

Fact Sheet | Sex Work & Sexual Assault

Criminalization, Stigma, and Vulnerability

Sexual Assault Prevalence Among Sex Workers:

Sex Workers Experience extremely high levels of sexual violence: Globally, sex workers have a 45 to 75% chance of experiencing sexual violence at some point in their careers and a 32 to 55% chance of experiencing sexual violence in a given year.¹

- ★ **Miami, FL:** 34% of street-based sex workers reported violent encounters with clients in the past 90 days.²
- ★ **Phoenix, AZ:** 37% of prostitution diversion program participants report being raped by a client, and 7.1% report being raped by a pimp.³
- ★ **San Francisco, CA:** Half of sex workers reported domestic violence, and 36.0% reported sex work-related violence. Those engaged in street-based sex work (61.8%), erotic dance (43.2%), sensual massage (48.1%); reported higher levels of work violence, as did those with a history of arrest (47.1% versus 25.9%)⁴

Perpetrators are Often Serial Predators: A small portion of clients are responsible for violence against sex workers.⁵

Stigma Increases Violence: Various studies have noted a correlation between anti-sex work rhetoric that sees street-based workers as a nuisance or threat to public order and an increase in violence against workers^{6 7}

Criminalization Increases Violence:

- ★ 70% of New Zealand sex workers were more likely to report violence to the police after decriminalization of sex work.⁸
- ★ Rates of sexual and physical violence against sex workers are lower in contexts where sex work is not criminalized.⁹

Barriers to Convictions:

- ★ **Sex Workers frequently aren't protected by rape shield laws:** New York and Ohio explicitly exclude prostitution to be used as character evidence against rape victims. Judges in states without explicit exclusion of sex work often allow for prostitution to be brought up.¹⁰
- ★ **Judges and juries hold bias against sex workers:** In Philadelphia, Judge Theresa Carr-Deni called gang-rape of a sex worker at gunpoint "theft of services" and refused to allow prosecution to press aggravated sexual assault charges.¹¹

Sex Worker Rape Victims Rarely Report Victimization to the Police:

- ★ **Vancouver, Canada:** 75% of youth engaged in survival sex did not report rape to the police.¹² Of youth who had been victimized, 18% did not receive help from anyone, including boyfriends, other sex workers, friends or parents.
- ★ **San Francisco, CA:** 93% of rape victims engaged in street-based sex work did not seek formal help (e.g., from a rape crisis center), and 96% did not report the rape to the police.¹³

Despite Low reporting rates, sex workers make up a large portion of rape reports: *One in Five* sexual assault police reports from an urban emergency room were for sex worker victims. Sex workers were younger, poorer and suffered a greater number of injuries than other victims¹⁴.

¹ Deering, Kathleen N., et al. "A systematic review of the correlates of violence against sex workers." *American journal of public health* 104.5 (2014): e42-e54.

² Surratt, Hilary L., et al. "HIV risk among female sex workers in Miami: the impact of violent victimization and untreated mental illness." *AIDS care* 24.5 (2012): 553-561.

³ Shepel, Elizabeth. A Comparative Study of Adult Transgender and Female Prostitution

⁴ Cohan, Deb, et al. "Sex worker health: San Francisco style." *Sexually transmitted infections* 82.5 (2006): 418-422.

⁵ Monto, M. (2004). Female prostitution, customers, and violence. *Violence Against Women*, 10(2), 160-188.

⁶ Lowman, J. (2000). Violence and the outlaw status of (street) prostitution in Canada. *Violence Against Women*, 6(9), 987-1011.

⁷ Penfold, C., Hunter, G., Campbell, R., & Barham, L. (2004). Tackling client violence in female street prostitution: Inter-agency working between outreach agencies and the police. *Policing & Society*, 14(4), 365-379.

⁸ Report of the Prostitution Law Reform Committee on the Operation of the Prostitution Reform Act 2003. New Zealand.

⁹ Report of the Prostitution Law Reform Committee on the Operation of the Prostitution Reform Act 2003. New Zealand.

¹⁰ Anderson, Michelle J. "From chastity requirement to sexuality license: Sexual consent and a new rape shield law." *Geo. Wash. L. Rev.* 70 (2002): 51.

¹¹ Furguson, David. 2013 October 31. Judge who ruled sex worker's rape was theft of services faces activist pushback. *Raw Story*. Retrieved from www.rawstory.com

¹² Cler-Cunningham, Leonard et al (2001). Violence Against Women in Vancouver's Street-Level Sex Trade and the Police Response *Pace Society*

¹³ Mimi Silbert, *Sexual Assault of Prostitutes*. San Francisco: (Delancey Street Foundation, 1981).

¹⁴ Mont, Janice Du, and Margaret J. McGregor. "Sexual assault in the lives of urban sex workers: A descriptive and comparative analysis." *Women & health* 39.3 (2004): 79-96.

Police Sexual Violence Against Sex Workers:

Sex Workers are especially vulnerable to police violence, as police officers can threaten victims with arrest or stage an arrest and sexually assault victims. Women, especially trans women of color, drug users, and individuals with criminal records are especially vulnerable due to intersectional bias.

West Sacramento, CA: Cop Sergio Alvarez sentenced to life in prison for raping at least 35 sex workers. Alvarez kidnapped women off the street in 2011 and 2012, targeting sex workers and drug users - women Alvarez assumed would not be believed if they came forward. Alvarez attacked them in his patrol car. He attacked them in back alleys and wooded lots.¹⁵

Chicago, IL: 30% of exotic dancers and 24% of street-based sex workers who had been raped identified a police officer as the rapist. Approximately 20 % of other acts of sexual violence reported by study participants were committed by the police.¹⁶

Oklahoma City, OK: Police officer Holtzclaw raped 13 black, low-income women, many with criminal records for prostitution and drug use. He systematically used threat of arrest and the victims' vulnerability due to race, class, and status as a sex worker or drug user to assault them. During his trial for 36 charges involving rape, sexual assault, and sexual misconduct, Holtzclaw's defense highlighted victims' criminal records¹⁷

New York, NY: Up to 17% of sex workers interviewed reported sexual harassment and abuse, including rape, by police.¹⁸

Eugene, OR: In 2004, two Eugene, Oregon police officers were convicted of sexual assaulting, abusing or raping at least 15 women over a six year period. Early complaints were dismissed as the "grumbings of prostitutes and junkies."¹⁹

Washington, DC: One in five sex workers/individuals profiled as sex workers have been approached by police indicated that officers asked them for sex. Most surveyed found this a negative, humiliating experience.²⁰

Impersonating Police to Victimize Sex Workers:

When sex work is criminalized, sexual predators can also impersonate police officers to rape and rob sex workers.

Ft. Lauderdale, FL: In summer 2015, a man attempted to coerce at least 12 sex workers into engaging in condomless sex for free by impersonating a police officer.²¹

New York, NY: A man attempted to evade paying for sex by pretending to be a cop and later sending a photo of a gun to the woman's cell phone.

Chicago, IL: In 2013, a man arranged to meet an escort. When he arrived, he pulled out a badge and handcuffed the woman. He and 3 friends proceeded to gang-rape the escort.

El Segundo, CA: In spring 2015, a man identified himself as an officer conducting a prostitution sting and flashed a realistic badge. Once inside the room, he handcuffed and sexually assaulted the victim before taking cash and property.²²

Greenbelt, MD(2014) - Beginning in January 2014, Ajibola Erogbogbo arranged to meet women who offered sex through online ads at local hotels. Erogbogbo would arrive wearing a vest that said "police" and would show the women a badge and a gun. He told the women they were under arrest, handcuffed them, robbed them, and in one case on Feb. 19, demanded sex from the woman in exchange for not arresting her. He had sex with her until she became unresponsive.²³

¹⁵ Alover, Norma Jean (2014) *Cops who solicit/ rape/ extort/ sexually assault and pimp prostitutes*. Police, Prostitution and Politics. Retrieved from: <http://www.policeprostitutionandpolitics.com/>

¹⁶ Raphael Jody and Deborah L. Shapiro, "Sisters Speak Out: The Lives and Needs of Prostituted Women in Chicago," Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 2002 <http://im.pactresearch.org/documents/sisterspeakout.pdf>

¹⁷ Oklahoma City Artists for Justice. In Facebook. Retrieved 11/30/2015 from <https://www.facebook.com/OKC-Artists-for-Justice-291371534394981/>

¹⁸ Sex Workers Project, Behind Closed Doors (New York City: 2005); Sex Workers Project, Revolving Door: An Analysis of Street-Based Prostitution in New York City, (New York City: 2003).

¹⁹ *Policing Sex Work*. Incite National. Retrieved 11/30/2015 from <http://www.incite-national.org/page/policing-sex-work>

²⁰ Move Along: Policing Sex Work in Washington, D.C., Different Avenues, 2008.

²¹ Alanez, Tonya (2015, August 28). Man threatened to arrest prostitute if she didn't have unprotected sex, deputies say. *The Sun-Sentinel*. Retrieved from <http://www.sun-sentinel.com/>

²² (2015, May 22) Alleged Police Impersonator Pleads Not Guilty To Sexually Assaulting, Robbing Woman In El Segundo *EL SEGUNDO*. Retrieved from CBSLA.com

²³ AP (2015, March 11) *Police Impersonator Pleads Guilty to Robbery of Prostitutes* NBC4 Washington Retrieved from: <http://www.nbcwashington.com/>