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Unfriendly Encounters: Street-Based Sex Workers and Police in Manhattan, 2005

Street-based sex workers are often targeted for unlawful arrest and harassment by police, and experience high levels of violence that go unaddressed. Outreach to street-based sex workers is critical to providing links between them and service providers in order to ensure access to condoms and information about legal rights. The Sex Workers Project (SWP) at the Urban Justice Center, which protects the rights and safety of sex workers through legal assistance, human rights documentation, and policy advocacy, sent two outreach workers to meet street-based sex workers at two sites in Manhattan.

Outreach workers went out every two weeks for three months (July, August and September) in 2005 between the hours of 2 AM and 7 AM. Both sites, which we named "Midtown" and "Downtown," were chosen because the SWP received information from sex workers and advocates about heavy policing in these areas. They approached people on the street and engaged them in conversation, offering condoms and "Know Your Rights" cards printed with legal information. People self-identified as sex workers. Outreach workers also asked sex workers about their needs and working conditions, especially relating to police interactions and safety.

This fact sheet builds on the SWP's 2003 report on street-based sex workers in New York City, *Revolving Door*, and reports the outreach workers' findings: New York City still aggressively polices sex workers and those who are wrongly profiled or arrested even though they are not committing a crime. The City still fails to provide long-term or productive solutions for helping those who want to leave the streets.

FINDINGS:

Demographics:

- **Midtown:** SWP outreach workers encountered only female sex workers in this area. They appeared to be between the ages of 21-35 and were of African-American, Caucasian and Asian descent. Outreach workers encountered 2-7 sex workers during each outreach session.
- **Downtown:** Sex workers were transgender women and non-transgender men. They appeared to be predominantly between the ages of 19-25, with a few who appeared to be to be younger or older than this range. Sex workers were primarily of African-American and Latino/a descent. Outreach workers encountered 20-35 sex workers during each outreach session.

Receptiveness:

- **Midtown:** Sex workers in this area appeared more suspicious and cautious about speaking with outreach workers, although they were receptive to receiving condoms. Because policing occurs frequently, sex workers did not appear to have the time or desire to talk with outreach workers and did not want to bring attention to themselves.
- **Downtown:** Sex workers in Downtown were more accessible to outreach workers. Transgender female workers were generally very receptive to condoms and information and were generous with divulging personal or neighborhood experiences regarding police. Non-transgender male sex workers in this area were somewhat receptive to receiving condoms and legal rights cards, but refused to talk about the police.

Police Interactions:

- **Midtown:** Sex workers appeared on the streets after 3 AM, which the SWP suspects is due to the frequent police sweeps. Sex workers reported that most police officers did not harass them, and any abuse experienced was generally verbal. Although outreach workers saw police undercover in cabs and private cars, most officers were uniformed and in clearly marked blue and white police cars.

- **Downtown:** On every outreach session, sex workers reported heavy verbal and physical harassment by police, including rude, intimidating and intensely derogatory behavior.

One week, sex workers reported that on a single night, police arrested approximately 25-30 people whom they assumed were sex workers. They also reported that the next day, police arrested 5-6 alleged sex workers. The next week, sex workers stated that police conducted a massive sweep early Saturday morning at 5 AM, possibly locking up as many as 10 transgender women.

One sex worker mentioned a police officer who routinely threatened workers with violence by stating: "You are not going to jail tonight, you are going to the hospital." She also noted that this same officer pushed another person against a wall and held a nightstick to her throat.

One male sex worker reported police sweeps in early August. He said he was picked up by the police even though he was not working, and was later released since he was not engaging in any unlawful activity. However, the police told him to stay off the street.

In early September, another sex worker stated that police officers in a black car drove up on the curb in front of her, shouted, "Run, bitch, run," and told her to leave the area. On that same day, a sex worker described how she saw two people with baseball bats beating up a transgender person. The police came by, slowed down, noticed the victim was transgender and drove past, offering no assistance.

Pimps:

- **Midtown:** Outreach workers encountered 2 self-identifying pimps over the course of outreach. These young men generally seemed curious and open to conversation with outreach workers. They also seemed receptive to outreach workers giving legal rights cards and condoms to the sex workers.
- **Downtown:** Outreach workers did not meet any pimps in this area.

Other Outreach Organizations Present:

- **Midtown:** SWP did not see any other organizations in Midtown.
- **Downtown:** There are a few other organizations which conduct outreach Downtown. Streetworks notified people of free HIV testing in a nearby van and Tranzition gave information on transitional housing for HIV+ transgender people. FIERCE provided free condoms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The New York Police Department (NYPD) must hold police officers accountable for harassment of sex workers. All officers must be trained on issues relating to sex workers and to gender identity. The NYPD must aggressively investigate and punish police officers who engage in harassment or violence of any kind against sex workers.
- Police must stop arresting people who are not engaging in unlawful activity.
- Government funds should be directed at preventive services that affect the root causes of sex work, such as substance dependence and the shortage of living wage jobs, rather than arrests and prosecution. The cycle of arrest does nothing to assist sex workers who want to leave prostitution.

For more information, please contact the SWP at www.sexworkersproject.org.