

Policing Must Change to End Violence Against Sex Workers: Disbanding NYPD Vice is a Critical First Step

This blog post from the Sex Workers Project (SWP) of the Urban Justice Center is part of the 2021 Leading to Violence Campaign. This campaign highlights the critical issues that must be addressed to realize the goals of the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers, recognized each year on December 17. SWP is writing on the topic of policing and the ways in which it harms and leads to systemic and interpersonal violence at the hands of law enforcement and the criminal legal system. At present, SWP is involved in and leading several initiatives that focus on this critical issue including the campaign to disband NYPD Vice described in this blog post as well as joint research projects with Yale University's Global Health Justice Partnership studying models of accountability for police harassment and violence against sex workers and mapping District Attorneys' policies around non-prosecution of sex workers and clients.

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Sex workers – and people profiled as sex workers who are frequently cis and trans women of color – have long been the target of violent and harassing mistreatment by the police. NYPD's Vice Squad has always been among the worst offenders. Even their own statistics show that they target communities of color and TGNC (Trans and Gender Nonconforming) people at higher rates than other divisions of the NYPD, communities that, due in part to racial and gender discrimination, are disproportionately represented in the sex trades. Despite this history of violent and harmful tactics – or perhaps because of it – the NYPD Vice Squad recently rebranded themselves as “Anti-Trafficking Vice,” or ATV Unit.

It's implausible that sex workers' most persistent persecutors could, with a simple name change, become sensitive protectors of people experiencing trafficking. Not least of all, because in the rebranding it further demonstrates that NYPD Vice is guided by the harmful myth that people choosing to do sex work and people experiencing trafficking in the sex trades are distinct groups. The former to be arrested and saddled with devastating criminal convictions and the latter to be arrested as a means to be “rescued”. SWP and others who approach anti-trafficking from a position of defending the human rights of all people involved in the sex trades, recognize that it is far more complicated and that individual experiences in the sex trades can range from fully consensual to fully coercive and everywhere in between. But no matter what brought someone to do sex work or be engaged in the sex trades in some capacity, defending and protecting their dignity and human rights is paramount.

The track record of NYPD Vice, whether they call themselves that or the Anti-Trafficking Vice, disqualifies them from continuing to exist. The Vice unit must be disbanded immediately and SWP is working to ensure that happens. Part of SWP's efforts in realizing the end of NYPD Vice, is to work closely with community members to track the behavior of law enforcement in this unit, including since its rebranding. What we are hearing is that Vice continues to employ violent tactics and their abusive behavior persists. Over approximately the last four years, service providers to people involved in the sex trades, including trafficking survivors, have voiced concern with ATV acting in a manner that was coercive, harassing, not trauma-informed, and fundamentally in denial of peoples' human right to self-determination.

As a national organization, SWP engages multiple forms of advocacy to end police violence against sex workers. In discussions with policymakers in NYC, we emphasize that:

- Even though ATV has reduced its sex work-related arrests and is claiming to refocus on trafficking, it maintains officers who are violent and coercive toward people involved in the sex trades whether it be by choice, circumstance, or coercion.
- ATV has been flat funded for the last several fiscal years, at \$18.2 million, exclusive of overtime. That funding would be better used for the purpose of supporting sex workers and trafficking survivors if redistributed to organizations that truly serve and are guided by the sex work and trafficking survivor communities. While the City spends upward of \$18.2m on ATV activities, it spends a mere \$4.4m on nonprofits via the Supports for Persons Involved In the Sex Trade initiative—which is a good start, but is not nearly sufficient to meet community need.

With a new NYC government coming into office in 2022, many people in it have long understood the abuses committed by NYPD. It behooves everyone—from NYPD supporters to those, like SWP, who favor dismantling it altogether—to eliminate this division that has done so much, and continues to do so much, to show consistently how brutal police can be. Policing makes sex workers more vulnerable to violence, the tactics of NYPD Vice over its years of existence is undeniable proof.