

Health Inequity among Sex Workers in the US

Team members: Reet Kapur, Amy Zheng, Kevin Mao, Meenal Khandaker, Niyah Howard, Tenzin Rinkartsang, Tracy Law, Yunika Magar

Abstract

Decriminalizing sex work means ceasing to treat sex work as a criminal offense. Once decriminalized, sex workers are rightfully given legal status, wherein they are allowed to operate under the same legal rights as other occupations, enjoy the same occupational health and safety standards, and be subject to the same tax, zoning, and employment laws as the general population. In this report, we examine previous literature on the effects criminalization has had on the physical and mental health of sex workers in the United States.

Our findings revealed important health issues that are highly prevalent in the sex worker community, including but not limited to HIV, police violence, stigma, lack of resources and agency, and the disproportionate burden of all the above on gender non-conforming/trans/binary sex workers. We observed that these health effects are also amplified because sex workers often face discrimination from healthcare professionals, effectively shutting the door to regular healthcare access for many. Considering these findings and drawing on examples of countries such as Australia and the Netherlands, where sex work is partially decriminalized, we also propose several policy actions in education, legislation, and community mobilization that may carve a path to eventually decriminalizing sex work on a state and federal level in the United States.