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Prostitute Survey Cites Cop Abuses

Rape, assault, extortion by police detailed

Rape, physical assault, sexual extortion and harassment were some of the abuses street prostitutes in the city said they suffered at the hands of police officers, according to a survey of sex workers by a public interest group.

The prostitutes told the survey interviewers that the negative interactions they experienced with police, which included officers stalking them or paying for sex, prompted them to dress conservatively and change their work habits to avoid catching the attention of law enforcement.

The survey, "Revolving Door," conducted in recent months by the Urban Justice Center of Manhattan, also found that the prostitutes reported not being helped by so-called mandated services, which are offered after they were arrested. Half of the prostitutes interviewed — 30 in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx — said they were never even offered services, such as health counseling or community service sentences.

Newsday faxed a few paragraphs about alleged police misconduct contained in the report to the Police Department Friday. But a department spokesman said officials would wait for the release of the full report today before commenting.

Not all of the interaction the prostitutes had with police was negative, the report stated. About 25 percent said they had good responses from police, particularly in situations of domestic violence or when customers abused them.

But for the most part, the report painted a picture of a grim life for street prostitutes. Their existence is plagued by homelessness, drug dependency and poverty, according to the 87-page document.

Most reported that they worked to support their drug habits, which made them unable to meet the demands of regular, structured employment. Even life in a brothel was too demanding, the report said.

The sample included mostly prostitutes who had come in contact with social service providers and was composed of 28 women, three of whom were transgender women, and two men. The subjects included 11 Latinos, 10 blacks, five whites, three Asians and one person who did not want to answer questions about race or ethnicity. They ranged in age from 19 to 53 years old, and 21 had children.

Twenty-six of the prostitutes reported having daily or frequent "run-ins" with police that included not only arrests or issuing of summonses but sexual situations, violence and threat of violence.

Nine of the prostitutes said they had been threatened with violence while eight reported experiencing violence from police officers. Sexual harassment included inappropriate touching, extortion of sex — sometimes in exchange for not making an arrest — and one instance of rape, the report stated.

Juhu Thukral, an attorney with the Urban Justice Center who worked on the survey, said that only one of the prostitutes reported complaining to the police Internal Affairs Bureau about police conduct — an alleged beating — about seven years ago.

In an interview, Thukral said there must be more concerted efforts by the social service system to provide meaningful services to street prostitutes. The report recommended that the city reconsider its policy of targeting prostitutes during street sweeps. Transitional shelters, similar to domestic violence shelters, should be created, the report stated.

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