



END HUMAN TRAFFICKING.
PROMOTE HEALTH & SAFETY.

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Decriminalize Sex Work for Public Health

There is significant research on the impact that laws governing sex work have on the public health and safety of our communities. Overwhelmingly, this research points to the decriminalization of consensual, adult prostitution to optimize sexual health, combat violence, and prevent trafficking and other forms of exploitation. Conclusive data analyzes the experience of sex workers and survivors around the world and supports the following conclusions:

1. The full decriminalization of sex work supports community health and safety.

A 2018 Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health meta-analysis reviewed over 130 studies conducted over 30 years and concluded that repressive policing¹ of sex work is associated with:

- An increased risk of sexual and physical violence at the hands of clients, third parties, and domestic partners;
- Increased risk of HIV and other STI infections, and made it more likely that workers would participate in condomless sex; and,
- A disruption of sex workers' support networks, workplace safety, and risk reduction strategies.²

2. The full decriminalization of sex work has conclusively reduced exploitation where and when it has been implemented.

- New Zealand passed the Prostitution Reform Act (PRA) in 2003, fully decriminalizing sex work for New Zealand nationals. In a study conducted by the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), there was no evidence of human trafficking of New Zealand citizens in the country between 2003 and 2018. Trafficking of migrant sex workers, who are not legally permitted to work under the PRA, persists. Reformers are pushing for the law to decriminalize sex work among migrants as well.³
- In 1980, Rhode Island inadvertently decriminalized indoor sex work in an attempt to make laws governing sex work more specific. In 2003, the loophole was noticed by lawmakers. A study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that during the six-year window between decriminalization, and recriminalization in 2009, the number of rapes reported in Rhode Island diminished by 31 percent, and the statewide

¹ Here, repressive policing refers to the criminalization of sex workers, their clients, or both.

² Lucy Platt, Pippa Grenfell, Rebecca Meiksin, et al., "Associations between sex work laws and sex workers' health: A systematic review and meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative studies," *PLOS Medicine* 15, no. 12 (December 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002680>.

³ Thomas Manch, "No Trafficking in NZ sex industry but migrant abuse is widespread, report finds," *Stuff*, April 17, 2018, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/103129627/no-trafficking-in-nz-sex-industry-but-migrant-abuse-is-widespread-report-finds>.



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incidence of gonorrhea diminished by 39 percent.⁴ Though the size of the market for sex work did grow, exploitation and poor safety outcome declined.

3. The same health and safety benefits of decriminalization are not observed under the Nordic Model (also known as the Entrapment Model) or the criminalization of the purchase, but not the sale, of sex.⁵

- Northern Ireland implemented the Entrapment Model in 2015. In 2019, The Northern Department of Justice released a report analyzing the impact of laws criminalizing clients of sex workers in Northern Ireland. Key findings included:
 - The analysis of 173,460 ads shows little effect on the supply of or demand for sex work.
 - From 2015 to 2018, there was an increase in reports related to assaults (from 3 to 13), sexual assaults (from 1 to 13), and threatening behavior (from 10 to 42).
 - Sex workers are exposed to higher rates of anti-social and nuisance behavior, and report higher levels of anxiety and unease as well as increased stigmatization.⁶

Public health professionals, anti-trafficking advocates, and human rights organizations, including the World Health Organization, UNAIDS, Amnesty International, and the American Civil Liberties Union, overwhelmingly recognize the value of decriminalization in supporting the health and safety of our communities. Please visit us at decriminalizensex.work to learn more about our work and this movement.

⁴ Max Ehrenfreund, “When Rhode Island Accidentally Legalized Prostitution, Rape Decreased Sharply,” *Washington Post*, July 14, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/07/17/when-rhode-island-accidentally-legalized-prostitution-rape-and-stis-decreased-sharply/>.

⁵ The Entrapment Model is a form of sex work decriminalization that removes criminal penalties for the sale of commercial sex, but not the purchase. Unfortunately, the Entrapment Model does not reduce the health and safety risks that workers face, and may augment them according to research.

⁶ “Assessment of Review of Operation of Article 64A of the Sexual Offences Order (Northern Ireland) 2008: Offence of Purchasing Sexual Services,” Northern Ireland Department of Justice, September 17, 2019, <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/assessment-of-impact-criminalisation-of-purchasing-sexual-services.pdf>.