



## **sex worker outreach program**



### **Sex Work and Human Trafficking in the Sacramento Valley; A Needs Assessment**

*Mary, a young street worker who has experienced both being pimped and raped, had just been arrested for carrying condoms. She spoke of being confused. She didn't even understand where she had broken the law. Mary informed the arresting officer that she was testifying for them the next day, as she had been brutally gang raped. The officer called and found out it was true, so he decided to cite and release her so she could show up as a witness for the prosecution. Her rapists are now serving 60+ years and society is safer. Mary is working on the streets to pay the fine she received for solicitation and for trying to survive. Nothing changed, except she no longer uses condoms.*

Kristen DiAngelo - Rachel Anderson  
Sex Workers Outreach Project/Safer Alternatives through Networking and Education  
SWOP/SANE



*Sacramento, California - May 2015*

## ***Abstract:***

This study examined the effects of poverty, the policing of online California adult posting venue (SFRedbook.com) and the effects it has on those engaged in survival sex and/or those who are the victims of sex trafficking in the Sacramento Region. Street workers from the Stockton Blvd strip in Sacramento, CA were interviewed in order to assess their current needs and what we as a community were doing right or wrong. We predicted an increase in street workers due to the seizing of SFRedbook.com and a high incidence of violence and predatory behavior as a result. Our study found that 18% of the 44 workers interviewed had transitioned to the street after the website shut down, and that those workers all had encountered either rape or arrest and in many cases, both. We also studied the effects of criminalization and listened to what the street workers thought would change their situation. Our findings indicated that many workers were no longer using condoms for protection, due to the use of condoms as evidence of intent to commit prostitution in the County of Sacramento. We predict an uptick in communicable diseases in our communities if these practices are continued. Our study was limited by funding, and geographic region.

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## **Definitions**

from *The Random House College Dictionary Revised Edition* 1984.

By Random House Inc. unless otherwise noted.

**a. Prostitution** *n.* 1. the act or practice of engaging in sexual intercourse for money. 2. Base or unworthy use, as of talent or ability

3. "Commit prostitution" means to engage in sexual conduct for money or other consideration, but does not include sexual conduct engaged in as a part of any stage performance, play, or other entertainment open to the public. (CA Penal Code SECTION 653.20-653.28)

**b. Brothels** *n.* 1. a house of prostitution; bordello.

2. A brothel is a place where people may come to engage in sexual activity with a prostitute, sometimes referred to as a sex worker. Technically, any premises where prostitution commonly takes place qualifies as a brothel. However, for legal or cultural reasons, establishments sometimes describe themselves as massage parlors, bars, strip clubs, body rub parlours, studios or by some other description. Sex work in a brothel is considered safer than street prostitution.<sup>[1]</sup>

**c. Abatement** *n.* 1. The act or state of abating; 2. The state of being abated;

3. Suppression or termination: *abatement of a nuisance*

**d. Street walker** *n.* a prostitute who solicits on the streets. - *street walking, noun, adj.*

**e. Sex worker** - A sex worker is a person who works in the sex industry. The term is used in reference to all those in all areas of the sex industry including those who provide direct sexual services as well as the staff of such industries.<sup>[2]</sup>

**f. Deviants** *adj.* 1. Deviating from the norm, *n.* 2. A person or thing that deviates markedly from the accepted norm

**g. War on Drugs** - An American term commonly applied to a campaign of prohibition of drugs, military aid, and military intervention, with the stated aim being to reduce the illegal drug trade<sup>[3]</sup>

**h. Sex Industry** *n.* sex trade. Can include those who engage in consensual or nonconsensual sex work.<sup>[4]</sup>

**i. Survival sex** - Persons, including homeless persons, who engage in sexual activity for

compensation or trade, in order to provide basic needs, such as, but not limited to, housing, food, water, and safety, or to avoid adverse consequences for refusal, e.g. eviction, loss of custody of children, job loss, violence, etc.

**j. Pimps** *n.* 1. Men who solicit customers for prostitutes or brothels, usually in return for a share of the proceeds; panderers; procurers. *v.i.* 2. To act as a pimp (Random House)  
3. Living or deriving support from the earnings of someone's prostitution, knowing the person is a prostitute. Pimping also includes soliciting for a prostitute or receiving compensation for soliciting a prostitute.<sup>[5]</sup>

**k. Trafficking** *v.* 1. To trade or deal in a specific commodity or service, often of an illegal nature (usually followed by *in*)  
2. Human trafficking is a modern-day form of slavery involving the illegal trade of people for exploitation or commercial gain.<sup>[6]</sup>

**l. PTSD** Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.<sup>[7]</sup>

**m. Stings** *Slang.* 1. An ostensibly illegal operation, as the buying of stolen goods or bribing of public officials, used by investigators to collect evidence of wrongdoing.  
2. In law enforcement, a sting operation is a deceptive operation designed to catch a person committing a crime. A typical sting will have a law-enforcement officer or cooperative member of the public play a role as criminal partner or potential victim and go along with a suspect's actions to gather evidence of the suspect's wrongdoing.<sup>[8]</sup>

**n. Stroll** *Slang* Area of a community, often one or two specific blocks up to miles of area, known for its street-based prostitution.

1. Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brothel>
2. Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex\\_worker](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_worker)
3. Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War\\_on\\_Drugs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_on_Drugs)
4. Personal Conversation, SWOP Sacramento, Gina Depalma
5. California Penal Code Section 266h
6. Department of Homeland Security Website, <http://www.dhs.gov/definition-human-trafficking>
7. Mayo Clinic  
<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/basics/definition/con-20022540>
8. Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sting\\_operation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sting_operation)

## Introduction

### *Discovering the Need*

Prostitution<sup>a</sup> and brothels<sup>b</sup> were legal in the state of California until 1913, when the legislature and the then Governor, Hiram Johnson, signed into law *The Red Light Abatement<sup>c</sup> Act*<sup>1</sup>. The act was intended to rid the state of both brothels and prostitution. By 1914, all brothels in the State of California were closed, except for those in the city of San Francisco. By 1915, San Francisco's brothels were closed as well. Prostitution, on the other hand, simply took another form. As each brothel closed, the women who worked there found they had no place to go. The day the brothels closed, the workers funneled out onto the streets and clients who wanted to help would pick them up. Instead of abatement, the Act simply changed the form of prostitution and street walking<sup>d</sup> was created. Along with the migration from indoor prostitution to outdoor prostitution came increased visibility, which made these workers easy targets for ridicule, discrimination, and public shaming. Many cities passed ordinances that banned single women from renting rooms on the first floor or renting any rooms at all. After all, "good women" should be married and it was the man who should secure the housing. These women who sold sex quickly became social outcasts for living without men, having sex outside marriage, and earning their own money<sup>2</sup>. Thus, began California's quest to arrest, shame, and brand sex workers<sup>e</sup> (SW) as criminals and sexual deviants<sup>f</sup>.

Today, the main objective of services and agency interactions with those engaged in the sex trade is still abolition, a notion as absurd as the War on Drugs<sup>g</sup> and its goal of eliminating drug use. Those interested in providing services to reduce the harm associated with working in the sex industry<sup>h</sup> deal with the same stigma and discrimination as the SW, making the acquisition of funding for services exceptionally difficult and often unsuccessful. In addition, there is a minimal amount of data available to inform the development of effective services for the SW population, though it is

generally understood those engaged in sex work carry a greater risk of violence and other harms, such as incarceration, exploitation, infectious diseases, etc., than the general population. One systematic, global review of 42 studies concerning the prevalence of violence against SW (1,876 articles reviewed) found the lifetime prevalence of workplace violence ranged from 45% to 75% and violence over the past year, 32% to 55%<sup>3</sup>. There is a considerable need for services to help SW reduce these harms, but information and support is limited.

When faced with similar circumstances, the community of drug users developed their own harm reduction strategies and techniques to reduce the harm associated with drug use, such as syringe access programs, safer injection facilities, overdose prevention and response programs, etc. At the same time, SW implemented many of the same strategies. One of the strategies used by SW was the migration of street work and riskier forms of prostitution to the internet<sup>4</sup>.

On the internet, SW have a barrier between them and the client. They have time to evaluate the risks and decide if the work is in their best interest. The Internet also is a tool for generating new business. To help sex workers with this type of screening and advertising, websites have arisen. One of those venues was a website named *SFRedbook* (<http://www.sfredbook.com>), also known as *MyRedbook* ([www.myredbook.com](http://www.myredbook.com)). *SFRedbook* was an online community where those working in the sex trade, including those engaged in survival sex<sup>i</sup>, could post advertisements at no cost, screen potential clients for histories of predatory behavior (at no cost), and didn't require a credit card. The bad-client database (also known as the *MyPinkBook* portion of the website) was compiled by SW over the past 15+ years. *MyPinkbook*, private and only used by SW, documented pimps<sup>j</sup>, rapists, and other violent offenders that targeted SW for abuse. Each day more than 10,000 SW posted ads on *SFRedbook* as well as screened for those who might harm them. In addition, as far as we know, *MyRedbook* was the only site of its kind to serve SW in Sacramento directly. Most such websites

serve large metropolitan areas and areas like Sacramento are considered rural. *MyRedbook* served California, with a focus on San Francisco and the Bay area, and provided a separate, easy-to-find page for Sacramento. Also, *MyRedbook* was the only site of its kind that provided a free, bad-client list that is widely known about; other sites charge extra fees for access to such a list. Therefore, *MyRedbook* was a powerful tool all sex workers in our region could use to protect themselves and their communities and decrease the harm associated with working in the sex industry.

In late June 2014, *SFRedbook* ([www.sfredbook.com](http://www.sfredbook.com)) was seized by the IRS and other agencies of the United States government and shut down<sup>5</sup>. Forty-eight hours later, Stacey Swimme (co-founder of the Sex Workers Outreach Project, USA<sup>6</sup>) and myself, (Kristen DiAngelo) participated in a *Redbook* support conference call for SW throughout California. The conference call was a difficult one as many sex workers who had used *MyRedbook* spoke of “being out of a job”, “having no way to feed their kids”, and “having nowhere to turn” as a result of the website’s demise. Three women described going back to the streets because they now had no other options. One worker, who had worked only on *MyRedbook*, revealed this would be her first time to work on the streets, said she was scared, and broke into tears. Another spoke about her early years on the streets, the danger she had faced, and said she never thought she’d have to work that way again. After the call, Stacey and I began to talk about our area, the greater Sacramento region, and the fallout from so many “newly unemployed” sex workers. For me, it was reminiscent of the displacement that happened during the implementation of the *Red Light Abatement Act* in both the early 1900’s and the resurgence in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s.

The Sex Workers Outreach Project, Sacramento ([www.swopsacramento.org](http://www.swopsacramento.org)) was formed on June 28, 2014 because of that conference call. The Sex Workers Outreach Project Sacramento (SWOPSac) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, created to provide services to SW in need in the greater Sacramento region. I, Kristen DiAngelo, became the Executive Director, Stacey Swimme, the Program Coordinator, Pearl Callahan, the



Outreach Director, James Johnson the Media Director, and SWOPSac began to grow. During the first six months, I traveled to many US cities and spoke at events such as the Toledo Human Trafficking<sup>k</sup> Conference (<http://www.prostitutionconference.com/>), The Harm Reduction Conference (<http://www.harmreduction.org>), The Freedom Network (<http://freedomnetworkusa.org/>), The Lyon-Martin Health Care clinic (<http://lyon-martin.org/>), many universities, and more. Each time I spoke, I became aware of the great lack of accurate data to describe work in the sex industry. There was a tremendous demand for information. How many women chose this line of work? How many were engaged in non-consensual sex work? How many? How much? How long? How old? There was a significant lack of information.

The conference call following the seizure of *SFRedbook* made one thing apparent. Sex work was their job and without it, they had no reliable access to even the basic necessities such as housing or food. The work paid their medical bills and kept their children in clothing and safe. Without Redbook, the workers would be forced to find another way to earn income. We wanted to determine if, as stated on the phone call, these workers would find their way onto the streets. And if so, we wanted to see what they needed and what their greatest challenges were.

I began to scour the internet looking for information and research about the sex industry and this process. There was little to none out there. The information I could find was flawed and exceedingly limited. Most of the data was unreliable due to methodological problems with data collection and the biases and stigma that influenced data analyses. Sex workers don't freely speak to researchers from the outside world due to fear and mistrust. In addition, much of the available data was collected from incarcerated women, where honesty could lead to further punishment and discrimination. Other data was collected by religious organizations or radical feminist groups who had overt biases against sex work, easily seen in the questions asked and the analyses and interpretations of the data. Additionally, I found many studies had been merged inappropriately, e.g., it was assumed conclusions from one area would apply to sex

workers anywhere; local context and culture were not taken into account. It was clear we needed better information.

If SWOP Sacramento (SWOPSac) were to address effectively the needs of SW in the region, we would need to organize the collection of accurate evidence, with which we could develop useful services. Stacey Swimme, Pearl Callahan, and I began by contacting Hurley Merical, Executive Director, Oak Park Outreach Services (OPOS), and Rachel Anderson, Executive Director, Safer Alternatives thru Networking & Education (SANE). OPOS and SANE are local organizations providing harm reduction-based services and advocacy for marginalized communities, focusing on drug users, HIV-infected persons, those involved with criminal justice, homeless and marginally-housed individuals, and sex workers. OPOS and SANE are experienced in conducting scientifically valid research with, and useful to, marginalized and stigmatized communities. An important tenet of OPOS and SANE's activities is, "nothing about us, without us". In other words, members of the "target population(s)", are a significant part of all aspects of every activity, including research. This dovetailed perfectly with SWOPSac's position that SW would not feel as stigmatized, as looked-down-upon or pejoratively judged if they were interviewed by peers. Peer interviewers, who were experienced researchers and certified in human research subjects' protection, would be able to create an environment in which participants could speak freely and safely. SWOPSac, OPOS, and SANE formed a collaborative dedicated to gathering relevant information and developing services, including advocacy for policy change, for and with SW, that will help SW decrease the harm associated with sex work and take steps toward positive change.

The first step was to begin research on the questions: 1) What do SW in this area need and want?; 2) What local resources are available for SW?; and 3) What currently unavailable resources do SW want to utilize? All three agencies participated in all aspects of the research, although SWOPSac led the design of the interview content and conducted the interviews; SANE led the development of the data collection

methodology; and OPOS led the design of the study protocol. SWOPSac, OPOS, and SANE collaborated on the production of this report. The goals of this project were to: 1) Ask local SW what they needed and wanted; 2) Assess the challenges and barriers SW face in fulfilling their needs; and 3) To facilitate self empowerment of SW and their communities. We wanted to help SW find and exercise their voice.

## **Methodology**

Former sex workers (SW), street outreach workers (SOW) and sex worker advocates (SWA) recruited participants from areas in Sacramento County known to have high levels of sex work activity. The sex workers, street outreach workers and sex worker advocates were experienced in conducting research and previously had been certified by Institutional Review Boards in human subject protections for research participation. Convenience sampling and snowball recruitment strategies were used, with some effort made to gather as random a sample as possible (e.g. asking every third contact to participate). Surveys were administered by SW, took 30-60 minutes to complete, and participants were compensated \$20 for their time and expertise. To be eligible for the study, interviewees had to meet three requirements: 1) engaged in local sex work activities in the past six months; 2) resided and engaged in street work in the greater Sacramento region; and 3) were at least 18 years of age. Verbal consent scripts were read to potential participants and those who agreed to participate gave verbal consent. No identifying information was collected on participants; only “street names” or “working names” were used. Simple frequency analyses were conducted on the data from completed surveys. Crisis intervention specialists were available at the time of the interviews to assist participants with difficult emotions that might arise from addressing troublesome and/or painful issues.

## *Limitations*

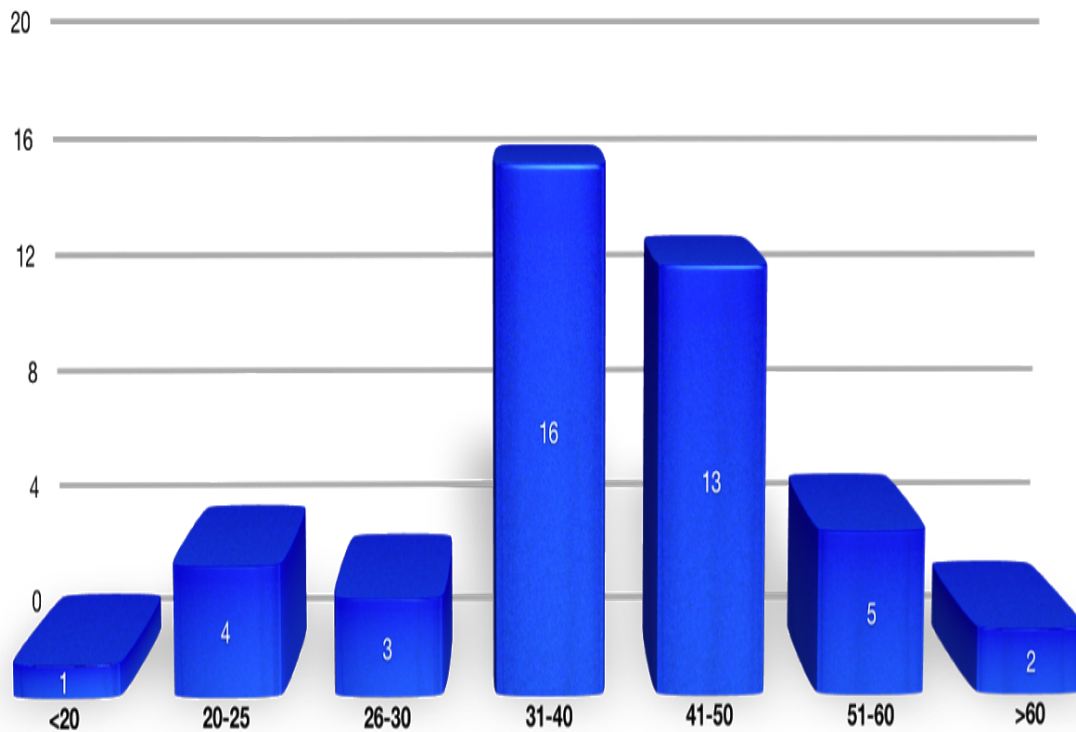
Randomization attempts were limited by the desire to maintain ongoing relationships with potential participants, e.g. several participants referred quite a few other SW to the study (snowball recruitment) and not wanting to deny participation to SW who had made a significant effort to get to us, resulted in a larger number of participants from South Sacramento than from other areas of the county. Minimal funding was another limitation thus capping the number of interviewees and the time available for the work.

## **Results - Quantitative data**

### **Demographics**

#### *Age*

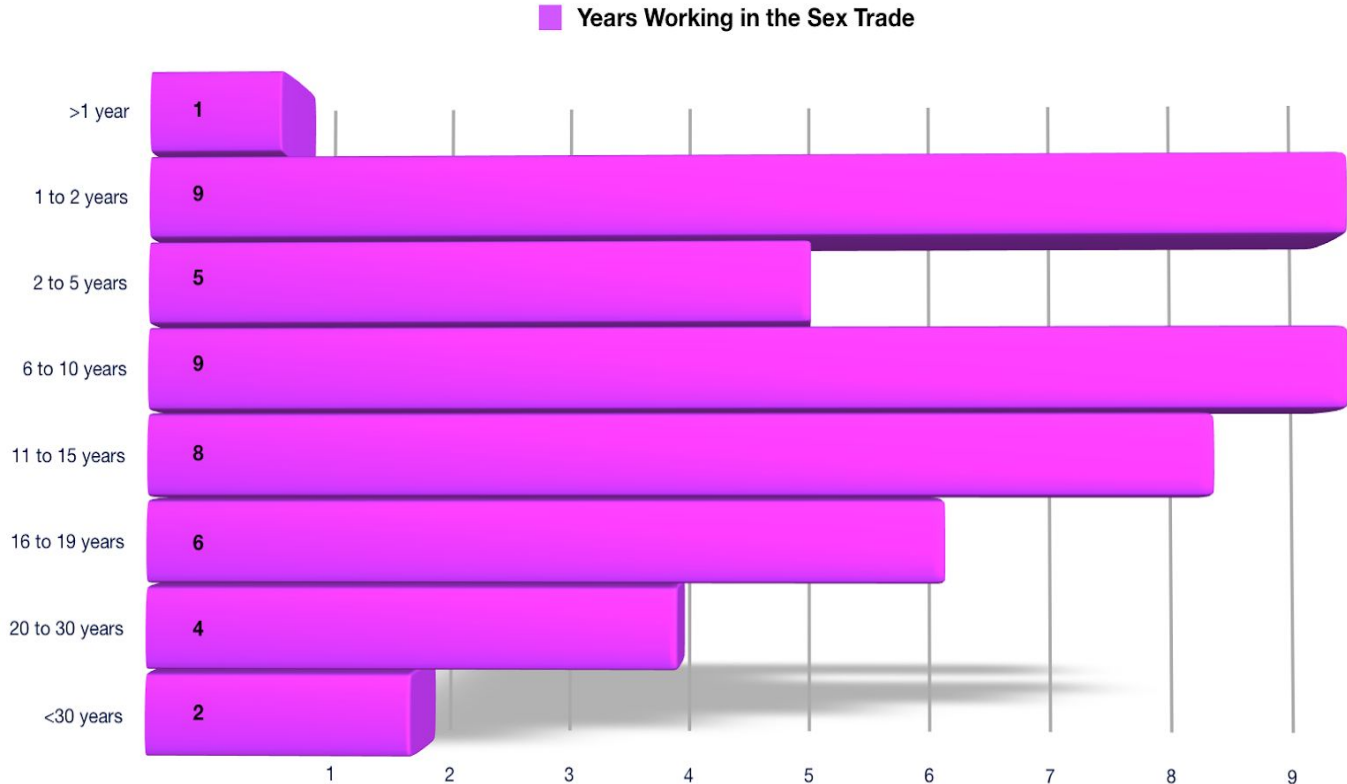
Forty-four participants completed surveys, 96% (42) of whom reported female as their gender at birth. Two participants (5%) reported male as their birth gender and no participants identified as transgender. The average age of participants was 40 years and 36% (16) of participants were 31-40 years of age. Just under a third of participants (30%, 13) were between 41 and 50 years; 11% (5) were younger than 26 years (one under 20, four between 20 and 25), Three of the interviewees were 26 to 30, eight were between 51 and 60, and two (5%) participants were over 60 years of age. Participants reported their ethnic heritage as: 84% (37) African American, 14% (6) Caucasian, 7% (3) Latina, 5% (2) each Native American and Other, and 9% (4) reported more than one ethnic heritage.



*Age of the Participants*

### *Sex Industry*

Three quarters of participants reported they entered the sex-work trade before their 18th birthday. One woman reported recent entrance to the industry with six months as a SW. Two (5%) women reported they had been SW for more than 30 years; one reporting 36 years of sex work and the other 44 years. The number of years the rest of the participants reported they had worked in the sex industry was: 20-30 years for four (9%) participants; 16-20 years for six (14%); 11-15 years for 8 (18%); 6-10 years for 9 (20%); 3-5 years for 5 (11%); and 1-2 years for 9 (20%). The types of adult industry jobs participants reported engaging in at some time in their career were: escort service (10, 23%), internet- based dates (9, 20%), brothel (2, 5%), and webcam services (2, 5%). Eight (18%) internet based participants identified as being displaced from the



internet to the streets after losing *SFRedbook* as a posting source. Five (11%) participants

reported *Other* types of sex industry jobs such as exotic dancer, newspaper-based dates, and houseboy and one participant reported keeping her own personal book of dates developed over the years (some respondents reported working in several types of jobs).

However, the type of job most participants (40, 91%) reported they had recently engaged in was street work, probably the most dangerous type of sex industry work.

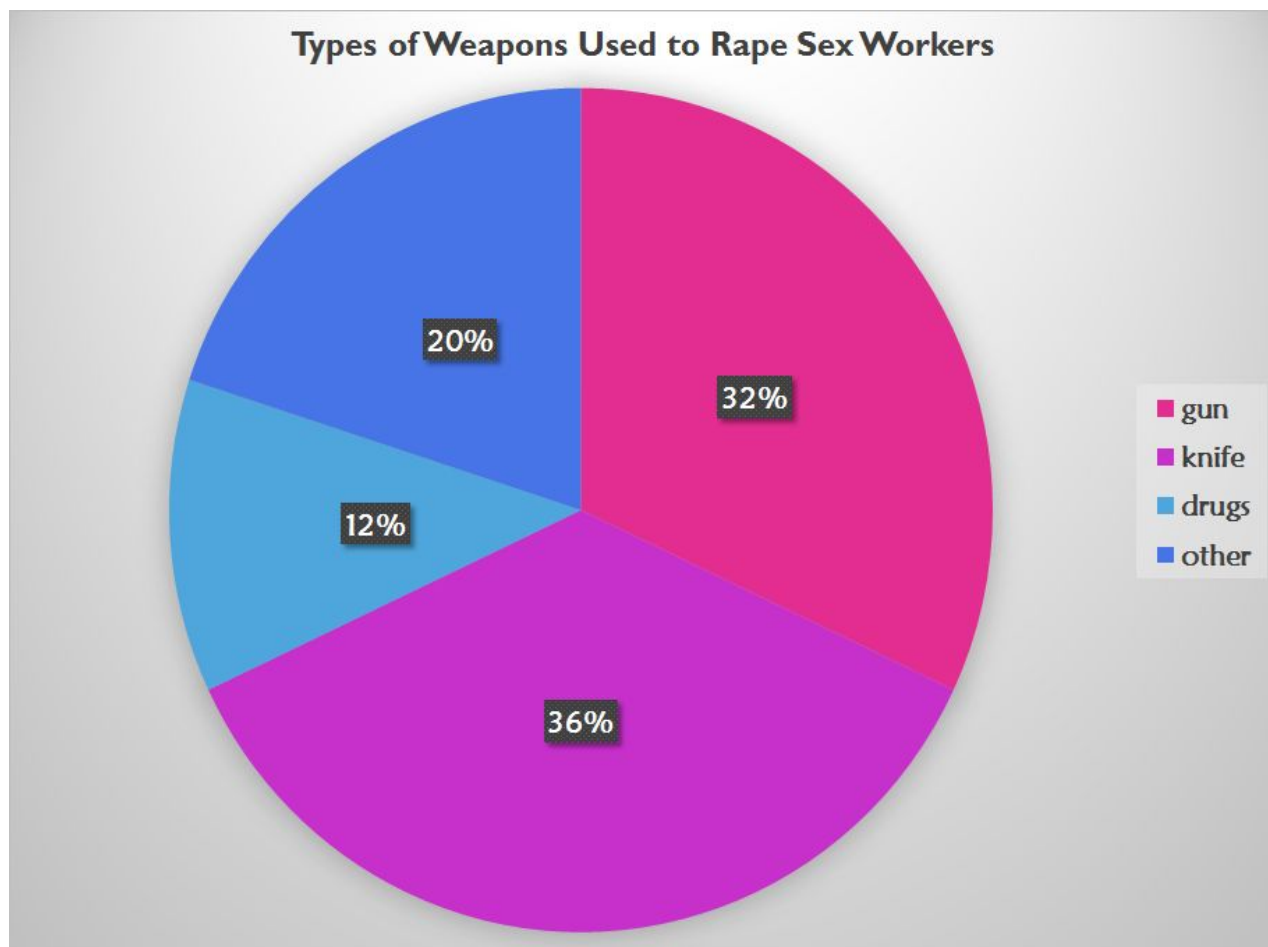
Many SW reported not using condoms for fear of arrest and, sometimes, to receive a higher fee. The increase in the number of sex workers working the streets due to the loss of *MyRedbook*, along with the same number of available clients, leads to more competition. Condom use becomes negotiable, so many SW had numerous sexual partners daily with no protection, which leads to increases in sexually transmitted

infections, including, we suspect, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, the virus that causes AIDS). Currently, Sacramento County has the 4th highest rate of chlamydia and gonorrhea among all counties in California and is experiencing a rise in syphilis incidence<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, there is a critical need to research alternative disease prevention strategies, such as Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) with Truvada<sup>8</sup>. Additionally, we see an immediate need to examine arrest policies and/or procedures and the use of condoms as evidence as many SW reported regular arrests and detentions because they were caught with more than two condoms in their possession. Apparently, possession of more than two condoms is considered evidence of intent to engage in prostitution. Such a policy or practice is a bad public health practice, we are certain the public health consequences far outweigh any law enforcement benefit.

### *Danger*

Our research supports the growing body of evidence showing SW around the world carry a high burden of violence and that there are large gaps in the epidemiological data needed to respond effectively to the factors that shape this violence. Participants in this study reported suffering physical, sexual, and emotional violence and trauma and loss of freedom from law enforcement officers, pimps, and predatory clients. Many of the SW spoke of violence and trauma in a resigned manner, as if it were an inevitable part of life. When asked about coping mechanisms for rape and/or other physical violence we got answers like “you just take a shower and get back out there”. The general consensus was the workers believed most other people would think it was their own fault. We found where other rape victims were treated as a victim, for sex workers, society seemed still to identify the SW as the problem. Our findings indicated there was a great need for trauma informed mental health care and education geared toward non-victim blaming.

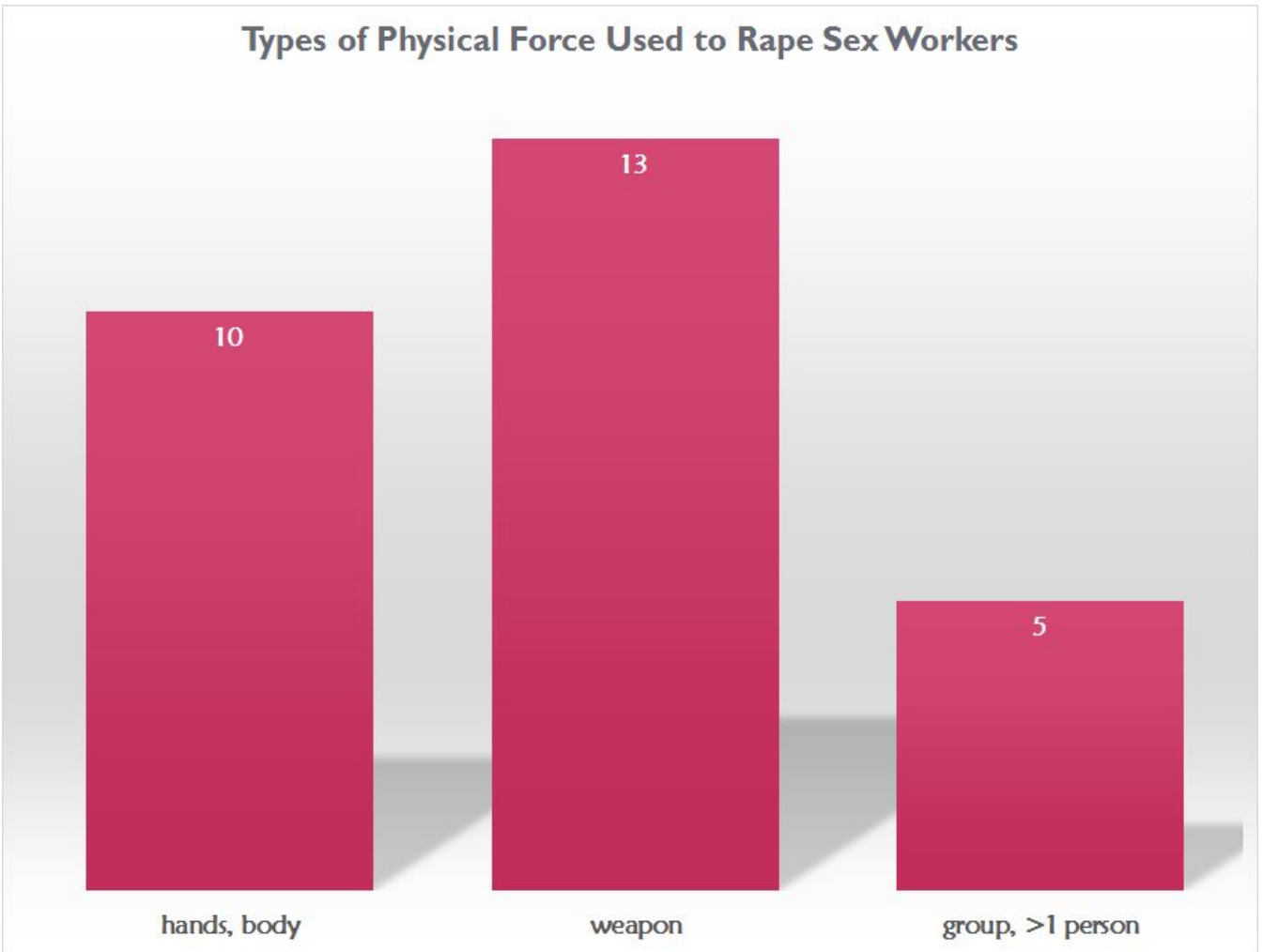
Almost half (48%, 21) of the participants reported they had been forced to engage in sex work against their will. Additionally, 59% (26) reported they had experience being



raped at least once. Of the rape victims, 62% (16) reported physical force was used to subdue them and 38% (10) reported psychological force was used. The types of physical force used were: hands, body (10/16, 63%), a weapon (13, 81%), and more than one person or group force (5, 31%). When use of a weapon was reported, the weapons used were: gun (8/13, 62%), knife (9, 69%), drugs (3, 23%), and Other (2, 15%), such as a stun gun or handcuffs. Many of the workers reported a number of rapes/attacks and fell in several of the categories.

More than half the women (55%, 24) reported they had been beaten at least once. Just under one third (27%, 12) of the participants reported they had been harmed by a law enforcement officer with several women reporting they had been raped by an officer of the law at least once. The same number of participants (12, 27%) stated they were





afraid of law enforcement officers. When asked if they would report a crime to law enforcement, slightly more than half (55%, 24) said “Yes”, 32% (14) said “No”, and 11% (5) said “Maybe”.

#### **Results - Qualitative data**

The last section of the survey was three open-ended questions concerning: 1) reasons for engaging in sex work; 2) what types of services would be valuable for the SW; and 3) if there was anything else the participants wanted to tell us.

### *Reasons for doing the work*

Participants were asked why they worked in the sex industry. The most common reason given was “for the money”. Working in the sex industry is a job and people do it for the same reasons other people do their jobs: to keep a roof over their head, put food on the table, take care of their children, etc. Like the rest of us, most SW work to meet the needs of living. However, there are other reasons people engage in sex work. Often, SW need to support a drug habit. Many SW like the autonomy, the ability to control their working conditions, conditions like the time, place, and frequency of work. We found the control of time especially important to those who suffered from mental illness. They identified as needing to work when they were able to, and being able to work a consistent job was often not within their capabilities. Some survey participants reported they like the work. Nevertheless, most of the SW stated they wanted to get out and/or were trying to get out of the business. Many of the interviewees were victimized by pimps and forced to work at one point or another, but this seemed to have little correlation with entering the industry. Instead many identified lack of protection under the law and an inability to seek help from law enforcement as a contributing factor to their victimization by pimps. Many interviewees reported criminal records and the stigma of sex work prevented them from obtaining positions in other lines of work, especially positions which provide comparable compensation.

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#### In their own words

- ❖ “On my own time.”
- ❖ “Used to like it, not now. Means to an end while I look for something else”
- ❖ “I’m young & it’s easy, fast money, but I’m trying to get out”
- ❖ “I have a son. It’s hard to get a job and welfare isn’t enough”
- ❖ “To keep food in my kid’s mouth; AFDC is garbage”
- ❖ “It’s the only income I get”
- ❖ “To survive. I’m homeless & it seems no matter what, sex sells”
- ❖ “Dropped out of school and had a rough life style”

- ❖ “The first time I was pimped - my son’s father got paid”
- ❖ “Everyone I love has turned against me. I have no one”
- ❖ “There is no one to help me on the streets” “I don’t want to ask nobody for nothing” “I like it”
- ❖ “No other choice - survival”
- ❖ “It started as a drug habit. Then because of necessity and because of a criminal record. I had to support 2 kids”
- ❖ “Quick money. It’s something you’d be doing anyway. But it has changed me. I don’t want to have sex for fun anymore”
- ❖ “I started as a young girl and after that, I wasn’t giving it away”
- ❖ “Initially a good supplement while in school, but it became a necessity. There’s an aspect of it I like”
- ❖ “I was a foreigner, from East Africa, Tanzania. I came here when I was 15 years old to go to school. My uncle brought me here who was my abuser. He was sexually molesting me. When I begged my father not to send me, but was too afraid to tell him, because my uncle told me he would kill my siblings if I did. When I got to America, I ran away. I am doing this work to support myself.”

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### *Valuable Resources*

All survey participants were aware of the scarcity of services specifically for SW. In fact,



many participants told us they had learned to hide the fact they worked in the sex industry when seeking services because if service providers were aware of their work, services might be denied (especially services related to domestic violence). The stigma surrounding sex work is pervasive and one of the greatest barriers to SW

receiving useful services. However, all of the participants spoke of an enormous need for services for SW and many recognized these services would not come about without significant public education to reduce the stigma of working in the sex industry. Some of the service needs identified by SW were education (assistance in obtaining high school diplomas, GEDs, college entrance, etc.), legal concerns (identification and/or citizenship papers, driving records and licenses, criminal records, divorce, child custody, etc.), and employment alternatives and training. One woman stated a Sex Worker's Union was needed as "people respond better when they hear union". Medical and mental health care needs were mentioned frequently, including the need for assistance with contraception and other family planning issues as well as the need for assistance with obtaining regular access to prescribed mental health medications. Counseling was the most frequently mentioned service need in this category. Overall though, the most commonly identified service need was the need for a *safe space*, from housing for the homeless/marginally housed to "dreaming of building a big community of apartments where women can learn and heal". A community of their own without judgement was an often spoken of notion. The desire for a place where SW could be safe, even for a few hours, from violence and/or pejorative, disparaging judgements was a pervasive theme, heard from almost every participant.

What SW said:

- ★ 'I had a good night recently when I went to a medical clinic & snuck into a room & slept for the night'
- ★ 'A drop-in center for us to relax & if homeless, to shower'
- ★ 'A safe haven when your feet are hurting & it's raining'
- ★ 'A safe place with no judgements'
- ★ 'We need a place for women to stay, even if it's overnight, **without being used**'
- ★ 'Homes for women to go to when they get out of jail'
- ★ 'I would like to reunite with my child. I would like rights & not to be belittled'
- ★ 'We need a better place for girls. We need it safer & help with clothes & medicine.'

## *Wanted us to know*

The surveys' last question asked participants if there was anything they wanted to tell us. For the most part, responses to the last question generally fell into one or more of three general categories. The three categories and their descriptions are: 1) *Respect* - the recognition of and desire for a reduction of the stigma associated with working in the sex industry; 2) *About me, services* - an expansion of the details about the interviewees and/or specific services needed/wanted by SW; and 3) *Hopes for the Future* - assistance will help SW help themselves, will help them improve the conditions of their lives.

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### *Respect*

"Don't judge me for what I do because I'm just like you, my job is just different. My job is hard, very hard. Don't judge me, I'm not harming you."

"It's like we have no rights; we are just objects. I am still a human."

"That no matter what you do you're someone and don't let people's outlook on you make you feel like you're nothing. Stay you and love yourself."

"That I'm a good person, just sometimes things happen and you have to result to this."

"It's the BS and the confusion that is screwing everything up. I don't bother nobody. I don't rob. I don't steal. All I have to say is any female in this game is pray."

"Open mind and outreach to everyone. Not everyone does things for the same reasons or makes the same type of choices."

"Don't always judge a book by its cover. We are honest people out here just doing the best we can do. We're still human."

"If they just realized that all isn't as fortunate as they are. If they could just stop arresting us for trying to eat and keep a roof over our head. But I understand they have a job to do."  
A lot of people don't understand us or why we're doing this. Be more understanding. People don't realize how hard it is to do this."

"I don't really give a fuck about what anyone thinks. If people would look at us as human beings and understand us. If people would be on our side then we could get help without feeling scared. But right now men can prey on us & get away with it. I just don't see why it is so illegal. They should make it less illegal so we don't have to run & hide. So we don't get hurt."

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### About me, services

"When you don't have a stable place and if you don't have anything you have to go out & get it. Just listen to us... I'd like to help someone myself. I have two kids. It's the only way I can survive."

"I have a 9-year old autistic son and I have depression."

"Need more daycare, child care, and homeless shelter. We need clubs for kids and jobs."

"I know girls have been hurt. People have to do what you have to do. Police should be there to protect you."

"I have PTSD, depression, and I'm bipolar. They changed my medical provider and the new one has no clue how to help me."

"Once I ate food in a store and walked out so they would lock me up and I could eat. I was so tired."

"There are stings out here & you don't need to be caught (committing a crime), you just need to be stopped. *[stopped = soliciting]* My cases were in Oakland & I've been arrested 5 times." *[19 years old & many of her cases occurred before she was 18]*

"We get charged, not helped. I came here to find my daughter. I need school opportunities & jobs & housing."

"My husband is a police sergeant."

We need counseling, children's services. A lot of us have kids & no child care, so we can't work full time."

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### Hopes for the future

"Please help us somehow to be united."

"They should know that if we could get funding we need to uphold or build spirits up. .... With funding we can make a change by just letting the next girl know we can make changes and offer safety."

“To teach women to do office work, farming would be good too. People need access to computers.”

”We need help for everyone”

“Keep trying and thank you.”

## **Conclusions**

As we interviewed, the needs became clear. We were told by many how their biggest desire was to have a place where they could sleep, even if only for a few hours. A place where they didn't have to worry about being raped, robbed or murdered once they closed their eyes. Others described how they foraged for scraps of clothing in alleys to use for feminine hygiene products, and most expressed that one of the things they wanted most was a hot shower or to wash their clothes. They discussed having no access to bathroom facilities or fresh water. We had requests for high school diplomas and job training. Many identified as being mentally ill and having no access to their medications or health care provider. They discussed their pimps and how they felt safer with them than with law enforcement. We were told about their inability to report crimes and how many felt anti-violence laws didn't apply to them. With us, they discussed the details of their lives.

The most pressing need we discovered was the need for a safe place. Many workers described the fear they faced daily. We were told of their nights in alleys or having to pay a pimp just to sleep on a couch for a few hours. Workers described going into abandoned houses and placing paper and other things near doors and windows so that they could hear if someone was coming in. Many had been raped in the night while trying to sleep. The idea of having a place where they could stop in and not be afraid, for even an hour or two, seemed to resonate throughout our interviews.

The sex workers interviewed had diverse experiences with law enforcement (LE), but it is still unclear if many would report even the most heinous crimes against them. Those who had been harmed by LE had repeated those stories to many, magnifying the fear amongst workers on the street. One woman, who we'll call Hope, stated she was not afraid of the police and would report a crime, also spoke of a graphic ordeal where she was held duck taped in a closet for four days. The abuser would come home from work each day, take her out of the closet, give her enough food to survive, and then rape her. He would then re-bind her and put her back in the closet. On the fourth day, after going through the same routine, he brought out a bottle of vinegar, and had her wash her mouth out with it. He then turned her upside down and poured it inside of her. He

took her to a remote dumpster and dumped her there. When she came out, he was gone. She made her way back to the street, only to find, he had been raping many of the women. She wasn't the only one, and in her eyes, this was not bad enough to report. There needs to be bridge building between LE and the SW community in order to rid our communities of predators. Training and education is needed to bridge the gap and build trust. In order to do this, more investigation is needed on how to best achieve that goal.

Policies which are counter productive to harm reduction need to be reviewed. Many of our interviewees reported they no longer carry condoms. Mary, a young street worker who has experienced both being pimped and raped, had just been arrested for carrying condoms. She spoke of being confused. She didn't even understand where she had broken the law. Mary informed the arresting officer that she was testifying for them the next day, as she had been brutally gang raped. The officer called and found out it was true, so he decided to cite and release her so she could show up as a witness for the prosecution. Her rapists are now serving 60+ years and society is safer. Mary is working on the streets to pay the fine she received for solicitation and for trying to survive. Nothing changed, except she no longer uses condoms. We believe policies like these are harmful to our communities and alternative actions need to be investigated and considered.

The last question in our interviews was, "Is there anything that you would want people to hear?" Many asked for understanding and for those on the outside to not hate them. They were very aware of the stigma and stereotyping that surrounded their profession. I interviewed a young woman I'll call Beth. She has been on the street since she was 12 years old, after she and her mother had been evicted from their home. She had not finished high school and had chosen sex work, over foster care, due to the exploitation she experienced while in the foster care system. She is now 19 years old and resigned to the fact she will never work in any other industry. I asked her why? Beth has already caught five prostitution cases. She has been raped numerous times, suffers from PTSD, is a mother of 2, and is working so her children can have a better life than she's had. At 19, she understands her arrest record will never allow her to transition into the "real" world. Despite our efforts to understand more about the trauma induced by stigma and stereotyping, more questions were raised by this survey than were answered. There is a great need for more information about the factors that contribute to this stigma, how the stigma impacts those involved in the sex trade, and how to change it.

We discovered many of the workers have a desire for resources to help them help themselves with steps toward positive change, but have no access to those resources.



The most requested service was mental health counseling, followed by transitional job services and education. Most of the workers were homeless and reported engaging in survival sex. The need for freshwater, toilets, feminine hygiene products, basic hygiene products, safe housing, showers, access to washers and dryers, and medical care were their greatest needs. To understand how financial support should be directed and how to deliver these resources, more research will need to be done.

Although many of the workers reported being pimped or trafficked, when asked why they didn't leave their exploiter, many of them said there was no where to go. When we looked, we found very few resources for SW. A worker, that we'll Gina and had participated in our interviews, called for help several days after we interviewed her. That call lead to a multi-day ordeal of helping to free her from a client who had kidnapped her. When she returned, she was told her pimp was looking for her. Gina had been held against her will for four days, yet still she owed him four days pay; she didn't have it and called us instead. We contacted a local domestic violence shelter with little luck. It took us nine days to find a place for Gina, and when we did, it was in Orange County, over 300 miles away, as there were no beds available in the Sacramento area. Trauma informed services, such as safe houses and advocacy services, and provider education for law enforcement, social services, and health care providers are urgently needed in Northern California.

Eight (18%) of our interviewees had relocated from the internet to the street as a direct result of the closure of *MyRedbook*. Each person who had transitioned to street work from online work identified it as their next best option. Some stated the fear of law enforcement officers and internet stings<sup>m</sup> was bigger than the fear of being hurt on the streets. None of the respondents considered getting a different job due to their marginalized circumstances, which include criminal records. The idea of worker migration due to policing of certain parts of the industry needs to be examined further. Our data support the notion that each time a venue closes, for those who are marginalized, prices drop and SW engage in riskier behavior. A year ago, the average price paid per client was \$100. Today, many claim to take as little as \$20 or \$40 due to the increase of workers on the stroll<sup>n</sup>. A year ago, many SW would not have considered working without condoms, now they engage in unprotected sex, sometimes frequently. The closure of work websites, which provided SW with some protection and control over their work, caused a migration of workers rather than an abolition of them.

We noted the SW who participated in our project had a profound bond, a familial type structure which others usually form through bloodline or marriage. They were leery of outsiders and relied on each other heavily for safety, friendship, and survival. The SW

often separated their existence from that of non-SW, as if there was an impenetrable barrier between the two worlds which helped keep SW safe. Upon completion of this project, we too saw the divide.

SWOP, SANE, and OPOS will continue to work toward reducing barriers between SW and the resources and support they need to work for positive change.

## References

<sup>1</sup> California Red Light Abatement Act. April 7, 1914.

[www.ballotopedia.org/California\\_Proposition\\_4\\_the\\_Red\\_Light\\_Abatement\\_Act\\_\(1914\)](http://www.ballotopedia.org/California_Proposition_4_the_Red_Light_Abatement_Act_(1914))

<sup>2</sup> Grant MG. When Prostitution Wasn't a Crime: The Fascinating History of Sex Work in America. Alternet: News & Politics. February 18, 2013.

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<sup>3</sup> Deering KN, Amin A, Shoveller J, Nesbitt A, Garcia-Moreno C, Duff P, Argento E, Shannon K. A systematic review of the correlates of violence against sex workers. Am J Public Health. 2014 May;104(5):e42-54. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2014.301909. Epub 2014 Mar 13.

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication. SWOP Sacramento, 2015

<sup>5</sup> FBI closes *MyRedbook*:

[www.fbi.gov/news/news\\_blog/operators-of-myredbook.com-website-arrested-on-prostitution-and-money-laundering-charges](http://www.fbi.gov/news/news_blog/operators-of-myredbook.com-website-arrested-on-prostitution-and-money-laundering-charges)

<sup>6</sup> Started on Aug. 13th, 2003; a national social justice network dedicated to the fundamental human rights of sex workers and their communities, focusing on ending violence and stigma through education and advocacy. SWOP USA, at its most basic, is an anti-violence campaign. As a multi-state network of sex workers and advocates, SWOP USA address locally and nationally the violence that sex workers experience because of their criminal status.

[www.swopusa.org](http://www.swopusa.org)

<sup>7</sup> California Department of Public Health. [www.cdph.ca.gov/data/statistics/Pages/STDLHJData.aspx](http://www.cdph.ca.gov/data/statistics/Pages/STDLHJData.aspx)

<sup>8</sup> Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP). [www.cdc.gov/hiv/prevention/research/prep/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/prevention/research/prep/index.html)

