSW
Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, PhD, MSW
Stacey Sutherland, BS

Understanding Sex Buyer Behavior: Insights from a Solicitation Diversion Program

"It's easy picking. Like picking an apple off a tree."
- Participant 07

Report
May 2025

By:
Ezequiel Y. Dominguez, MSW
Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, MSW, Ph.D.
Arizona State University, Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research

Stacey Sutherland, Arizona Anti-Trafficking Network

Funding for this study was provided by the Arizona Anti-Trafficking Network.

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Arizona State University and conducted in collaboration with Catholic Charities, who reviewed and authorized all data collection activities.

Contact:
For questions or inquiries about this report, please contact:
Dr. Dominique Roe-Sepowitz (dominique.roe@asu.edu)

OVERVIEW

This study explores the attitudes, experiences, and thought patterns of adult men arrested for attempting to purchase sex in Arizona. Through voluntary, confidential interviews with 20 men enrolled in a court-mandated diversion class, researchers collected detailed narratives about why they bought sex, how they viewed the people involved, and how they responded to being arrested and educated through the program.



What we learned:

- Sex buyers described the sex buying experiences through a lens of power with the buyer holding greater power and control over the encounter than the sex seller.
- Sex buying was often a response to emotional disconnection and gaps in intimacy.
- Buying sex was an intergenerational or familial pattern.
- Sex buyers did not hold girls and women in high regard and were not empathetic or concerned about the impact of their sex buying on the seller.
- Some sex buyers had a period of contemplation before their first sex purchase beginning with awareness of street prostitution and later purchasing sex.
- Sex buyers reported feeling shame about their sex buying behavior but rarely spoke about it with others.
- Sex buyers reported that they had not really considered the experience of the sex seller and their possible victimization.
- A few participants shared deeply held beliefs that human trafficking is not only tolerated by those in power in the U.S. but is actively facilitated by them.
- Several participants stated that sex was a basic need for men, similar to eating and sleeping and that they sought out purchasing sex with curiosity and spontaneity.

12 themes that emerged from the interviews with sex buyers included:

- **Perceptions of power and control:** Many buyers described feeling in charge of the interaction due to the financial exchange.
- **Emotional drivers and intimacy gaps:** Loneliness, emotional neglect, or past relationship trauma often played a role in their decision-making.
- **Moral rationalization and normalization:** Some framed sex buying as equivalent to dating or other transactional relationships.
- **Deliberation before action:** Some participants reported a temporary delay between being introduced to street prostitution and the actual purchasing of sex.
- **Limited awareness of exploitation:** Most had not considered that trafficking or coercion could be involved until exposed to the diversion curriculum.
- **Moral conflict, shame, and social stigma:** Some participants described ambivalence, remorse, or shame about purchasing sex. This was often shaped by how they perceive their families, partners, or society would view their behavior.
- **Entrapment and systemic distrust:** Some believed the sting operations were unfair or deceptive which led to resentment rather than accountability.
- **Emotional suppression and masculine guarding:** Men frequently minimized or avoided discussing emotional drivers or consequences.
- **Situational versus patterned engagement:** Participants varied widely on how they framed their relationships to sex buying - some were accidental and others were habitual buyers.
- **Conspiratorial thinking and institutional blame:** Participants described their strong distrust in law enforcement, the legal system, and even broader institutions.
- **Intergenerational normalization:** A few men said they learned about buying sex from fathers, uncles, or peers.
- **Toxic masculinity and misogyny:** Some participants expressed resentment or disdain toward women, often in the context of past romantic disappointments or perceived rejection.

IMPLICATIONS SUMMARY



UNDERSTANDING EXPLOITATION

Many participants did not recognize that trafficking or coercion could be involved in the commercial sex exchanges they pursued. Several assumed that the individuals they encountered were acting entirely by choice. This suggests the importance of educational efforts that move beyond definitions and incorporate grounded, real-world examples that reflect the complexities of exploitation.



GENDER AND CONTROL

Some participants described women in transactional or dismissive terms, often framing sex as something owed or expected. These attitudes were not always overt, but they reflected ideas shaped over time by peers, family, and broader social norms. Addressing these beliefs involves creating space to examine how views about control, entitlement, and masculinity are formed and sustained.



DELIBERATION BEFORE ACTION

Some participants reported that there was a temporary delay between being introduced to the sex buying opportunity and following through with the sex buying. This pause or short time period is an opportunity for public awareness to provide prevention or early intervention to stop sex buying. This pause signals that sex buying is not always impulsive and can sometimes follow a period of internal negotiation and eventual decision making.



RESPONSES TO ARREST

A number of participants described feeling defensive, embarrassed, or distrustful following their arrest. For some, these emotions made it difficult to engage meaningfully with the material presented in the diversion program. While these reactions should not derail accountability, acknowledging them can reduce resistance and allow for more honest reflection.



TYPES OF BUYERS

The men who completed the survey and interviews represented a wide range of life experiences. Some described a one-time decision while others reported long-term, patterned involvement. Their reasons varied, as did their emotional awareness and willingness to reflect. These differences point to the value of flexible approaches for interventions that avoid assumptions and meet individuals where they are.

BUYER DEMOGRAPHICS

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Buyers

Characteristic	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	40	100
Race and Ethnicity		
Hispanic/Latino	18	45
White/Caucasian	10	25
Native American/American Indian	5	12.5
Black/African American	4	10
Biracial or Multiracial	2	5
Marital Status		
Single	19	47.5
Married	13	32.5
Divorced	2	5
Widowed	1	2.5
Separated	1	2.5
Children[a]	18	45
From Arizona[a]	26	65
Highest Education Level		
Some high school	1	2.5
High school / GED	24	60
Some college	6	15
Associate's	2	5
Bachelor's	2	5
Master's	2	5
Age		
Minimum	18	
Maximum	68	
Average	38.2	

Note. N = 40

[a] *Reflects the number and percentage of participants answering "yes" to this question.*

During the diversion class, all men arrested for attempting to purchase sex were invited to complete a Life Experiences Survey. The survey was administered on-site and designed to collect broader demographic information to complement the interviews. Participation was voluntary and confidential, and men were able to complete the survey regardless of whether they agreed to take part in the interview portion of the study. As a result, not every interview participant completed the survey, and not every survey respondent took part in an interview. Still, the data offer some insight into the range of backgrounds represented within the program.

A total of 40 men completed the survey. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 68, with an average age of just over 38 years old. The participants identified across several racial and ethnic categories. Approximately 45 percent identified as Hispanic or Latino, 25 percent as White, 12.5 percent as Native American, 10 percent as Black, and 5 percent as multiracial. Just under half reported having children, and nearly half indicated they were single. Sixty-five percent of respondents were from Arizona.

Participants also represented a wide range of educational backgrounds. Most, 60 percent, reported completing either some high school, a high school diploma, or a GED. A smaller group had attended college without completing a degree. A few reported earning associate's, bachelor's, or master's degrees. One participant indicated that 11th grade was their highest level of education.

Together, the survey findings reinforce what the interviews also made clear: there is no singular or easily defined profile of a sex buyer. The men who completed this survey brought with them different life experiences, identities, and social circumstances. Rather than fitting one mold, they reflect a broader cross-section of the community. This variation highlights the importance of designing interventions that are responsive to a wide range of realities.

INTRODUCTION

Efforts to address commercial sexual exploitation in the United States have increasingly recognized the importance of targeting demand as a necessary component of prevention. Yet while much attention has focused on identifying and supporting victims, less is known about how men who buy sex think about their actions, what motivates them, and how they respond when held accountable. This study was developed in partnership with Catholic Charities' Solicitation Diversion Program and led by Arizona State University's Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research. Funded by the Arizona Anti-Trafficking Network, the project sought to fill a persistent gap in the field by gathering firsthand accounts from men arrested for solicitation with a specific focus on the participants' first sex buying experience. The aim of the study was to better understand the emotional, social, and cognitive pathways that shape sex buying demand.

METHODOLOGY

Catholic Charities' Solicitation Diversion Program in Arizona serves men arrested for attempting to purchase sex. The program includes a one-day court-ordered educational class designed to address the legal, social, and personal consequences of sex buying. Participants sign a plea agreement to attend diversion with the alternative being going to jail for 14 days. During the one-day classes' lunch break and after the conclusion of class, participants were invited to take part in a voluntary research interview.

A total of 20 adult men participated in semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in private rooms at the class site immediately following the break for lunch and at the conclusion of class. Each participant received a $50 stipend and lunch as compensation for their time. Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted in either English or Spanish. All interviews were audio recorded with consent and later transcribed for analysis. Participation was confidential, voluntary, and had no impact on participants' legal cases or class outcomes. The interview protocol included open-ended questions about participants' motivations, how they were introduced to the idea of buying sex, their reactions to the diversion class content, and what they believed would support behavior change. The goal was not to extract confessions but to better understand the internal narratives and social conditions that shape demand.

A thematic analysis approach was used to identify patterns across the data collected from the interviews. Transcripts were reviewed in multiple rounds with emergent codes developed and refined collaboratively by the two authors. Themes were finalized through ongoing comparison across cases, with attention to both recurring statements and contradictions. Direct quotes are used throughout the report to preserve participants' language and illustrate how key themes appeared in their own words. It should also be noted that this study is not intended to be representative of all sex buyers. Rather, it offers a look at the perspectives of men who have already entered a legal intervention process and agreed to speak openly about their experiences. While findings cannot be generalized, they still can provide insight into how some men think about, justify, and reflect on sex buying.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Perceptions of Power and Control

Many of the men that were interviewed talked about buying sex as a situation where they felt in control. They believed that because they were paying, they got to decide what happened, including what was allowed, how much it cost, and whether or not it continued. Several described the sex buying transaction as one-sided, with them setting the terms and the other person agreeing and going along with it.

One participant said:
"*They [buyers] dictate the rules. They dictate what can happen, what cannot happen, what they can pay for, what they cannot pay for.*" — Participant 19

Another participant explained the difference in power:
"*The one who's buying has a choice of whether he can leave or not. She [prostituted woman] doesn't.*" — Participant 02

Others talked about how money created this imbalance. They believed that because the women needed the money, they were willing to do whatever the buyer asked:
"*The buyer always got control... If you're [prostituted person] broke and you got nowhere to go, you'll do it.*" — Participant 10

These comments were not usually expressed with anger. Most men spoke about the exchange in a matter-of-fact way. Still, the underlying belief was consistent in that paying for sex gave them control over what happened and who it happened with. Few questioned whether the women involved had a real choice. Even when some men expressed regret or discomfort, they often returned to the idea that they were the ones in charge of the interaction. This belief shaped how they described the interaction, how they viewed consent, and how they made sense of their own actions.

Theme 2: Emotional Drivers and Intimacy Gaps

Several men spoke about having emotional reasons for buying sex. They described feeling lonely, disconnected, or unwanted, especially in the context of long-term intimate relationships that had lost physical or emotional closeness. For many of the participants, buying sex was not just about physical desire, but about trying to meet an unmet emotional need.

One participant described:
"*Me and my wife haven't had a good sex life in the last five years, and the last three, none at all.*" — Participant 20

Others explained that they felt overlooked or emotionally distant in their everyday lives, and that the experience of buying sex gave them a brief feeling of being seen or wanted.
"*It's not about lust... sometimes it's just needing someone to notice you.*"
— Participant 08

"*You go years without anyone looking at you that way. It wears on you.*"
— Participant 14

Some men described the act as emotionally numbing, or a way to avoid dealing with how they were really feeling. One participant shared:
"*It [purchasing sex] was easier than talking about anything. You don't have to explain yourself.*"
— Participant 11

While not all men in the study framed their decisions this way, a number made it clear that the emotional part of their lives, whether it was loneliness, rejection, or the absence of connection, played a role in their choice to buy sex. These drivers rarely came with detailed reflection, but they came up often, usually when men were trying to explain what led them to that point. This information adds important context to understanding demand. For some men, buying sex was about what they were missing emotionally.

Theme 3: Moral Rationalization and Normalization

Many participants explained their sex buying actions by comparing sex buying to other everyday situations or relationships. These comparisons were used to downplay and minimize the harm of sex buying or to frame the behavior as normal, practical, or understandable. In some cases, men presented sex buying as a common part of adult life, or something many people do, even if it's not openly discussed.

One participant said:
"*You're gonna pay [for sex] either way; dinner, a movie, a truck. Same thing.*"
— Participant 10

This kind of reasoning allowed some men to shift attention away from questions of harm or exploitation. Instead, they focused on the idea that all romantic or sexual relationships involve some form of exchange. Another participant put it this way:
"*As humans, we do have needs... for men, it's [sex] a need. So it's not always a want.*" — Participant 15

For others, the act of buying sex was framed as a practical decision and one that avoided the complications of relationships or emotional risk. Some described it as efficient, low-commitment, and less stressful than dealing with the expectations that come with dating or long-term partnerships.

"*You get what you want, and then you leave. There's no arguing, no pretending.*"
— Participant 09

In many of these statements, the focus was not on the other person involved, but on the buyer's experience. The women they purchased sex from were rarely described in detail. Instead, the men emphasized their own needs, expectations, or reasoning. By framing sex buying as routine, necessary, or comparable to other activities of life, they avoided reflection on power, consent, or harm. This kind of moral rationalization helps explain why some men felt little urgency to stop the behavior before they were arrested. As long as the exchange felt normal or justifiable to them, there was little reason to think of it as harmful or something worth questioning.

Theme 4: Deliberation before Action

Several participants described the timing of their first sex buying act with reference to a pause or delay between the offer of buying sex to the actual purchase action. This delay between introduction and behavior offers the opportunity for prevention or early intervention. During the weeks or months between seeing where and how to buy sex and the action of soliciting a person to buy sex is a key time period for community action. This time delay signals that sex buying is not always impulsive. Instead, it can sometimes follow a process of internal negotiation and eventual decision-making. Using a motivation to change framework of behavioral change, the participants described being in a stage of contemplation, considering the sex buying behavior and lining up things (cash, being at the sex selling location, confidence) to move to the action action stage where they actually buy sex. One participant referred to the identification of where to buy sex was with some male friends:

"Someone told me about it [purchasing sex]... we were joking – some guys, friends of mine. We looked at a website. I was kind of amazed... it became like a menu. You know, you look at the different girls, different things... Curiosity kicks in."

– Participant 20

"*I met one of my friends at rehab and he told me about buying sex on 27th Avenue. He told me about it six months ago. It was stuck in my head because he told me tha*t."

– Participant 04

"I was going to my friend's house over there on 27th Avenue and a woman had came up to my car, didn't know what it was at first and then I remembered at the time she had told me, she had offered me and all that. At the time I didn't have no cash. Couple weeks went by later, the excitement, knowing that that was over there, decided one day to do it, continued to do it till I got caught down one day. It was 2- 3 years ago."

—Participant 02

Community actions can assist in dissuading the eventual decision making of whether or not to purchase sex through the use of community prevention education and awareness activities about the illegality or harm done when purchasing sex. This new awareness may interfere with the rationalization of buying sex and stop the decision to purchase sex.

Theme 5: Limited Awareness and Shifting Understanding of Exploitation

Before their arrest, most participants said they had not thought about the women involved in the sex trade as victims or as people who might be forced into it. For many, the idea that trafficking or coercion could be part of the situation wasn't something they had seriously considered. They assumed the women were acting on their own, freely consenting to the activity, or making a choice, even if that choice was shaped by poverty, addiction, or other challenges.

One participant reflected:
"*You never actually think that the women out on the streets might be doing it against their own will.*" — Participant 14

Some men acknowledged that the women they met were in difficult situations, but still didn't view them as being exploited. One explained:
"*I realize that there's women who are forced into it because of sex trafficking and having pimps... but most of the girls I've dealt with... have a drug problem or a disorder.*"
— Participant 08

Others shared that their understanding changed only after hearing from survivor speakers or law enforcement during the diversion class. Several men described being surprised by what they learned and expressed guilt or discomfort afterward:
"After it [purchasing sex]... morally kind of felt wrong. It took getting caught to actually make me realize what I was doing was wrong. Because... they very likely could be victims."
— Participant 12

Still, not all participants accepted the idea of exploitation. Some remained skeptical, while others minimized the possibility by saying they had never personally seen signs of trafficking among the people they had purchased sex from. This range of responses showcases how much of the men's understanding depended on their exposure to information and their willingness to consider it. Overall, this shows how limited awareness about sex trafficking plays a role in how some men come to see sex buying as low-risk or morally neutral. For those who did begin to question their assumptions about low risk or that the sex sellers might be victims, the shift often came only after they were arrested and not before.

Theme 6: Moral Conflict, Shame, and Social Stigma

Many participants described feeling embarrassed, ashamed, or disappointed in themselves after their arrest for solicitation of sex. Some were worried about how others, especially their partners, children, or employers, would view them if they found out about the arrest. These feelings often came up when participants talked about the consequences of being caught, not necessarily related to the act of buying sex itself.

One participant explained:
"*I have kids on my own, I have a daughter... I just didn't know what to do. I don't know how everybody would look at it... I didn't want nobody knowing that I'm here [diversion program]. You know? Because I'm ashamed of myself for everything that happened*."
— Participant 11

Others said they felt judged or labeled, especially once their arrest became public. One participant reflected on how he believed society views men who buy sex:
"*They [family and friends] would look at me different. They would be ashamed of me*."
— Participant 06

Some participants described the experience of arrest as humiliating and said it had shaken their sense of self:
"*It was actually my first time... Imagine doing something for the first time and then getting caught. It was just like, damn, what is everybody going to think?*"
— Participant 11

Still, the participants reported that this shame didn't always lead to reflection or change. In some cases, it caused participants to shut down or avoid the topic entirely. Very few said they had talked openly with friends or family about what happened. Instead, the experience was something they kept to themselves either because they were embarrassed or because they feared the consequences of disclosure. For some, this silence left little room to process their behavior. Most men were focused on avoiding further judgment rather than thinking through why they made the decision in the first place.

Theme 7: Entrapment and Systemic Distrust

Several participants said they felt set up or trapped in the sex buying sting where they were arrested by law enforcement. They believed that the sting operations used to arrest them were unfair, overly aggressive, or designed to humiliate them. A number of men spoke about their innocence and how they were at the wrong place at the wrong time. These men didn't necessarily deny what they did, but they were focused more on how they were caught than on the harm of their actions.

One participant said:
"*I was exhausted from work that day... then this random lady comes up to my car. I was like, what do you want? When I left, I got arrested. It was frustrating. Obviously, I was going to fight the law. I had plenty of reason to go into an AutoZone.*" — Participant 01

Others described feeling caught off guard or misunderstood:

"*That day I was just like, 'Oh, hey, what's up? What's your name?' I was just trying to be friendly. It wasn't my intention to really solicit her... I told her to go around back, joking, and I took off. Next thing I know, I got stopped by police on the freeway.*"
— Participant 19

A third man described being caught off guard:
"*I went to a store to buy sushi. When I saw the police lady - she was supposed to be a hooker, I guess. She engaged me and started asking me questions... I guess I answered the wrong questions. I was at the wrong place at the wrong time.*" — Participant 10

These experiences led some men to question the motives of law enforcement. A few expressed frustration that they, rather than traffickers or exploiters, were the ones being targeted. They viewed the police sting as something designed to make an example out of them rather than solve a larger problem. These reactions were not always defensive. Some men acknowledged wrongdoing but still felt that the tactics used to arrest them made it harder to fully process their behavior. Others used criticism of the system as a way to avoid self-reflection, focusing on how they were treated rather than on why they were there. This theme highlights how when men feel the process is unfair or designed to shame them, they may become more focused on the system than on their own role in the harm. For some, that sense of mistrust created distance between what they learned in the class and what they were willing to internalize.

Theme 8: Emotional Suppression and Masculine Guarding

In several interviews, participants struggled to express their emotions or avoided them entirely. While some men talked openly about loneliness or shame, others kept their answers short, changed the subject, or laughed nervously when the conversation turned serious. This pattern reflected a discomfort with vulnerability as well as a tendency to downplay or suppress feelings rather than talk through them.

Some men were aware of this and named it directly. One participant said:
"I don't talk about feelings. That's not what I was taught." — Participant 06

Others brushed off questions that might invite emotional reflection. When asked about how he felt after the arrest, one man said simply:
"*I got over it. That's life*." — Participant 02

This guardedness made it difficult for some men to fully engage with the deeper questions of why they bought sex or how it affected them and others. In some interviews, the emotional tone was flat, even when the content was serious. For example, one man who described being in a long-term marriage and feeling deeply disconnected from his wife spoke about it, saying only:

"*It's been a while [since having had sex]. That's all.*" — Participant 20

The interviews were not therapy sessions, and not all men were expected to open up in detail. But the overall pattern was noticeable. Some participants seemed unsure how to talk about their internal lives, or did not see value in doing so. This emotional distance may have served as a coping strategy or a way to protect themselves from judgment or from feelings they didn't want to face. This theme matters because emotional suppression can get in the way of real accountability. If men can't or won't talk about what led them to buy sex, it becomes harder to reflect on the behavior or commit to change. Programs that work with sex buyers may need to create space where emotional honesty is possible and where men are supported, not shamed, in unpacking what they've been taught about masculinity and expression.

Theme 9: Situational vs. Patterned Engagement

Participants in this study described a number of different patterns when it came to buying sex. Some said it was a one-time decision, something they did in response to a specific situation like a bad day, a breakup, or stress. Others admitted it was something they had done many times before, sometimes over many years.

Men who described their behavior as situational often emphasized that it was out of character. They said it wasn't something they normally did, and they blamed the moment more than the decision. One participant explained:

"I had a bad day. That's really it. I wasn't thinking straight." — Participant 09

Another participant described it as an impulsive act, tied more to mood than intention:

"*It was like a craving. I didn't plan it. I just did it.*" — Participant 13

On the other hand, some men described regular or repeated involvement in buying sex. These individuals spoke about having routines, specific locations, or preferences. For them, it was part of how they navigated unmet needs or avoided relationships.

One man shared:

"*The first [time purchasing sex]? 25 years ago. Once a month since then. It was easy, like fruit off a tree. I seen them. Approached them. It's easy picking. Like picking an apple off a tree.*" — Participant 07

Whether occasional or habitual, the participants described the sex buying behavior as something they controlled. Few used the word "addiction" or described themselves as unable to stop, even if the behavior had become routine. Instead, they often saw it as a way of dealing with something else, whether emotional, relational, or situational. This distinction is important for understanding how to intervene. Some men may respond to one-time educational efforts or conversations about consequences. Others such as those with longer-term patterns, may need more sustained engagement including opportunities to talk through emotional and behavioral habits they may not have questioned before.

Theme 10: Conspiratorial Thinking and Institutional Blame

A small but vocal group of participants expressed strong distrust in law enforcement, the legal system, and even broader institutions. These men were more likely to focus on external forces than on their own decisions. They suggested that the system was rigged, corrupt, or intentionally targeting people like them.

One participant said:
"*It's never gonna stop because the people at the top are the ones that are the main providers of it.*" — Participant 02

Another suggested that arrests like his were more about revenue or public image than stopping harm:
"*There has to be more done with people that have the higher power... they're the ones who get caught and then get to put it under the rug. We get fines, jail, and custody battles.*"
— Participant 03

These comments by the participants were not always rooted in specific facts. Often, they reflected a belief that those in power were being dishonest, and that the system was more interested in punishment than prevention. Some men used this thinking to downplay their own role or shift attention away from the people impacted by their actions. This mindset made it harder for some participants to engage with the content of the diversion class. If they believed the entire system was flawed or corrupt, they were less likely to take the information seriously or reflect on the potential harm caused by sex buying.
While only a few participants expressed these views in full, the impact was evident. When participants saw themselves as victims of a larger setup or believed they were being singled out unfairly, it became a barrier to accountability. For those working with sex buyers, it may be important to recognize when institutional mistrust is being used to avoid responsibility, and to find ways to refocus the conversation on behavior and impact rather than blame.

Theme 11: Intergenerational Normalization

Several men said they first heard about buying sex from older male family members including fathers, uncles, or cousins, or from male friends. In these cases, sex buying was not presented as something secret or shameful, but as a normal part of being a man. Some men described these conversations as casual or even encouraging, suggesting that the idea of paying for sex was introduced early and without judgment.

A participant stated:
All the men in my family, you know [are involved in] prostitution. It is not a surprise I guess. — Participant 02

One participant reflected:
"*My uncle used to do that [purchase sex], my cousins do that, my brothers do that... So it's kind of like just a generational thing.*" — Participant 06

Another described how his father normalized the behavior when he was younger:
"*My dad probably told me about purchasing sex. He said go to the massage parlor — just be careful*." — Participant 09

In these stories, the message was that sex buying was something that men in their families or social circles did, and it wasn't questioned. This kind of early exposure shaped how some participants thought about the behavior later in life. It also made it harder for them to see the sex buying as harmful, since the people they trusted or looked up to had done the same thing. This kind of normalization didn't always come with pressure, but it created a sense that buying sex was an option and something that their role models approved. For men who grew up hearing about it in this way, it may not have felt like a major or risky decision to purchase sex..

These statements by the participants about their family involvement in sex buying shows that the idea of sex buying doesn't always start with curiosity or a spontaneous decision. For some men, it was introduced early through people they knew, looked up to, and trusted. That early messaging can shape what men believe about relationships, sex, and power, and can influence how they understand responsibility later on.

Theme 12: Toxic Masculinity and Misogyny

While not all participants expressed strong views about women, a noticeable group did. Some described women as manipulative, dishonest, or emotionally difficult. Others spoke in ways that reflected resentment or contempt especially toward romantic partners or women in general. These attitudes shaped how they explained their behavior and attitudes towards women and often served as justification for buying sex.

One participant said:
"*I hate people. Honestly... I get annoyed with a lot of women like really, really, really fast. And like, I'm not gay or anything... but just everybody annoys me... Like I've had [female] friends where it's like, okay, I could stand you. And then they think I catch feelings. It's like, no, I'm just tolerating*." — Participant 16

Another added:
"*I can look down on women for just being, you know... nowadays women don't respect themselves. You know it's their desire - just money hungry, unfortunately*."
— Participant 06

These kinds of statements were often connected to frustration with relationships. Some men described past experiences of feeling rejected, cheated on, or emotionally let down, and they carried those experiences into their worldview. In those cases, buying sex was seen as a way to avoid the emotional risk they believed came with relationships.

One man explained:
"*She [prostituted woman] don't even like you. She don't care for you. And you're giving her your money? How are you gonna pay somebody that don't give a f*** about you?*" — Participant 06

This theme overlaps with others including emotional suppression and moral rationalization, but it stands apart because of how directly it reflects negative beliefs about women. These beliefs matter because they don't just explain behavior but can make it harder to challenge sex buying attitudes. When sex buying is rooted in resentment or dehumanization of women, changing attitudes and beliefs towards gender equality should be considered. Programs and interventions must be prepared to address these deeper attitudes, not just the behavior itself.

DISCUSSION

The men interviewed for this study described a range of reasons for buying sex. Across their stories, a few key patterns stood out. Many of the participants spoke about emotional disconnection from women such as feeling unwanted, isolated, or shut out of relationships. Others described their sex buying linked to stress, curiosity, or habit. Some had bought sex once. Others had done it many times. What tied many of the participants statements together was how they made sense of the behavior after they were arrested and in a diversion class as a consequence..

For some participants, buying sex was framed as a solution to an emotional, physical, and or practical problem. The act itself was often described in simple terms like as a transaction that met a need. But the meaning behind it was more complicated. Some men felt ashamed. Others were defensive. Some questioned their actions after hearing from survivor speakers or law enforcement during the diversion class. Others rejected what they heard entirely and absolved themselves of blame or responsibility.

Many participants described buying sex in terms that gave them feelings of power and control. They felt that paying for sex allowed them to decide what happened, and they often didn't question whether the person they were paying had any real choice. This sense of control helped them avoid thinking about power, pressure, or harm. And when asked if they considered that the women might be exploited, most said no, or said they hadn't thought about it at the time.

Participants also showed us how their environments shaped their choices. Some were introduced to sex buying by male relatives or peers. Some held very negative views about women that made it easier to justify the behavior. Others shut down emotionally when asked to reflect. In a few cases, men expressed deep frustration with law enforcement or the system; not because they believed they had done no harm, but because they felt targeted or humiliated.

What these findings tells us is that sex buying is rarely just about the sex buying moment itself. For many of the men we spoke to, it was shaped by what they were feeling, what they had been taught, what they believed about women, and how they had learned to deal with pain, stress, or loneliness. Some justified their actions as a justifiable need while others blamed others or systems for the availability of buying sex. Often during the interviews, questions were met with silence or limited engagement including a lack of open conversation, a fear of judgment, or a belief that this was just 'something men do'. This does not excuse the behavior, but it does help explain it. And if the goal is to reduce demand and prevent harm, these explanations matter. Programs and systems that engage sex buyers, whether through diversion, community education, or outreach, must account for the emotional, social, and cultural dynamics that shape sex buying behaviors. Targeted response will include looking beyond legal consequences and creating space for reflection, challenge, and accountability.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study offer specific points of consideration for communities building prevention and awareness campaigns as well as for professionals working in solicitation diversion programming, community demand-reduction efforts, and education around commercial sexual exploitation. Rather than suggesting one-size-fits-all approaches, these interviews highlight the need for interventions that are responsive to the layered realities sex buyers bring into those spaces.

For practitioners facilitating diversion classes or working with court-mandated clients, one critical implication identified as the need to distinguish between surface level compliance in the diversion classes and meaningful engagement. Some participants described showing up physically but remaining emotionally detached during the classes. A more intentional design that integrates facilitated discussion and opportunities for guided reflection may help move conversations beyond information delivery. Equally important is ensuring that facilitators are trained to navigate discomfort and resistance without defaulting to shame-based strategies, which several participants said led them to shut down or engage.

The role of misinformation and limited exposure to accurate depictions of sex trafficking also emerged clearly in the interviews. As such, efforts that assume participants already understand coercion, third-party control, or victimization, risk missing opportunities to shift diversion attendees' perceptions. Rather than relying on abstract definitions, content that presents grounded and nuanced examples of sexual exploitation may better support critical reflection especially for participants who otherwise see sex buying as a private and low-impact decision.

Another consideration involves how beliefs about gender, power, and masculinity are handled. While not every participant voiced overtly misogynistic views, enough did to warrant increased attention. Simply prohibiting the use of describing sex selling using certain victim-blaming or shaming language may not be sufficient. Instead, interventions may need to allocate structured time for examining how ideas about control, emotional suppression, and entitlement are formed, as well as how those ideas influence behavior. This is even more important given that some men reported learning about sex buying through older male relatives, thus normalizing the behavior long before they were arrested. This study found that identifying ways to un-normalize sex buying is a critical element of changing sex buyers behaviors.

The interviews also suggest that the experience of being arrested can activate complex feelings by the sex buyers which may hinder learning and changes in behavior. Distrust of law enforcement, shame and embarrassment, along with fears of public and private judgment were common during the interviews. While these sentiments should not be the focus of diversion programming, they also cannot be dismissed. Creating a space where these reactions can be acknowledged but not used to justify or minimize harm may improve engagement and reduce defensiveness.

Finally, this study clarified that no single message or curriculum will be relevant to all sex buyers. The 20 participants in this study varied significantly in their emotional awareness, willingness to reflect, and level of openness to changing their behaviors. This shows the value of adaptable diversion programming that can account for situational versus patterned behavior, skepticism versus openness, and silence versus self-disclose. As such, diversion interventions built with flexibility and relational skill at their core rather than a one-size-fits-all moral script, are more likely to create space for accountability and induce change.

LIMITATIONS

This study was designed to offer qualitative insight into the perspectives of men arrested for attempting to purchase sex with a focus on their first sex buying experience. As such, the findings reflect the experiences and viewpoints of a specific group of individuals who had already entered a legal diversion process and agreed to participate in a voluntary interview. These men were not randomly selected, and their willingness to be interviewed may suggest greater openness to reflection or engagement than others in the same program. Therefore, the data do not represent the broader population of sex buyers, nor are they intended to generalize across all regions or sex buying enforcement contexts.

Additionally, interviews were conducted in a single setting and time-limited by the structure of the diversion class. Participants were interviewed during the lunch break or immediately following class, which may have influenced their tone, availability, or willingness to speak freely. The presence of the recent arrest, coupled with uncertainty about the legal system or potential stigma, may have also shaped how participants chose to present themselves. While efforts were made to build rapport and ensure confidentiality, it is possible that some men withheld certain views, softened their language, or expressed what they believed researchers wanted to hear.

Another limitation relates to the nature of self-report data. Participants shared their own interpretations of their behavior, motivations, and beliefs. These narratives are meaningful in what they reveal about personal framing, but they may not always align with external facts or broader patterns of harm. The study does not include perspectives from individuals in the commercial sex industry, nor does it attempt to verify or adjudicate the accuracy of individual accounts.

Finally, this report focuses on themes that emerged most prominently across interviews. While the analysis was iterative and collaborative, the process necessarily involves a degree of interpretation. Some themes may overlap or evolve further with continued data collection. Future research that includes longitudinal perspectives, comparative analysis across jurisdictions, or input from service providers and survivor-led organizations could provide additional depth and help triangulate findings from multiple vantage points.

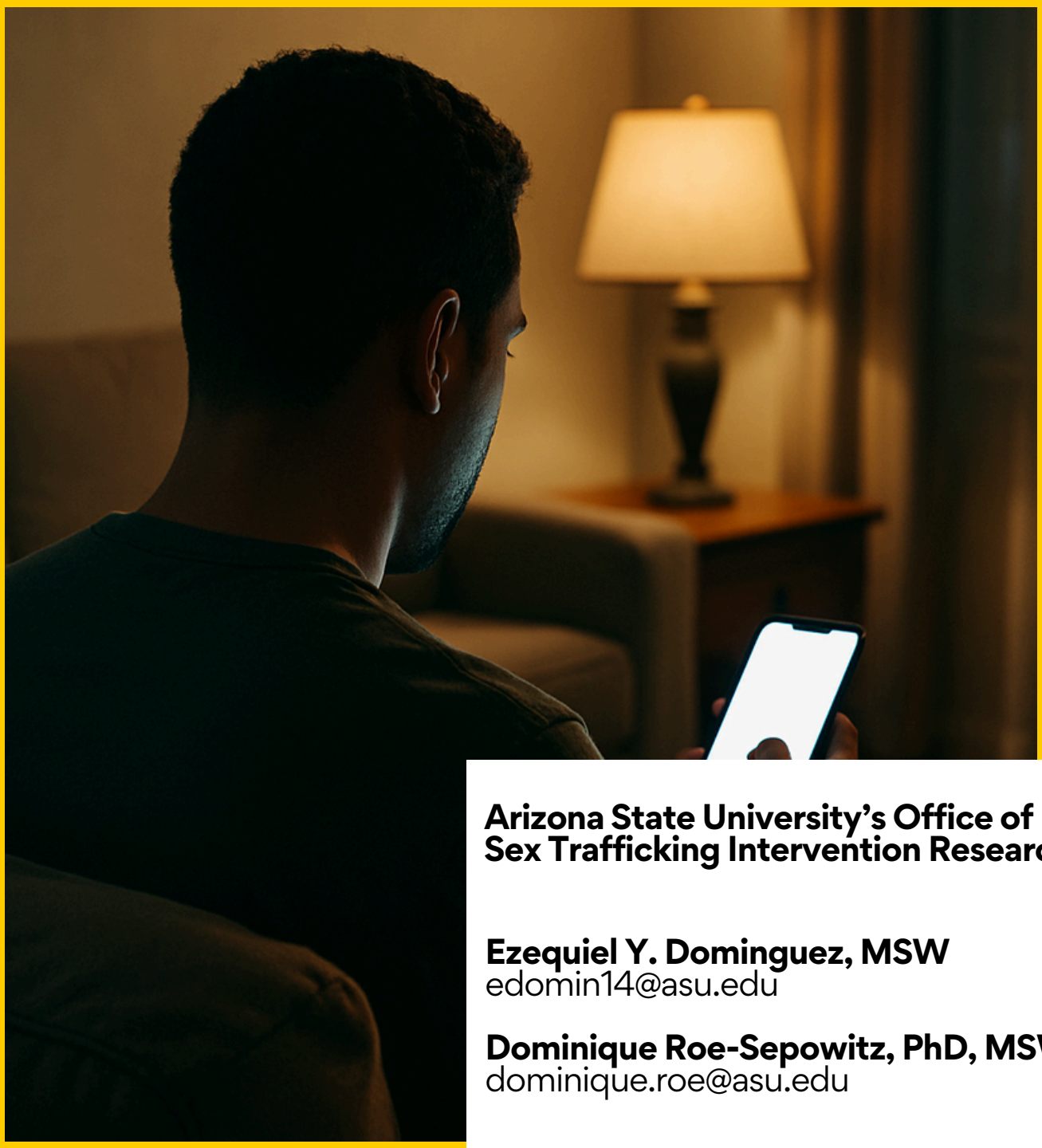
CONCLUSION

This report provides a close look into the internal thought processes and personal histories of men arrested for attempting to purchase sex. The interviews reflect a wide spectrum of perspectives and reveal contradictions, defenses, and moments of uncertainty. While some minimized their behavior or focused on external factors, others showed glimpses of introspection, confusion, or discomfort. These responses do not form a single narrative but instead highlight the diverse and often conflicted ways men interpreted their actions and experiences.

What emerges is a clearer understanding that demand for commercial sex is shaped by more than impulse or opportunity. Emotional detachment, gendered socialization, peer influence, and early exposure to harmful norms all play a role. There are different time frames and spaces in the deliberation process on whether or not to buy sex where intervention to prevent sex buying can fit in. The insights of the participants challenge the idea that sex buying is a private act made in isolation. Instead, they suggest it is often the outcome of layered dynamics that unfold over time, shaped by relationships, beliefs, staggered decisions, and internal coping mechanisms. Prevention and awareness as well as intervention programs and other efforts that seek to reduce demand will be more effective when they recognize this complexity. A legal response may initiate the process of intervention to try to stop sex buying behavior, but it is the quality of engagement afterward that determines whether reflection, change, and accountability are possible. The men who participated in this study were not always ready to name harm or accept responsibility for their actions, but many expressed feelings and experiences that suggest there is room for thoughtful intervention.

As stakeholders consider how to improve or expand demand-focused initiatives, this research serves as a reminder that long-term change requires more than criminal enforcement. It requires spaces where silence can be interrupted, where distorted narratives can be challenged, and where those who have caused harm are expected to reflect, not just comply. This approach does not excuse the behavior. Rather, it provides a foundation for addressing it in ways that are more informed, more humane, and more likely to prevent future harm.

CONTACT US



Arizona State University's Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research

Ezequiel Y. Dominguez, MSW
edomin14@asu.edu

Dominique Roe-Sepowitz, PhD, MSW
dominique.roe@asu.edu

ASU Office of Sex Trafficking Intervention Research
Arizona State University

AATN
Arizona Anti-Trafficking Network

Catholic Charities
COMMUNITY SERVICES