



Selective Enforcement of Sex Work Criminalization Laws in Chicago

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INTRODUCTION

Commercial sex work criminalization policies in the United States have shifted over the past two decades as local jurisdictions have adopted End Demand reforms. These reforms aim to refocus arrest from individuals who sell sexual services to buyers and facilitators, a departure from the quality-of-life, nuisance-focused approach of the late twentieth century. This article presents a case study examining enforcement of commercial sex laws in Chicago, a city that has been heralded as a leader in End Demand reforms.

To conduct this research, we analyzed annualized arrest statistics from 1998-2017 and individual arrest reports from 2015-2017 from the Chicago Police Department (CPD).

FINDINGS

Overall, our analysis showed that institutional policing practices and a lack of enforcement of anti-trafficking laws contributed to the continued criminalization of sellers of sexual services. Key findings include the following:

- CPD's use of arrest in enforcing commercial sex laws has declined substantially since the adoption of End Demand.
- Sellers of sexual services face the heaviest burden of arrests and made up more than four-fifths of total commercial sex arrests from 2015 to 2017. This arrest pattern conflicts with the goals of End Demand, which directs the CPD to focus arrests on buyers and facilitators of commercial sex.
- Anti-trafficking and anti-violence efforts are not prioritized at a street level, and police responses to sellers' reports of violence are inconsistent. In some cases, reports of violence resulted in the arrest of the victimized seller and impunity for the reported perpetrator of violence.
- Institutional policing practices such as street-level bureaucracy, in which officers have a great deal of discretion in enforcing policies, and a focus on removing 'nuisance' behaviors from certain urban areas, resulted in targeted surveillance of sellers, who were predominantly poor and Black, and many of whom were transgender.

IMPLICATIONS

Despite a significant reduction in rates of arrests relevant to commercial sex in the last decade, policing strategies remain primarily oriented toward arresting sellers. Our analysis shows the limited impact of End Demand reforms on buyers and facilitators of sexual services and continued lack of prioritization of anti-trafficking and anti-violence efforts.

This article highlights the institutional factors that disproportionately affect marginalized groups who engage in commercial sex. By prioritizing 'quality of life' policing and targeted surveillance of sellers, CPD predominantly responded to public space issues and targeted sellers who were predominantly poor and Black, many of whom were reportedly transgender. Aggressive policing of public space and a heavy reliance on surveilling the bodies and behaviors of sellers can further infringe sellers' freedom to access certain neighborhoods, and impede their access to health and social services.

Read the full article [here](#).

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