Sex in the City: An Analysis of the Moral to Economic Change in Perspective of the Causes of Prostitution Produced by the Chicago and Portland Vice Commission Reports

The beginning of the twentieth century is marked by a rise in attention to social issues. As many people in the United States began crusades to battle perceived moral corruption, some turned to the problem standing on many street corners throughout America. Prostitution quickly became known as the social evil. Magazines published white slavery narratives, in which young girls are seduced or kidnapped by men and sold into prostitution. Muckrakers caused the development of a nationwide fear that upstanding women living in big cities were being tricked into prostitution by sensationalizing stories in which women unwillingly became prostitutes.¹ This white slavery scare prompted higher levels of interest in and concern about prostitution. Many cities reacted by segregating the social evil into red-light districts, hoping that by sectioning off vice from upright society the effects it had on the public would be reduced. However, the problem continued to plague cities. Reformers were not satisfied by the minimal changes made and persisted in their pursuit of the destruction of prostitution. Publicity condemning the social evil did not abate and classified vice as a high-level problem that cities needed to face.

In 1911, the city of Chicago addressed the issue of prostitution by publishing The Social Evil in Chicago: A Study of Existing Conditions, a report which analyzed the current state of

¹ Lary May, Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 44.
prostitution in Chicago, outlined the causes of the social evil, and suggested possible ways to combat the growing problem. Two years later, Portland, Oregon followed suit, publishing its own collection of reports on investigations into the social evil. Both of these studies were written by commissions appointed by the mayors of the two respective cities. They were created out of a moral desire to find the best method for ending prostitution, which would then hopefully be carried out by the general populace. The two reports went beyond morals, however, and revealed the root problem causing prostitution. In their investigations, the commissions discovered the economic factors that were enticing women into a life of prostitution.

The committees emphasized the commercialization of vice and the financial corruption which lead women to become prostitutes, and shied away from discussing the immoral physical actions taking place in vice districts. By shifting the focus of prostitution reform from moral disapproval to economic corruption, the commissions portrayed women as the victims of industry. Activists responded positively to these reports and embraced the condemnation of the economic causes of vice, such as businesses not paying young women a living wage. Prostitution became categorized as a commercial industry. In the early twentieth century, the vice commissions of Chicago and Portland were begun as moral endeavors; however, the reports they produced were economic in nature. The commissions came to the conclusion that moral degradation was a consequence of women’s economic insecurities, rather than a sign of their morally evil nature. The Chicago and Portland commissions recommended intervention methods to combat prostitution. Reformers responded to the change towards focusing on the


commercialization of prostitution by shutting down places used for vice, discussing the connection between the social evil and low wages for female workers, and treating prostitutes as people who should be helped.

The Portland and Chicago vice commissions were established as committees with a moral purpose, created in response to public outcry against vice in the city. Reform movements were common during this era because many people were concerned with the social morality of their community. The Progressive era saw the beginning of the change from Victorian to modern life. However, many people, especially middle class Protestants, held on to Victorian ideals. The major tenants of Victorianism encouraged the importance of hard work and self-dependence, resisting temptations, containing sexual passions, and contempt for leisure activities. Social evil reformers believed that prostitution went against the Victorian principles of society and destroyed the Victorian family, which was essential for the public well-being. Middle class supporters of Victorianism believed in the need for formality in both the public and private sphere. The historian Lary May argues that it was an unspoken rule that men were allowed to dabble in vice activities, such as gambling, drinking, and visiting red light districts, as long as it did not disrupt Victorian formality by crossing into his everyday life. May takes his argument a step further by postulating that vice crusades occurred when vice was not kept separate enough.

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5 May, *Screening Out the Past*, xii.
6 Ibid., 3-4.
8 May, *Screening Out the Past*, xv.
from respectable life.\textsuperscript{9} His theory is supported by the Protestant campaign against prostitution, which was sparked by the rise in white slavery narratives detailing the effect of social evil on genteel women. The abolishment of social evil was therefore needed to restore Victorian principles to urban life, since the narratives demonstrated that prostitution could not be contained in red light districts. Advocates of vice reform expressed this opinion. In 1910, the Church Federation of Chicago, representing six hundred local congregations, met to discuss the crisis of social evil in the city. The clergy members came to the conclusion that further investigation of conditions was needed, in order to determine the best course of action for combating vice.\textsuperscript{10} The federation approached the mayor of Chicago with their request, and he recognized the seriousness of the situation and responded by founding the Vice Commission of Chicago. The Portland Vice Commission was a reaction to similar public uproar. An ordinance of the city council established the commission to examine conditions of vice in Portland, “…including all practices which are debasing and degrading and which affect the moral and physical welfare of the inhabitants of the city…”\textsuperscript{11} The commissions were created to appease middle class Protestants’ moral concerns with prostitution and were seen as both short-term and long-term solutions.

In the beginning, the existence of these committees satisfied activists by demonstrating that the city government was taking an interest in prostitution reform. The committees hoped the enduring result would be an end to prostitution as a whole. The commissions were created with two goals in mind. The Portland report describes these as being an analytical goal and a

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{10} Vice Commission of Chicago, \textit{Social Evil}, 1.

\textsuperscript{11} Portland Vice Commission, \textit{Report}, ii.
constructive goal. The first objective was to research and then convey the facts about vice. The second objective was to suggest reasonable ways to better the situation.\textsuperscript{12} Neither commission was solely created to acquire information. The mayors believed that by acquiring more facts about the conditions of prostitution, the issue could be handled more intelligently. The majority of information known by the general populace about the social evil came from white slavery narratives. While these stories raised awareness about prostitution, their truthfulness and accuracy is still debated among scholars.\textsuperscript{13} Rather than accepting unconfirmed or biased information, city officials commissioned the vice reports to gather factual data about conditions.

Officials recognized that in order for the public to solve a problem, they first had to know what the real problem was. The Portland Vice Commission wrote that once citizens were presented with the facts, then they would be able to “proceed to more intelligent action, basing such action not on ignorant surmises, prejudices or special pleadings, but on conditions as they are.”\textsuperscript{14} Reformers believed that investigation would lead to a solution for the social evil problem and the harms that came along with it. In his letter to the press announcing the creation of the Vice Commission of Chicago, the mayor announced that the commissions would study prostitution and answer five basic questions on the public’s mind: if vice and the people involved should be ignored, if vice should be segregated, what the best method for controlling the spread of sexually transmitted diseases would be, what the best approach to vice would be that would protect against other crimes as well, and what the best approach to vice overall would

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13} Mara L. Keire, “The Vice Trust: A Reinterpretation of the White Slavery Scare in the United States, 1907-1917,” \textit{Journal of Social History} (Fall 2001): 6. Keire offers a concise overview of the historiography of the white slavery scare. The traditional opinion is that white slavery did not exist and the narratives were exaggerated claims meant to induce fear.

\textsuperscript{14} Portland Vice Commission, \textit{Report}, iii.
The mayor of Chicago and the city council of Portland commissioned the vice reports so that the moral sins of prostitution would be brought to an end. In order to achieve results that documented the immoral features of prostitution, and attempted to fix the problems, the vice committees needed to be composed of moral members.

The people chosen to be on the vice commission were to be moral men and women who were upstanding and well respected members of society. In both instances, the mayor of the city selected the members of the commission. These commissions included religious and business leaders, scholars, medical and legal professionals, and prominent activists in the vice crusades. Members of the committees often had previous experience with vice reform. Walter T. Sumner, Dean of the SS Peter and Paul Episcopal Cathedral and chairman of the Vice Commission of Chicago, had a history of performing mission work in vice districts. His church was credited with rescuing 130 girls in the span of four years. Sumner also devoted much of his personal time to volunteer work and spent his Christmas eves visiting troubled areas, where he delivered Christmas cards to women which contained information on how to obtain assistance if they were ever in need. Members with backgrounds like Sumner’s were chosen not only because they were perceived as authorities, but also because they exhibited both a high moral fortitude and a high social standing, which did not always naturally go together. It is unlikely that any of these commissioners would have denied the effects of vice or tried to argue that prostitution was not immoral. Their own moral opinions would have prevented them from thinking such things. In the rare chance that their morality was a façade, they would not have been willing to risk

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17 Johnston, “Chicago’s Social Morality,” 555.
questions about their own morality by expressing such controversial sentiments, which would negatively affect their reputation and social status. The mayors of Portland and Chicago chose moral and prominent figures with backgrounds in vice reform to ensure that the reports issued by the vice commissions did not contradict the public condemnation of prostitution and would be accepted as credible sources whose recommendations should be implemented. The commissions recognized that for the reports to be deemed reliable by the public and integrated into the fight against the moral corruption of prostitution, not only did they themselves need to be trustworthy, but so did the information they gathered.

The commissions put in place methods to attempt an unbiased approach to prostitution, in order to make sure that their research was gathered morally and would be accurate. Both reports endeavored to be judicious in their decisions and criticisms. One method they used for doing this was fact checking. The two commissions utilized field operatives who would investigate various suspect immoral businesses. Each investigator’s work was verified by other investigators who would be sent to the same location, unaware that it had already been reported on. The commissions organized this method of fact checking so as to limit the number of errors and prohibit false reporting. Besides these field studies, the commissions also conducted interviews with a variety of individuals. Since collecting these personal histories was done for the purpose of gathering information, not prosecuting criminals, the commissions felt it was morally right to omit specific names and addresses of offenders, such as brothel owners, prostitutes, and customers. While this added to the morality of their methods, it detracted

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18 Portland Vice Commission, Report, 4, 217; Vice Commission of Chicago, Social Evil, 28.
19 Portland Vice Commission, Report, 5; Vice Commission of Chicago, Social Evil, 69.
20 Johnston, “Chicago’s Social Morality,” 554; Portland Vice Commission, Report, iii; Vice Commission of Chicago, Social Evil, 30.
slightly from the credibility of their research, since specific sources were not listed. The commissions made up for this, however, by listing the various ways which they gathered information. In addition to regular meetings, the Vice Commission of Chicago arranged 98 conferences at which representatives from various philanthropic, civic, social, reform, and business organizations were invited to speak, in order to share their own data about prostitution.\textsuperscript{21} They also read accounts from the juvenile and adult court records.\textsuperscript{22} The Portland Vice Commission included questionnaires given to prostitutes and brothel owners in their research to gather statistics and implemented a block to block investigation of districts suspected of vice.\textsuperscript{23} The methods used by the vice commissions were meant to not only accumulate a large collection of data, but also to ensure the information was accurate and gathered in a morally appropriate way.

To sum up, the vice commissions of Chicago and Portland were moral endeavors in their creation that were meant to stop what was believed to be a problem stemming from moral corruption. The need for reports on prostitution grew from public outcry against the anti-Victorian sins of prostitution and the realization that more information on existing conditions was necessary in order to combat the problem. Members were then selected for this commission based on their moral standing and recognition of the evil of vice. These committees then laid out methods for investigation which would be honorable and unbiased. Every step of the formation process of the commissions was guided by a moral desire to achieve results which would bring to an end the social evil of prostitution. However, the results produced by the two commissions and

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 70, 163.
\textsuperscript{23} Portland Vice Commission, \textit{Report}, 4-5, 217.
published in the vice reports did not focus on the immorality of prostitutes, as was expected. Rather, the vice commissions discovered that the true issue that needed to be focused on was the economic environment which made women vulnerable to the moral degradation of prostitution.

The Portland Vice Commission and the Vice Commission of Chicago portrayed prostitution as a commercialized business and blamed the economic conditions of industry for contributing to the causes which led to women finding themselves in a financially weak position. The commission reports maintain that prostitution is a commercialized vice because of its business oriented structure.\textsuperscript{24} Profits are abnormally high in the vice industry, which is close to the heart of the problem of the continued existence of vice districts.\textsuperscript{25} The Vice Commission of Chicago estimated that the social evil earns profits of more than fifteen million dollars a year.\textsuperscript{26} Part of this profit came from the women working as prostitutes who were taken advantage of economically by other people employed in the vice industry, such as brothel owners, bartenders, and real estate agents.

The commission reports argue that only a small portion of the profits from social evil were paid to the women who earned them. The majority of the money went to groups of men who were exploiting these women.\textsuperscript{27} The Vice Commission of Chicago claims that it was common practice for half of a prostitute’s income, known as bed money, to go directly to her procurer or keeper.\textsuperscript{28} The Portland Vice Commission supports this assertion with examples of the actual character of prostitution obtained from proprietors and the sporting women of immoral

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\item[\textsuperscript{24}] Portland Vice Commission, \textit{Report}, 61; Vice Commission of Chicago, \textit{Social Evil}, 32.
\item[\textsuperscript{26}] Vice Commission of Chicago, \textit{Social Evil}, 113.
\item[\textsuperscript{27}] Ibid., 263-4.
\item[\textsuperscript{28}] Ibid., 97.
\end{itemize}
houses who, in the majority of cases, state that the girls turn over half of their bed money.\textsuperscript{29} In addition to paying their keeper part of their income, women in vice districts were only able to buy clothing and food directly from their madams.\textsuperscript{30} The Chicago Vice Commission discovered that keepers took advantage of this monopoly and sold items, such as hats and dresses, to their prostitutes for exorbitant prices, making even more money from them.\textsuperscript{31} Many other people took cuts of prostitutes’ pay at various times. Real estate owners, jewelers, clothing designers, druggists, and doctors all shared in the profits of the vice industry.\textsuperscript{32} Additionally, the Chicago Vice Commission reported that keepers encouraged their prostitutes to spend money and excessively indulge themselves by using drugs and drinking.\textsuperscript{33} Once immersed in this lifestyle, women often spent outside their economic means and were obligated to accept a loan from their procurer. This process of financially exploiting prostitutes was meant to keep women in a debt peonage cycle, where they would be forced to return to prostitution in order to pay back the money they borrowed. The commissions exposed the financial extortion and commercialized vice occurring in the prostitution industry, which was forcing women to remain in a life of moral degradation. In addition to the revenues amassed from the bed money of sporting women, the liquor industry and the property industry were incorporated into commercialized vice and contributed to its profits.

The commission reports of Chicago and Portland agree that parts of the profits of the vice industry come from liquor sales and property rentals. The commissions maintain that there was a

\textsuperscript{30} Keire, “The Vice Trust,” 12.
\textsuperscript{31} Vice Commission of Chicago, \textit{Social Evil}, 78.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 45-6.
direct and obvious connection between saloons and prostitution.\textsuperscript{34} Houses of assignation were often located in close proximity to saloons, where many prostitutes could be found openly soliciting patrons.\textsuperscript{35} Saloons offered a secure venue for these women to acquire new clients. In return for this protection, saloons used prostitutes as a way to increase liquor sales.\textsuperscript{36} Women would work in conjunction with the bartenders to persuade male clientele to continue to buy drinks. In addition, the Chicago report explains why prostitutes would coax men into purchasing them alcoholic drinks. When a man ordered a drink for a prostitute, the bartender, who was in on the scheme, would serve the customer liquor, but would give the woman a counterfeit mixed drink which was valued at much less than the cost paid.\textsuperscript{37} Saloons were able to use prostitutes to increase their business. Furthermore the liquor industry profited from commercialized vice outside the setting of the saloon. The Portland commission announced that they discovered 163 brothels where liquor was being sold by prostitutes. The report came to the conclusion that the commercial success of houses of ill repute was reliant on the sale of liquor by prostitutes.\textsuperscript{38} The liquor industry worked with prostitution to increase the profits of both commodities. However, in both industries, prostitutes were being used as tools to make money for other people. A third business, the property industry, became more closely involved with the actual system of prostitution.

Several real estate agents and property owners detected financial opportunities that could be seized when renting to keepers or prostitutes. The prostitution industry created a market for

\textsuperscript{34} Portland Vice Commission, \textit{Report}, 58.


\textsuperscript{36} Vice Commission of Chicago, \textit{Social Evil}, 34.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 109, 131.

\textsuperscript{38} Portland Vice Commission, \textit{Report}, 61.
all categories of property rentals. Buildings and houses could be leased to larger and more highly organized groups and then converted into brothels. Keepers may have been interested in renting a floor above another business or a bank of rooms in a hotel for their girls to have ease of access to. Individual rooms in hotels or houses could be booked by prostitutes. Some real estate agents responded to this demand for rentals by seeking out property owners willing to consent to their buildings being used for vice. While owners may have agreed to leasing their property to prostitutes out of ignorance, indifference, or denial of responsibility for the actions performed by their renters, the vice reports of Chicago and Portland show that the owners of property used for prostitution quickly took advantage of the opportunities for profit that vice provided.  

Prostitution was the social evil in this era, and while some people were willing to rent their property for its use, the majority was not. The low level of supply existing for the high demand of rentals allowed owners to increase prices. Drastically increased rent prices were charged to prostitutes, sometimes even double the normal rate, according to the vice reports. By leasing their property for high rates and extracting as much money as possible from immoral renters, property owners shared in the profits of the vice industry. Landowners became a part of the prostitution hierarchy, which financially extorted members lower on the scale. Money earned through renting to prostitutes was part of the commercialized vice system and contributed to the profits of social evil, while continuing the process of keeping prostitutes financially dependent on others because a large portion of what the women earned would have to be used to pay property owners.

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39 Ibid., 71.

40 Portland Vice Commission, Report, 67; Vice Commission of Chicago, Social Evil, 96.

41 Vice Commission of Chicago, Social Evil, 32-3.
The prostitution industry offered immense opportunities for profitability. It was an attractive field to those greedy for money because a person did not need to become a prostitute in order to reap the benefits of the system. Prostitutes were kept at the bottom of the hierarchal business structure of vice. While these women earned money, they were not able to keep it. Instead, this bed money was distributed in various ways, allowing other people, such as brothel owners, to profit from the prostitute’s work. Interactions with alternative forms of commerce, such as liquor sales and property rentals, allowed an even larger group of people to experience the advantages of commercial prostitution. The Vice Commission of Chicago argues that the desire of men for wealth and the vast amount of profit that can be made from vice explains why prostitution continued to exist.\(^42\) The conversion of prostitution into a commercial industry led to an increase in anonymous allies of vice who were focused on earning a profit, which made eliminating the social evil even harder for reformers. The commercialization of vice was a two-fold factor for the continued existence of prostitution. First, profitability appealed to those who craved prosperity, expanding the size of the industry. Second, the new business structure which shifted profits away from prostitutes placed women in a cycle which did not allow them to leave the vice industry. Economic exploitation was not only a factor in sustaining the reality of prostitution, but it also contributed to the downfall of women who became prostitutes. By revealing this aspect of prostitution, the vice commissions publicized to many people a new perspective on the causes of vice. Portland and Chicago showed that poverty and financial anxiety were leading people to choose to participate in vice because they felt as though they had no other option.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., 105.
While the Chicago and Portland vice reports acknowledge that women enter the life of prostitution for many different reasons -- for example, poor home conditions, abnormality, lack of religious instruction, and trickery -- their research focuses on the economic troubles of industrial life because they saw the problem of women becoming prostitutes as rooted in the inequalities of labor.\textsuperscript{43} The commissions state that the poor conditions under which girls are employed in the city make them more susceptible to prostitution.\textsuperscript{44} The contributing causes were low wages, desire for finery, and vicious and demoralizing environments.\textsuperscript{45} Low wages negatively affected workers because women were not being paid enough to survive. Both commissions researched how much money was required for a young woman to live in the city. Portland determined that ten dollars a week, minimum, was required for a girl to live in health and comfort.\textsuperscript{46} Chicago established that it would be impossible to live on less than eight dollars a week.\textsuperscript{47} Many women were attempting to survive on less than a living wage, since department stores only paid an average of six to seven dollars a week.\textsuperscript{48} Existing on a starvation wage added unnecessary stress to the lives of these women, who feared getting sick because missing a day of work could destroy their lives.\textsuperscript{49} Starvation wages also made these girls more vulnerable to prostitution because the enticement of earning more money would be very tempting. These women were not just living in poverty, but were living in city poverty. They were constantly

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 45.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 199.

\textsuperscript{45} Portland Vice Commission, \textit{Report}, 165; Vice Commission of Chicago, \textit{Social Evil}, 230. These three causes are listed in both reports; the Portland and Chicago reports each include an additional reason, fatiguing work and insanitary conditions, respectively.

\textsuperscript{46} Portland Vice Commission, \textit{Report}, 165.

\textsuperscript{47} Vice Commission of Chicago, \textit{Social Evil}, 203.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 42.
surrounded by good food, beautiful clothes, and entertainment, yet could not afford any of it.\(^{50}\) Their desire for finery contributed to their susceptibility to prostitution because they believed that if they earned more money, then they would be able to afford the nice things they coveted. Lastly, entering the workforce of industrial life exposed young women to a demoralizing environment. The Portland commission reported that not only were girls harassed at work by unsavory characters, but that their commute to and from work subjected them to interactions with vice.\(^{51}\) Contact and other forms of association with vice deaden their sense of morality.\(^{52}\) The vice commissions reported that the stress created by these economic conditions weakened the will power of some female workers leading them to turn to prostitution in the hope of attaining a life of ease.\(^{53}\)

As previously mentioned, the reports of the Portland and Chicago vice commissions were written with the dual purpose of being analytical and constructive. The analytical aspect was meant to provide information on the facts about prostitution. The constructive aspect was designed to offer reasonable suggestions for eliminating vice in the cities. In the informational sections of their reports, the commissions focused on the interaction between economics and prostitution. They blamed commercialization and preoccupation with profits for the continued existence of social evil. Poor work conditions and low pay were then cited for causing women to become prostitutes, not a lack of morals. The presentation of vice as a problem of industry and not moral corruption is shocking at first, because the reports were commissioned with a moral purpose. However, the investigations of the commissions successfully studied prostitution by

\(^{50}\) Ibid.


\(^{52}\) Ibid., 72.

forgetting their preconceived notions. While the two commissions were sparked by a moral agenda to restore Victorian principles to cities, they were established with the duty of acquiring more information about prostitution because not enough accurate data to determine a solution was known. Their research led them to the realization that while prostitution had previously been viewed as an issue of women having little to no morals, the problem was now perceived as economic in nature and needed to be addressed as such.

The constructive aspects of the reports, which offer ideas on how to end prostitution, concentrate on recommendations that apply to the commercialized character of vice in a last attempt to ensure that citizens and reformers recognize the underlying problem with prostitution. The Portland report calls for an attack on commercialism, which the commission believes to be the most vulnerable aspect of prostitution because lessening the profits of the industry would directly lessen the number of supporters. The best way to combat commercialism is to reduce the profits of prostitution or make vice profits more distasteful and dangerous to acquire by prosecuting the beneficiaries of prostitution, rather than the prostitutes themselves. Successfully harming the profits of vice would remove prostitution’s allies and much of its threat to society and individuals.54 Another suggestion for attacking profits was to enact laws which could be enforced against places, not just people, to have them closed and permanently put out of business if they were under immoral management.55 The vice reports also gave advice on how to help women who were the victims of prostitution. The Vice Commission of Chicago called for the reform of economic and social conditions as a dual effort to decrease the number of women who

55 Ibid., 68.
turned to prostitution and to facilitate the return of fallen women to society.\textsuperscript{56} An example of a legal reform given is the establishment of a living minimum wage for women.\textsuperscript{57} The commissions also suggested that victims could be helped by abolishing the fining system against prostitutes. Both cities agree that the system produces more harm than good because it forces women to remain in prostitution in order to earn the money to pay the fine.\textsuperscript{58} The reports made recommendations on how to battle prostitution in a way which would create noticeable change. They hoped citizens would respond directly to the crisis caused by commercialized vice, rather than idly condemning the moral sins of prostitution, a practice which would not lead to any improvement in the vice situation.

The Portland and Chicago vice commission reports were successful in directing public awareness of prostitution away from an issue of moral disapproval and towards a problem of economic corruption. Reformers accepted the image of commercialized vice and utilized the findings of the commissions to attack the newly recognized root problem of prostitution. Following the publication of the reports, activists responded to commercialized vice by campaigning for the closure of establishments used by the prostitution industry, creating public discourse about the connection between social evil and low wages for women, and recognizing and treating prostitutes as the victims of industry.

Vice reformers attacked the commercialized industry of social evil by advocating for the shutdown of houses, businesses, and districts which harbored prostitution. In 1912, Chicago closed down the red-light district of the West Side in a response to citizens, “feeling the need of

\textsuperscript{56} Vice Commission of Chicago, \textit{Social Evil}, 263.
\textsuperscript{57} Portland Vice Commission, \textit{Report}, 200; Vice Commission of Chicago, \textit{Social Evil}, 44.
explosive action ever since the publication of the report of its Vice Commission.59 A little over a year later, an ordinance by the Assistant Corporation Counsel was proposed to reopen the vice districts. Even though the likelihood of the ordinance being enacted was all but non-existent, the public still responded with outrage at the mere proposal of the idea.60 Similarly, Oregon passed abatement laws shutting down property used for prostitution following the release of the Portland report in 1913.61 By closing property and areas used for vice, reformers were able to attack the profits brought in from prostitution. Not only did they slow down the ability for liaisons to occur as prostitutes and keepers were forced to find new locations, but they also disrupted the property rental industry, which was earning a lot of money by leasing flats and houses at exorbitant costs. By cutting into the profits of prostitution and disrupting the ability of prostitutes to perform their job by closing down areas of social evil, reformers increased the difficulty of achieving financial success through commercialized vice.

Protestant reformers also reacted positively to the vice commission reports by advocating for public discourse about the connection between low wages paid to women and the likelihood that those women would become prostitutes. In Portland, newspaper articles such as “Low Wages and Prostitution” and “Low Wages and Vice Problem” were being published. These articles blamed low wages for driving women to prostitution and called for businesses to pay women a living wage.62 Many women’s clubs followed the advice of the commission report and fought against meager wages for female workers as a way to stop women from being led

60 “Shall Chicago Legalize Hell?” American City 7 (November 1912): 405.
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By discussing the issue of prostitution and poor wages in the media, reformers of social evil were able to spread awareness about one of the true causes of vice. Public discourse would hopefully lead more people to take action. This was the case in Chicago, where roughly two years after the publication of the vice commission report, an investigating committee was appointed by the Illinois State Senate to look into the minimum wage law and its link with vice. The senatorial committee heard testimonies from many women who explained that their descent into vice was a result of them being forced to choose between prostitution and starvation. The chairman of the commission and Lieutenant-Governor of Illinois, Barratt O’Hara, affirmed that low wages were to blame for many prostitute’s moral degradation and declared that the best solution was a minimum wage law for women. By spreading awareness of one of the causes which led to prostitution, reformers increased support for a minimum wage law. They hoped that once a living wage law was passed fewer women would feel the need to turn to vice for economic support.

Lastly, reformers responded to the vice commissions by encouraging the view of prostitutes as victims, instead of as the problem. One way this was done was through the use of the media in Portland and Chicago, in which Protestant reformers pleaded for prostitutes to no longer be regarded as outcasts and to receive better treatment. Others were working to help prostitutes escape from red light districts and opened up their own homes for victims to flee to as a type of refuge center. They argued that these women needed protection and to be rescued,

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64 “Vice Investigation by the Illinois Senate,” *Survey* 29 (March 1913): 897.
rather than punished.Prostitutes were not morally corrupt people because they turned to vice as a last resort, not out of a willingness or desire to be evil. Instead, the people who should be more strictly punished, reformers claimed, were male sinners who solicited prostitutes. In accordance with the vice commission reports, reformers argued that previous laws punished the victims of men’s evil deeds. Instead, men who benefited at the expense of weak women needed to be targeted. Calls for the punishment of male sinners emphasized the vulnerability of women. The vice reports altered the way that many reformers viewed prostitutes. This new perception allowed activists to focus less on their moral condemnation of prostitutes and more on the root issue of economic insecurities caused by commercialization which was leading women to participate in vice activities.

Prostitution reform began as a movement hoping to reinforce Victorian morals; however, the vice investigations of Chicago and Portland discovered that the root problem causing women to become prostitutes was economic insecurities. The vice commissions of Chicago and Portland successfully convinced Protestant activists that these economic insecurities were leading women to become prostitutes and that the commercialization of prostitution then forced women into a debt peonage cycle, which never allowed them to feel financially comfortable enough to abandon this morally inappropriate lifestyle. Reformers responded by focusing their attack on the commercialized aspect of prostitution by closing brothels and red light districts, advocating for a living minimum wage for women, and recognizing prostitutes as the victims of vice. The Chicago and Portland commissions’ emphasis on environmental factors, such as economics,

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67 “Fighting Vice Segregation in Chicago,” 848.
68 “They Now Have a Voice,” 4.
69 “War on the Social Evil,” The Morning Oregonian (May 9, 1913): 10.
rather than the choices of individuals reveals a changing approach to reform in the Progressive era. People began investigating the larger, root causes of social problems. The circumstances in Portland and Chicago can be considered representative of the nation as a whole because not only are they major urban centers, but other cities were conducting vice investigations in the years closely related to the release dates of the Chicago and Portland reports.\(^70\)

\(^70\) Reginald Wright Kauffman, “White Slavery – Cause and Cure” \textit{Frank Leslie’s Weekly} (July 4, 1912). Throughout the article, Kauffman mentions various cities which have conducted vice investigations, such as New York.
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