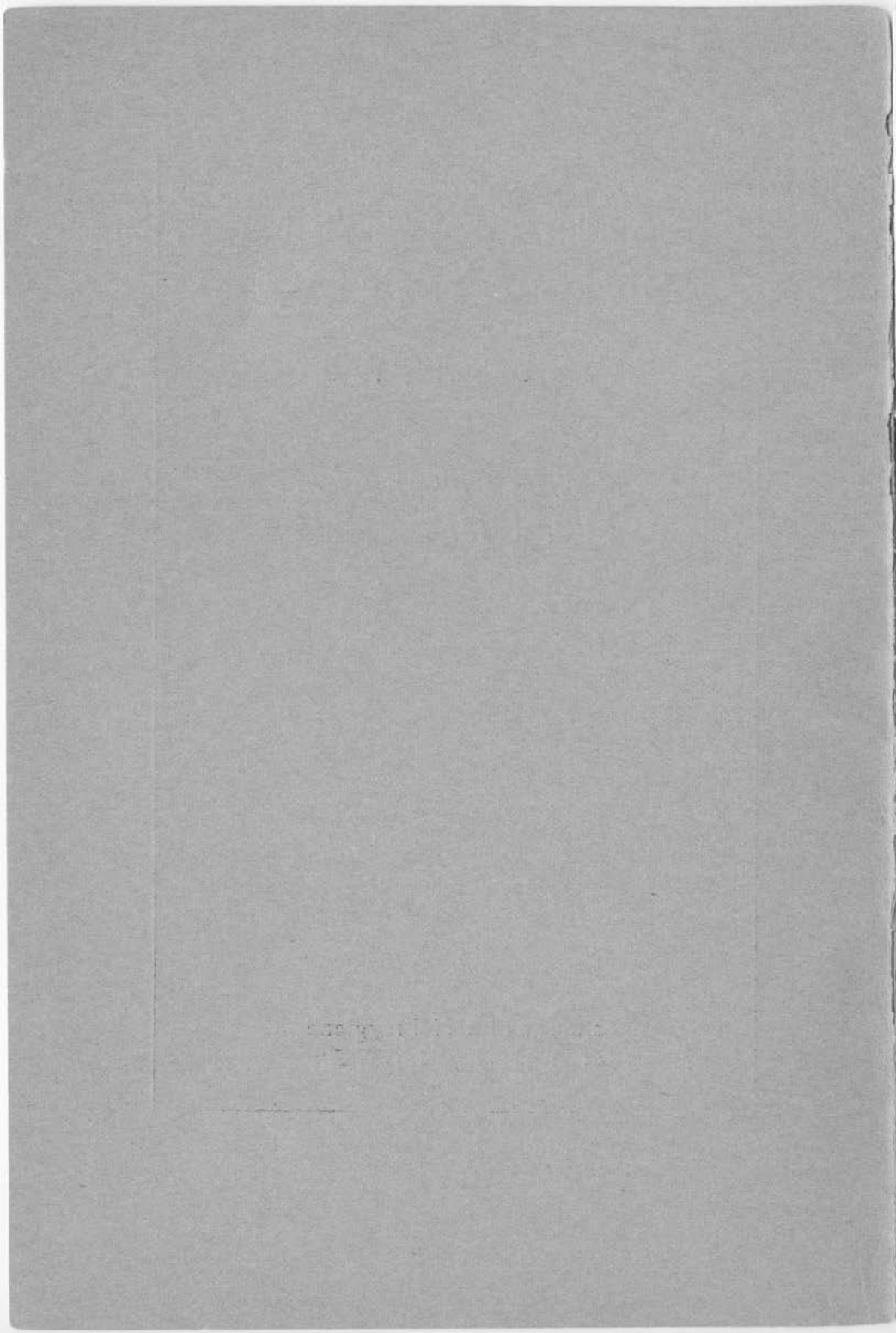


Commercialized Prostitution in New York City

November 1, 1916

*A Comparison Between
1912, 1915, and 1916*

Bureau of Social Hygiene
61 Broadway, New York City



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*PUBLICATIONS OF THE BUREAU
OF SOCIAL HYGIENE*

COMMERCIALIZED PROSTITUTION
IN NEW YORK CITY

With a Supplementary Chapter by
Katharine Bement Davis

GEORGE J. KNEELAND

PROSTITUTION IN EUROPE
ABRAHAM FLEXNER

EUROPEAN POLICE SYSTEMS
RAYMOND B. FOSDICK

LAWS RELATING TO SEX MORALITY
IN NEW YORK CITY
ARTHUR SPINGARN

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RAYMOND B. FOSDICK

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INTRODUCTION

VICE CONDITIONS IN NEW YORK CITY

The Bureau of Social Hygiene issued in 1912 a volume entitled *Commercialized Prostitution in New York City*, by George J. Kneeland. This volume described in detail the situation as respects the practice of prostitution in this city at that time. A year ago, the Bureau issued a pamphlet which endeavored to contrast conditions in 1915 with the conditions reported in 1912. Now, a year later, in the present pamphlet, the Bureau presents a concrete statement of existing conditions, as compared with the conditions disclosed in its two previous accounts. The contrast is in the highest degree striking and encouraging. Vice still exists; but its amount has been greatly reduced, and the damage caused has been immensely lessened. In 1912, prostitution was open, organized, aggressive, and prosperous; in 1916, it is furtive, disorganized, precarious, unsuccessful. This improvement is shown in the statistics that follow; but, as a matter of fact, the real improvement is far greater than the statistics show. A single example will make this point clear. There were 142 parlor houses in 1912; the present statement gives 22. On the face of the figures, the parlor houses have been cut down to one-seventh of what they were four years ago. But this understates the achievement. For the 142 houses in 1912 harbored over 1600 inmates; they were notorious resorts, engaged in the active and open prosecution of their shameless business. The 22 houses now reported contain less than 50 inmates. They are hard to find, still harder to enter; they lead a brief, uncertain, day-to-day existence; before these pages leave the press, every one of them will probably have

been snuffed out by the police. The same holds true of vicious saloons, of vicious tenements, of streetwalking, and of pimps. Thus, though commercialized vice continues in New York, it has been dealt a body-blow.

The credit for this achievement must be more or less widely apportioned. Civic organizations, such as The Committee of Fourteen, deserve to be prominently mentioned; the District Attorney's office and the Criminal Courts have recently by successive convictions performed an admirable service. But the chief credit belongs to the Mayor and to the Commissioner of Police. For three years an able, upright, clear-headed, and high-minded Police Commissioner has pursued a sound and consistent policy, with all the backing, moral and official, that the Mayor could bring to his support. The results are obvious: The police force has steadily improved in morale and efficiency; a new standard of public decency has been set and maintained.

Prostitution has been proved to be a "modifiable phenomenon." Whether the city has more of it or less of it depends very largely upon the policy which the municipal government pursues in dealing with it.

Commercialized Prostitution in New York City

I. VICE RESORTS

PARLOR HOUSES¹

Conditions in 1912:

In 1912, 142 parlor houses were in operation in Manhattan, with 1,686 inmates. The majority of these inmates lived in the houses and were under the direct control of the men owners and madams. Some lived with their pimps and came to the houses at regular hours, remaining until closing time.

Conditions November 1, 1915:

On November 1, 1915, only 23 houses were in active operation. In ten of these resorts, 21 regular inmates were counted. In five of the houses, 36 women were "on call."

¹A parlor house or brothel is a building used exclusively for the business of prostitution. It derives its name from the fact that its inmates gather in the parlor to receive their guests. There is, however, an exception to this definition, inasmuch as some parlor houses at the present time are conducted as furnished-room houses—that is, the madam rents certain rooms in her house to respectable persons, as a subterfuge. Her inmates are designated as roomers, and customers are shown directly to these rooms, rather than to the parlor. Again, some of these so-called parlor houses do not harbor inmates on the premises as formerly, but they are called to the houses by telephone when needed. Thus, their proper classification would be "call houses." These "call houses" are included under parlor houses because they are private dwellings used more or less for the business of prostitution.

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In six houses, no inmates were seen, but it was estimated that they contained sixteen women. That is, with the term "parlor house" construed even more broadly than was the case during the previous investigation, the number was cut down from 142 to 23; the inmates, from 1,686 to hardly more than 50.

The 23 houses above mentioned were located in the following police precincts: one in the 14th; four in the 18th; eleven in the 22d; two in the 23d; three in the 26th; one in the 28th; and one in the 31st.

Conditions November 1, 1916:

Not one of the 23 houses reported in 1915 is running today. Police activity has suppressed them all, together with 56 others which in the course of the year led a brief, furtive existence. We were able to locate 22 houses in operation as of November 1, 1916, although it is probable that by the time this report reaches the public, some of them, at least, will have been closed. Eight of these 22 houses were "call houses." Twelve of the houses had an average of from one to two inmates, and in the remaining two nothing was learned as to the number of inmates.

The 22 houses operating on this date were in the following police precincts: one in the 16th; three in the 18th; nine in the 22d; one in the 23d; seven in the 26th; and one in the 29th.

The change in the method of operating these houses is equally significant. In the majority of them, the inmates remain in their rooms, dressed in respectable attire, pretending to be legitimate boarders. In fact, these resorts are to all appearances furnished-room houses.

The contrast between the volume of business transacted by these resorts in 1912 and at present is very striking. In 1912, the houses were in active operation, with a full quota of

Vice Resorts

inmates. Today the few houses with one or two inmates each, are, according to their own testimony, hardly making expenses. They are merely "holding on," speculating as to how long this condition will continue, and eagerly watching for a termination of police activity. "We have weathered all reforms," they say, "from the Lexow Investigation and the Low administration down to the one now in power, and the reformers always got tired and quit. But this one still keeps up after three years. We can't understand it."

II. VICE RESORTS

TENEMENT HOUSES, HOTELS, FURNISHED ROOMS, MASSAGE PARLORS

(1) Tenement Houses:

Conditions in 1912:

In 1912, 1,172 vice resorts were reported in 575 different tenement houses in Manhattan. The number of inmates counted in these resorts was 2,294.

Conditions November 1, 1915:

In the course of this investigation, 484 vice resorts in tenements were located, with 771 inmates. It was claimed by the madams that 140 women were "on call." A very great reduction in number had, therefore, been effected. But the actual reduction was greater, for the volume of business was more than correspondingly reduced.

Conditions November 1, 1916:

As of November 1, 1916, 238 vice resorts in tenements were found in operation. One hundred and fifty-eight others, to our personal knowledge, were suppressed by the police during the year. The 238 resorts were located in the following precincts: one in the 6th; one in the 12th; two in the 13th; three in the 14th; two in the 15th; two in the 16th; sixteen in the 18th; two in the 21st; thirty-three in the 22d; thirty-three in the 23d; four in the 25th; thirty-two in the 26th; twenty-seven in the 28th; one in the 29th; ten in the 32d;

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one in the 35th; eight in the 36th; ten in the 37th; forty-three in the 38th; four in the 39th; two in the 42d; and one in the 43d.

The most significant change in the operation of these flats over previous years is that a large number, in comparison, have become "call" places. Certain madams do not dare to have inmates on the premises, and those who keep inmates have reduced the number, as shown above, to two or three.

It is practically impossible at present for men to enter these resorts without a personal introduction to the madam from some one actually known to her. Even after the admission is gained, the prospective customer is often called on to prove his identity by displaying a personal letter or a business card; or he must submit to an examination of his hat and clothes to show whether he has purchased these articles in New York or elsewhere.

Because of the small number of inmates and the difficulty of gaining entrance, it is evident that the volume of business in vice resorts of this type has been reduced to a minimum.

(2) Assignment and Disorderly Hotels:

Conditions in 1912:

During 1912, 103 hotels were discovered in Manhattan which were classified as being disorderly or suspicious. The number classified as disorderly was 90.

Conditions November 1, 1915:

In the course of this investigation, 56 such hotels were reported in Manhattan. Investigators one or more times were actually solicited by prostitutes on the streets and in rear rooms of saloons to enter 51 of these resorts.

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These 51 disorderly resorts were in the following police precincts: two in the 16th; three in the 18th; ten in the 21st; four in the 22d; nine in the 23d; two in the 25th; sixteen in the 26th; one in the 28th; three in the 36th; and one in the 43d.

Conditions November 1, 1916:

There has been a decided gain over the previous year in respect to disorderly hotels. A considerable number have been suppressed by the police, and the business in others has been greatly reduced by means of constant raids and arrests. In some cases officers have been stationed, with fairly satisfactory results, in front of persistently vicious hotels. This method has led to some petty grafting, which has been minimized, however, by frequent transfers of the men on post.

During the present investigation, 41 hotels have been discovered to be disorderly or suspicious; 1,347 men have been seen to enter these establishments with known prostitutes. Investigators were solicited to go to 27 of these resorts for immoral purposes.

The 41 hotels classified as disorderly or suspicious are in the following police precincts: two in the 1st; one in the 6th; one in the 13th; one in the 15th; three in the 18th; ten in the 21st; one in the 22d; two in the 23rd; three in the 25th; ten in the 26th; one in the 36th; three in the 37th; two in the 39th; and one in the 43d.

A marked change has taken place in the operation of disorderly hotels. Except in the 21st precinct, where conditions are far from satisfactory, the proprietors of most of these 41 resorts will not allow a prostitute to enter with a customer more than once in 24 hours.

Vice Resorts

(3) Furnished Room Houses:

Conditions in 1912:

In 1912, 112 disorderly furnished-room houses were found in Manhattan.

Conditions November 1, 1915:

During this study no exhaustive effort was made to ascertain the number of disorderly furnished-room houses. They were reported whenever a prostitute soliciting on the street, or in the rear rooms of saloons, invited the investigator to accompany her to such a place. Seventy-eight disorderly resorts of this character were located in this manner. Much the same conditions as those which obtained in 1912 prevailed in 1915 in connection with these resorts, and the situation needed the continued attention of the police.

Conditions November 1, 1916:

The results of the present study show that the situation needs the continued attention of the police. When vice is suppressed to any extent in houses, flats, and hotels, it is inevitable that it will at first betake itself to furnished-room houses. This has happened in New York City, and is the most serious problem confronting the police at the present time.

During the present investigation, 142 furnished-room houses were found. The investigators were actually solicited to go to 60 of these resorts for immoral purposes. They counted 389 prostitutes connected with the houses, and estimated 58 more. To our knowledge sixteen houses of this type were suppressed by the police during the year.

The 142 resorts in existence on November 1 were located in the following precincts: one in the 13th; five in the 15th;

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twenty-five in the 18th; one in the 21st; seventy-five in the 22d; seven in the 23d; twenty-six in the 26th; one in the 29th; and one in the 38th.

It should be remembered that not all of these 142 furnished-room houses reported are given over entirely to this business. Many of them have respectable roomers also. The landladies are, however, not averse to taking in prostitutes, because roomers of this type are eager and willing to pay a larger rental for "privileges."

(4) Massage Parlors:

Conditions in 1912:

It was estimated that there were 300 illegitimate massage parlors in Manhattan; 75 were actually reported.

Conditions November 1, 1915:

No estimate of the number of these illegal places was attempted during this investigation, but 90 disorderly resorts masquerading as "massage" parlors were located in the following police precincts: nine in the 18th; nine in the 22d; five in the 23d; sixteen in the 26th; one in the 27th; thirty-two in the 28th; five in the 29th; eight in the 32d; three in the 38th; and two in the 40th.

Undoubtedly, conditions in respect to these places were better than they were in 1912. The resorts were run far less openly. Indeed, they were so cautiously conducted that evidence to sustain a prosecution could not easily be obtained.

Conditions November 1, 1916:

During the past year, the police have been especially active against "massage parlors." A systematic and per-

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sistent effort has been directed against all such resorts of an illegal character, particularly where signs were ostentatiously displayed.

An investigation was made of the 90 disorderly resorts where massage signs were displayed at the time of our investigation in 1915. In 41 such places, legitimate businesses of entirely different character are now being conducted. At 31 other places no signs were shown, nor did any of the names of former operators appear in letter boxes or under the vestibule bells. At nine former disorderly addresses the premises were vacant. The remaining nine places displayed signs, such as "Massage," "Masseuse." Presumably these resorts are still disorderly. They are located in the following police precincts: four in the 26th; one in the 28th; three in the 29th; and one in the 32d.

From 1908 to 1915 a weekly paper, which carried from one to two, and sometimes three, pages of massage parlor advertisements, was sold on the news stands. In the majority of instances these related to disorderly resorts. During the latter part of 1916 these advertisements gradually decreased, until one issue contained only four such notices. Soon after, this paper disappeared from the news stands.

As the result of permissive legislation passed at the last session of the state legislature, the Board of Aldermen recently adopted an ordinance which was signed by the Mayor, giving the Commissioner of Licenses, with the approval of the Police Commissioner, the power to license massage institutes and massage parlors. Under the ordinance the Commissioner of Licenses may also suspend or revoke licenses for cause. The usefulness of this ordinance has not yet been tested, but it promises to bring to a speedy conclusion the illegitimate use of massage parlors.

III. PLACES WHICH CATER TO VICE

DISORDERLY SALOONS AND THE STREETS

(1) Disorderly Saloons:

Conditions in 1912:

In 1912, 765 saloons were investigated. Unescorted women believed to be prostitutes were seen in 308 of these. The investigators were openly solicited for immoral purposes in 107 of the 308 resorts.

Conditions November 1, 1915:

While this investigation of disorderly saloons was less exhaustive than the preceding one, it was sufficiently extensive to indicate distinct improvement. Out of the 346 saloons investigated, only 84 could be classified as being disorderly, on the ground that prostitutes habitually frequented them for the purpose of soliciting customers.

The 84 disorderly saloons discovered by this investigation were in the following police precincts: two in the 16th; five in the 18th; fifteen in the 22d; twenty-two in the 23d; twenty-three in the 26th; two in the 28th; one in the 32d; five in the 36th; and nine in the 38th.

Conditions November 1, 1916:

Probably at no time in the history of New York City have the conditions in saloons shown such improvement as in recent months. In former years, and especially in 1912, a

Places Which Cater to Vice

large number of saloons served as hangouts and soliciting places for prostitutes. Such is not the case any longer.

During the present investigation conditions were observed in 492 saloons. In 34 of these resorts, 109 prostitutes solicited investigators for immoral purposes; but their advances were made with the utmost secrecy, in direct contrast with the open and flagrant practice in similar resorts in 1912. The 34 saloons which can be designated as disorderly at present are in the following police precincts: one in the 13th; one in the 15th; one in the 18th; seven in the 22d; two in the 23d; two in the 25th; eight in the 26th five in the 37th; five in the 38th; and two in the 43d.

(2) The Streets:

Conditions in 1912:

Street walking was conspicuous on Broadway from Twenty-seventh to Sixty-eighth Street, Sixth Avenue, etc.

Conditions November 1, 1915:

Street walkers were found in reduced numbers on prominent thoroughfares; but their tactics had altogether changed. Open solicitation had been almost entirely stopped. Women conducted themselves inoffensively, leaving the initiative to the customer. In consequence, the traffic was less voluminous, less profitable, and therefore less attractive than formerly. On the other hand, any relaxation on the part of the police was quickly followed by a recrudescence. There was also somewhat more active solicitation in out of the way places where the police were less numerous. On the whole, a very great improvement was reported.

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Conditions November 1, 1916:

The improvement in respect to street walking in 1915 has been maintained, and further progress has been made. Old-time street prostitutes declare that they have never made so little money. They are now satisfied to earn a bare existence; whereas, in previous years, notably in 1912, receipts from street soliciting were large.

The police have been so aggressive against all types of vice resorts and soliciting on the streets that, as has been stated above, madams and prostitutes demand introductions and marks of identification before they will recognize a customer. Cabmen and chauffeurs, who formerly had lists of houses and flats to which they conducted customers, now declare that they know of very few resorts. The evidence collected abounds in references to the fear of the police and to the reduction of the business during the past two years.

Broadway and Sixth Avenue have always been the chief districts for street walkers. This is not now the case. Prostitutes can still be found in these sections, but men are seldom solicited unless they make the first advance. The most flagrant street solicitations at present are made in the 21st police precinct.

IV. THE EXPLOITERS

Conditions in 1912:

The investigation during 1912 established the fact that the business of prostitution in New York City was exploited and, for the most part, controlled by men, though women were involved. Personal descriptions and histories of over 600 men exploiters, including owners, procurers, and pimps, were obtained.

Conditions November 1, 1915:

The vice ring was completely disorganized. After the exposure of their activities in 1912, the owners of vice resorts went into hiding or left the city. Indictments were secured against several, who forfeited their bonds and disappeared.

Conditions November 1, 1916:

The vice ring in the old sense of the word no longer exists in this city. In fact, former promoters of commercialized prostitution in this city seem to have come to the conclusion that "the banner years of prosperity" will never return. It is a known fact that more than 75 former men owners and their agents, such as procurers and pimps, have left the city with their women for more open markets. Twenty of these men moved to a near-by city, where they became the head and front of a string of houses which opened after a recent municipal election. The so-called "King of the Vice Trust," with others indicted with him in 1912, is still a fugitive from