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PRINT NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE OF SEX TRAFFICKING AND PROSTITUTION IN MINNESOTA, 2005-2014

As part of the study “Mapping the Demand for Sex with Trafficked Individuals in Minnesota,” a team from the University of Minnesota’s Robert J. Jones Urban Research and Outreach Engagement Center (UROC) conducted an analysis of print news media coverage of sex trafficking and prostitution in Minnesota. This research brief shares three findings from the study of news media coverage.

1. Print news media coverage of the topic began to increase in 2007, with a dramatic rise in coverage starting in 2013.
2. Key terms in coverage of commercial sex in print news media shifted from being primarily “prostitution” related stories to increasing coverage of sex trafficking.
3. We identified a shift in perspective on women involved in commercial sex over time.

METHODS

Our team identified 1,565 print news articles pertaining to sex trafficking and/or prostitution from 1995-2014 using a key word search with the terms: “Minnesota + sex trafficking + news” & “Minnesota + prostitution + news”. These search terms account for the two dominant conceptual frameworks relating to commercial sexual exploitation during the time frame we analyzed. The search engines LexisNexis and Google News were used. Duplicate articles were identified and removed. The team read and analyzed a random sample of approximately 20% of all the articles in each year, which was 265 articles. Full data from this study and “Mapping the Demand” will be described in a future report.

RESULTS

The news media has a symbiotic relationship to public opinion; it both reflects and shapes how the general public views any given issue or topic. Further, the way issues (or experiences) are framed – that is the narratives around them – shape what we see as possible *and* problematic in our society.

Print news media coverage of the issue from 1995 to 2006 was relatively low and steady. Between 2007 and 2012, coverage increased with a large spike in the overall number of stories beginning in 2013. Likewise we saw a steady increase in the use of the term “sex trafficking” over time. Prostitution was a more common term used in news media articles from 1995 thru 2010. After that use of the term sex trafficking becomes more prevalent, with many articles using both terms in a single piece. Much of the specific content in news media articles comes from law enforcement (i.e. court cases or arrests) and focuses on individuals involved in specific cases. In terms of the content and tone of the print news media we reviewed, we identified a shift over time in articles presenting women and children involved in commercial sex being portrayed as “criminals” or “bad”, toward presenting them as victims in need of support and services.

Below we provide charts that show print news media coverage of sex trafficking and prostitution in our 20% sample of news media articles over time in Minnesota.

Chart 1. Sample of print news media articles, key words “prostitution” and “sex trafficking” combined

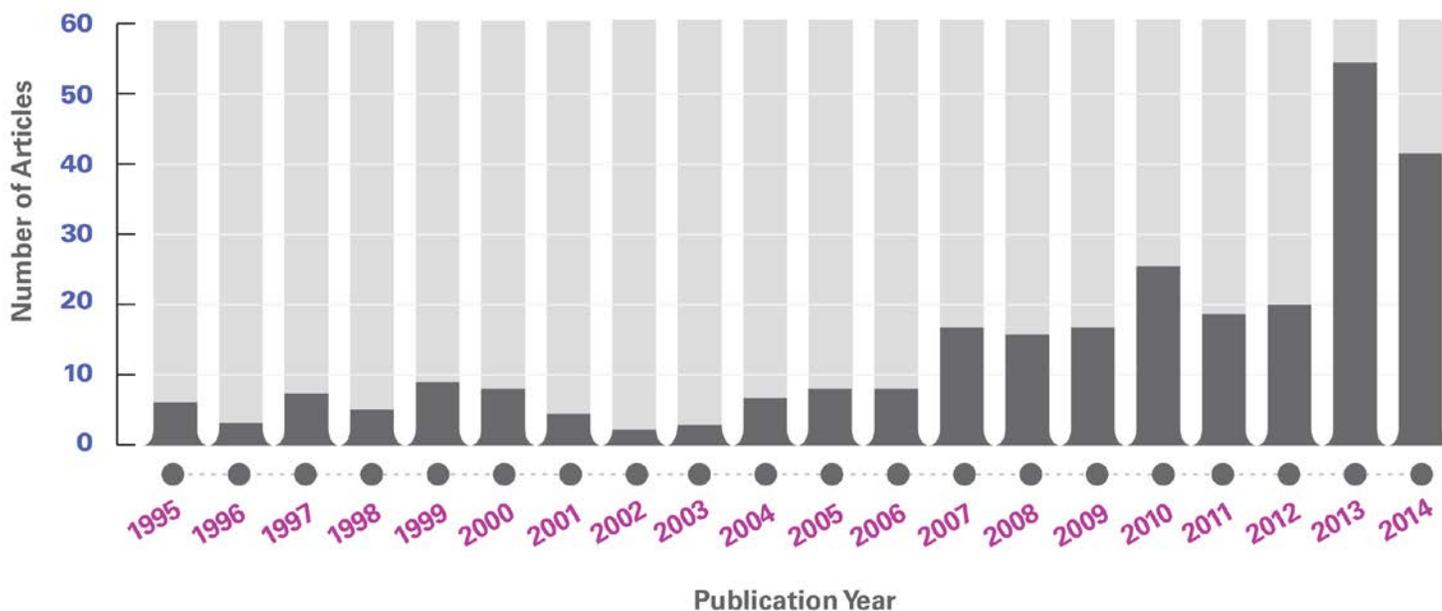
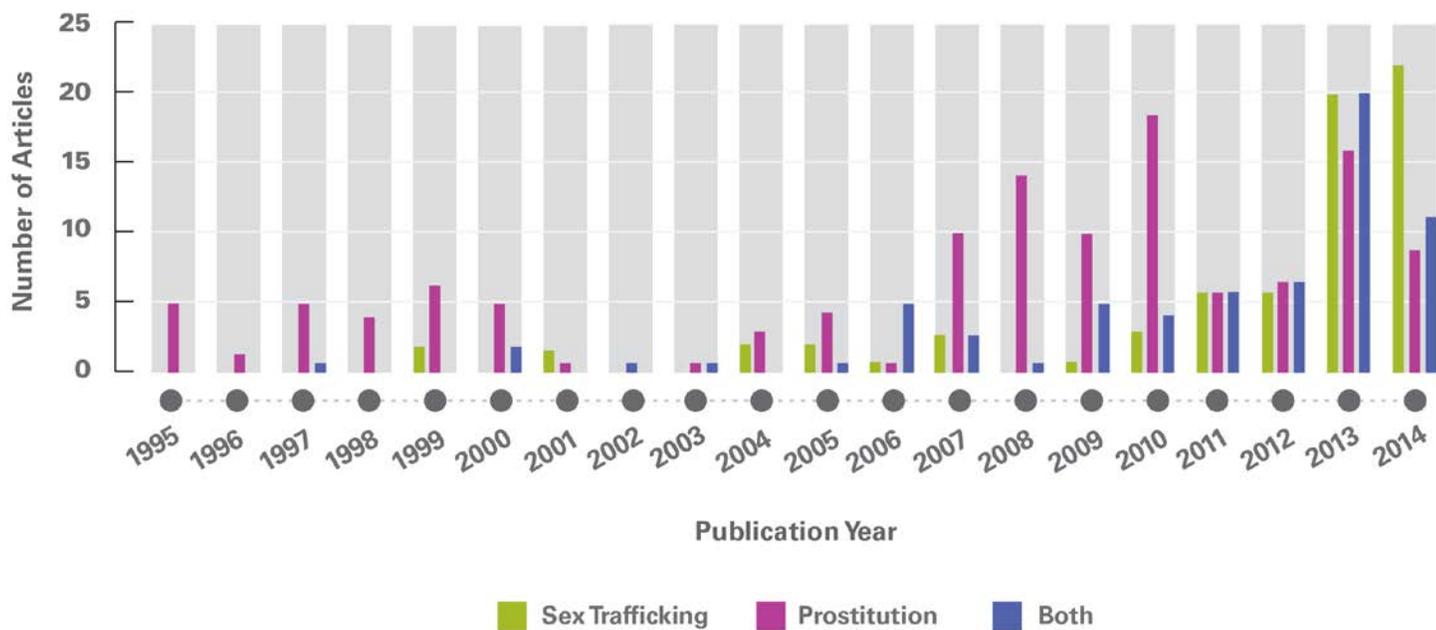


Chart 2. Sample of print news media articles, key words “prostitution” and “sex trafficking” disaggregated



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