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Jacqueline E. Ross

# Urban Vice Regulation Compared

How the Progressive Era's  
Undercover Tactics  
Underwrote American  
Challenges to French  
Regulation

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Regulation

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction



**Overview of Claims** During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, efforts by social reformers to address urban squalor in the densely populated urban centers of the United States and France increasingly coalesced around urban vice establishments and the prostitutes who conspicuously represented urban decadence and despair. American and European reformers increasingly advocated for the abolition of prostitution, and brothels in particular, challenging regulatory approaches that tolerated prostitution as a “social evil” to be channeled into “sanitized” outlets that were geographically confined in red light districts (in the U.S.) or state-supervised to prevent the spread of venereal disease (in France.) But if American abolitionists were more successful than their French counterparts in shutting down brothels and influencing national policy, this had something to do with the American private sector’s reliance on undercover tactics to outflank and model the public sector’s enforcement tactics and to control and publicize the definition of deviance, through the issuance of best-selling vice reports based on the first-hand accounts of undercover investigators.

Undercover tactics in the U.S. helped moral purity societies in their initial push for geographical containment of vice establishments in red light districts, at the end of the nineteenth century, before helping to channel and to shape the abolitionist backlash against the regulationist approach they had spearheaded. Undercover tactics played a role in framing public discourse around prostitution and in generalizing abolitionism across moral panics ranging from prostitution to immigration, racial mingling, leisure pursuits of working-class immigrants, gambling, alcohol, and narcotics—all of which could be investigated by the undercover tactics that private reform societies helped to normalize. Private reformers’ ability to use their undercover tactics to shape public perception of vice helped them impose an abolitionist agenda on all levels of government