

# Legalising prostitution in Las Vegas, BBC News

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BBC Radio 4's Crossing Continents

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[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/crossing\\_continents/7350146.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/crossing_continents/7350146.stm)

Nevada is the only state in the US that allows legal prostitution, but in its largest city, Las Vegas, prostitution is illegal. When the mayor suggested changing the law, it sparked a huge debate.

Mayor Oscar Goodman grabs the headlines whatever he says or does - and he relishes it. He is proud of Las Vegas' image as "Sin City" and happily calls it "an adult playground".

He boasts about his love of gin, cigars and pretty women and calls himself "the happiest mayor in the universe".

Before he became mayor, he was the top criminal lawyer to the Las Vegas mafia.

But when he suggested legalising prostitution and creating a red-light district and a string of "magnificent brothels" in downtown Vegas, the mayor got his most dramatic headlines yet.

He had opened up a debate on a taboo subject: Las Vegas' illegal prostitution.

Everybody knows it goes on, many businesses profit from it, but in-keeping with the city's slogan "What happens here, stays here", it is rarely discussed.

"It's disingenuous when people say they don't want to legalise it," says Mr Goodman. "Right now it's uncontrolled and unregulated. There's no check and balance as far as the women's health is concerned and legal brothels could be an important revenue-raising device for the city," says Mr Goodman.

"When you speak about it intellectually, not morally, it makes sense," he says. "If we had a referendum or ballot on legal brothels, it would probably pass."

Not without a fight, though. The vested interests in this city are legion.

Spectrum of workers

It is estimated that there are as many as 10,000 prostitutes operating illegally in Las Vegas, in an industry that may be worth as much as \$6 billion a year.

Over 150 pages in the Las Vegas phone book advertise "escorts" and "massage", and leaflets promising to deliver "hot babes direct to your room in 20 minutes" are handed out to tourists openly on Las Vegas Boulevard, usually called "The Strip".

"Lucy" [name has been changed to protect her identity] is a top-end "companion" selling her time with men at \$4000 a night. She explains how the sex trade functions in Las Vegas.

"There are women who get propositioned in the casinos, bars and hotels," she says.

"There are women who do 'extras' out of strip clubs and who 'give pleasure' in massage parlours. Women who do what we term 'outcall' - going to specific apartments to spend erotic time with gentlemen.

"There are women who work by print ads or on-line. And every casino host has a bevy of girls to call at a moment's notice to satisfy their high-rollers."

At the other end of the spectrum - in the seedier parts of downtown Las Vegas, among the cheap motels and ganglands - there are women who sell their bodies to pay for their drugs. They might charge as little as \$20.

Robert Clymer, a former FBI agent in the city working in organised crime, says human trafficking adds to the industry.

"The number one problem, according to the FBI, is Asian prostitution," he says. "That means Asian organised crime and human trafficking into the US, straight into Las Vegas. And it's all fuelled by money."

Strange vacuum

With 600,000 people, Las Vegas is the largest city in Nevada.

Its illegal sex trade operates in a strange vacuum because in most of the rest of the state prostitution has been legalised.

In fact, Nevada is the only state in the US to allow legal brothels, which stems from a 1970 state law allowing Nevada's individual counties to licence their brothels. But this only applies to counties with populations under 400,000, which excludes Las Vegas and Reno.

The question today is - is what is good for Nevada, good for Las Vegas?

There are nearly 30 state-sanctioned brothels in Nevada.

With names like "Mustang Ranch" and "Moonlite Bunny Ranch", their owners say they contribute to the local economies and provide safe, clean sex.

Brothels are so much part of the Nevada culture that Home Box Office (HBO) even films a reality TV show inside the Bunny Ranch called "Cathouse".

George Flint is the chief lobbyist of the Nevada Brothel Association.

"Legal brothels could work anywhere," he says. "They could be huge in Las Vegas. It would be great for the women and for our industry which is today fragile because it remains a teeny business in a big state."

'Sexual slavery'

But some religious groups, academics and campaigners say that all prostitution is wrong and legalising it does not stop sex trafficking or the abuse of women.

"I see it as sexual slavery," says Candice Trummell, director of the Nevada Coalition Against Sex Trafficking. "I think it's morally and ethically wrong for governments to say it's OK to sell humans in that way. The government should not pimp the girls."

When asked if she was calling the government a pimp, Ms Trummell answered: "Yes, absolutely".

Kate Hausbeck, a sociology professor at the University of Las Vegas, has spent nearly 10 years researching both the legal and illegal sex trade in Nevada.

She concludes that the best model for Nevada - and any country in the world - is the decriminalisation of prostitution.

"Empower the women who do the work. Give them labour protection and the rights given other workers. Because it's a job and a choice for many women," she says.

But, when asked about Mr Goodman's idea of legal brothels for Las Vegas, she says she doesn't think prostitution will ever be legal here.

"There's too much money to be made from the illegal sex trade. The casinos and convention industry fear it would be a step too far," she says.

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