

Perils of city sex trade cited

A two-thirds majority of so-called indoor sex workers say they are motivated by economic necessity, and many say they have been abused

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When suspected madams Julie Moya and Jenny Paulino were arrested recently, investigators said their separate prostitution rings pulled in millions of dollars a year.

But the life of prostitutes and other sex workers in New York City isn't all big paydays and bling bling. Instead, it is a precarious and dangerous mix of marginalization and violence that includes forced sex with police, according to a new study to be released today.

More than two-thirds of the indoor sex workers interviewed by researchers at the nonprofit Urban Justice Center said they got involved in their jobs, which include prostitution, stripping, escort work and acting as dominatrices, because they were unable to earn a living wage at other jobs.

Close to 40 percent of the 52 people surveyed for the report, "Behind Closed Doors: An Analysis of Indoor Sex Work in New York City," said they couldn't meet their financial goals even from sex work.

"We find many are part of the working poor," said Juhu Thukral, an attorney and one of the study's authors. "They are really people trying to make a living wage and get money and find a way to save it and use in a way that doesn't have anything to do with sex work."

Thukral and co-author Melissa Ditmore, who had done a similar study about street sex workers in 2003, said in the report that while indoor sex jobs were more stable, workers still experienced violence.

Nearly half of the respondents said they had been forced by a client to do something they didn't want to do, while almost a third said they had been robbed by clients. Indoor sex work is invisible, isolating and lacks peer support, the report stated.

Sixteen percent of those interviewed said they had sex with police officers, either consensual or coerced, as a way to avoid arrest. Fourteen percent cited police violence.

Alexandra Murphy, another author of the study who is affiliated with the Center for Urban Research and Policy at Columbia University, said the findings about police were greater than expected.

Paul J. Browne, a department spokesman, assailed the report.

"The authors of this report, along with Newsday, appear to have confused salaciousness with credibility," he said.

The study said that while the sample of the mostly women sex workers was not large, it was varied in terms of the type of jobs and experiences.

Sixty percent of those surveyed were U.S. born, while 40 percent were immigrants. Just over 20 percent of the immigrants claimed to have been trafficked into the United States, a figure the researchers said clearly indicated that the majority of immigrant prostitutes surveyed were in sex work as a matter of choice.

The majority of respondents were from 20 to 39 years old. Those of European ancestry made up the largest group, at 44 percent, Latinos 27 percent, blacks 15 percent, Asians 12 percent and 2 percent reported mixed race.

One of the escorts identified as Louise in the survey told Newsday she started sex work in college because it paid more than flipping hamburgers and took less time and energy. "Sex work is something you can do with far less hours if you have other things to do," said Louise, who works as an escort to supplement her office job.

The survey recommends that police be trained to deal with violence against sex workers and that social service organizations develop peer support programs for sex workers.

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