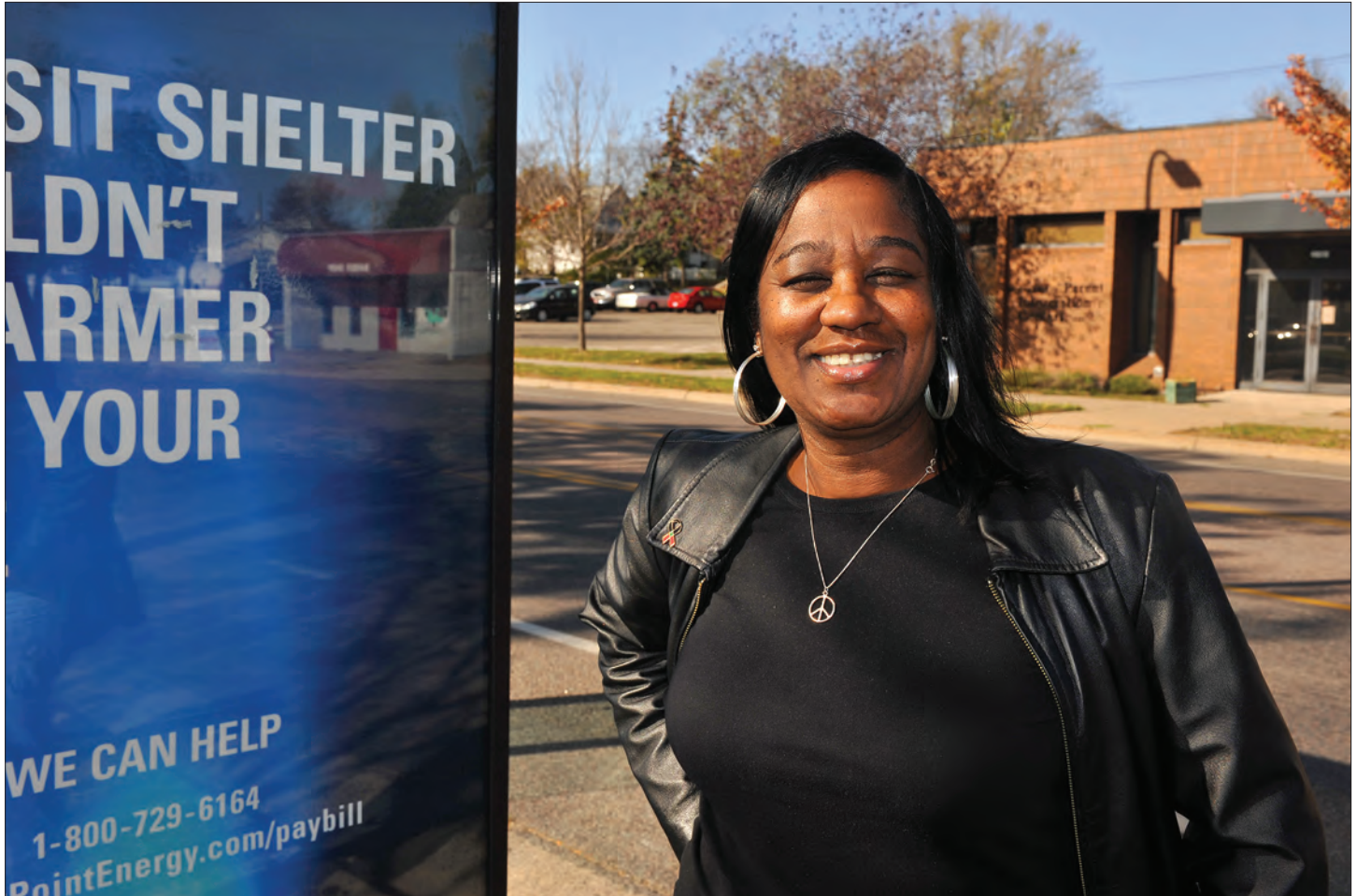


The Prostitution Project: Community-Based Research on Sex Trading in North Minneapolis

by Lauren Martin

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Doris Johnson is an HIV outreach coordinator at Broadway Family Medicine in north Minneapolis and is a survivor of prostitution. Doris helped to design the Prostitution Project research recruitment methods and is currently on the advisory panel for the Northside Women's Space.

American society generally views prostitution as a transaction between two individuals. When sex trading occurs outside on the streets—and adults and children find condoms and witness sex acts taking place in alleys, in automobiles, at bus stops, and in parks—a broader community impact may be perceived, as it was in north Minneapolis earlier this decade. In 2005, a group of north Minneapolis stakeholders became fed up with the sex trade taking place on the streets of their community and were determined to see these transactions stop, or at least to happen somewhere else.

At the time, the voices and experiences of those who trade sex were not yet part of the community discussion about how to stop prostitution. In 2005, I was hired to conduct The Prostitution Project, a large-scale, community-based research project on prostitution focused on developing solutions to the problem. By working with residents, businesses, law enforcement, as well as people who trade sex, this research found that sex trading is not simply a transaction between two individuals; it deeply impacts the broader community and is intertwined in complex ways with the systemic exploitation of those who are poor and vulnerable. Sex trading

in north Minneapolis harms not only those who sell sex, but also the social fabric of families, neighborhoods, and the community.

This article focuses mainly on research I conducted during the fall and winter of 2006 and 2007 with adults who trade sex. More than 150 adults who traded sex in North Minneapolis responded to our research recruitment flyer and came to my office in the community to complete a survey about their lives. Findings from this research were startling. People who trade sex in North Minneapolis experience extreme poverty, high rates of violence (including child sexual abuse, rape,

and assault), homelessness, chemical dependency, exploitation by pimps and traffickers, unmet health needs, societal stigma, exclusion, and victimization. We also found that these individuals were strong and resilient mothers, sisters, wives, aunts, and members of the community. Most said they wanted to give back and do something positive.

Between 2005 and 2008, we also conducted research with more than 400 other community stakeholders on the Northside about their views of and experiences with prostitution. We worked with residents, businesses, police and probation officers, activists, advocates, health professionals, and others. We developed the overall project goals, aims, and methods in concert with community stakeholders, including people who trade sex, using an approach called *participatory action research*. The research process itself catalyzed untapped common ground among stakeholders, including people who trade sex. We successfully recruited diverse research participants, generated new knowledge, and launched numerous prevention, intervention, and policy initiatives to meet needs and address issues raised through our research. The Prostitution Project has built a foundation for working together to solve the myriad and complex problems related to prostitution.

CURA-funded students have been a critical component of this work, helping to conduct research and bringing fresh interdisciplinary perspectives to the project. More than 14 student research assistants have been part of the Prostitution Project during the last five years. CURA has supported six of these students, who have been involved with seven smaller projects within the larger research effort.

In this article, I describe our research and three of the initiatives that have grown from our community-based knowledge production about trading sex in North Minneapolis: the Northside Women's Space, Gaining Independence for Females in Transition, and Safety on the Streets. These projects show how our community-based participatory research has set in motion an organic process of inquiry leading to action, the outcomes of which could not have been designed in advance. As we documented needs, we designed and launched programs and interventions to meet those needs. This, in turn, spurred more research and evaluation, which led to the documentation and identification of deeper needs, and so on. This work is a model

for how organic and sustained research, conducted in partnership with the community, can help develop solutions for some of our most-pressing urban challenges, such as prostitution. The research upon which this article is based was supported by several grants from CURA's Neighborhood Partnerships for Community Research, Northside Seed Grant, and Communiversities programs, as well as the Otto Bremer Foundation, the World Childhood Foundation, Folwell Center for Urban Initiatives, and individual donors.

Methodology

Our research team used participatory action research methods to develop research methodologies, gather information, and translate our findings into positive social change. Participatory action research involves actionable research directed at problems identified by communities, and includes stakeholders and potential research participants in all phases of the research as experts and co-equal partners.

The research team conducted a pilot phase to test our recruitment methods



Mary Jo Meuleners, Community Health Program Supervisor for NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center, counsels a young woman on sexual health issues. Meuleners was a member of the community advisory panel for the Prostitution Project and is currently a program partner in the Northside Women's Space.

and survey instrument from March 2005 to January 2006. We then designed and implemented the full research project from February 2006 to January 2007. We transcribed, coded, and entered the data into an SPSS statistical database from February to June 2007. Since then we have conducted several related follow-up projects. Although a detailed description of the methods used for each project is beyond the scope of this article, below I describe some of our core methods and approaches.

The research we conducted in 2006 and 2007 with people who trade sex is the foundation for all of our work. For research about illegal or stigmatized behavior such as sex trading, sampling is always an issue. The characteristics of the population are not well known outside of those arrested for prostitution, and people are generally reluctant to self-identify for the purposes of research. Our study recruited a community-based sample of people involved in prostitution in North Minneapolis. This sample is rather unique in the prostitution literature. The majority of prostitution research is conducted either with “captive” groups of women—for example, those in prison, probation programs, or chemical dependency treatment—or with women who are easy to “see,” such as those who work in street-based prostitution. These samples are potentially skewed, however, as the sampling approach misses people who have not been arrested or those who work less frequently or in off-street venues such as online services, crack houses, or bars. Community-based samples that include representatives from all of these groups are rare. In our sample, fewer than one-third of research participants had ever been arrested for prostitution, and only two-thirds had ever worked on the streets. We also surveyed people who work in a variety of sex-trading venues and who work infrequently. Therefore, our study provides a solid and representative informational basis for prevention, intervention, and additional research.

Project Beginnings (2005–2007).

The project began in the summer of 2005 with an identified community need about prostitution, a research question, and help from CURA. The previous year, Northside community members had become increasingly vocal about the rise of street-based prostitution in their neighborhoods and the seemingly deleterious impact of prostitution on the women they saw on the streets and in mug shots. According to one stakeholder at that time:

These women were viewed as the scourge of the neighborhood. In community meetings, I could hear that these women and their actions were despised. Not even the drug dealers drew that much wrath.

My work as a community-based researcher began while I was working at the Jordan Area Community Council in North Minneapolis, shortly after I completed my Ph.D. in anthropology. A task force administered by the Folwell Neighborhood Association had expressed concerns about prostitution in the neighborhoods, and asked for my help with the issue. A month later, I came back to the group with a two-year research plan that encompassed four primary data threads:

- ▶ the needs and experiences of people who trade sex
- ▶ the perspectives of residents and businesses in North Minneapolis

- ▶ law enforcement knowledge
- ▶ community-based ethnography

Soon after, Folwell Neighborhood Association hired me to conduct the research and follow the data through to intervention, prevention, and policy implications.

I did not have previous experience in prostitution research, but I knew it was a sensitive topic with many pitfalls. The research itself had the potential to harm participants, particularly people who trade sex. I operated my research on the principle of “do no harm,” and used participatory-research methodologies to incorporate a wide variety of perspectives into the design and conduct of the research. I convened a community advisory panel that included advocates, law enforcement officials, academics, and Northside pastors, as well as people with experience trading sex (Table 1). Together we developed a research question that sought to understand the

Table 1. Community Advisory Panel (CAP) Members, 2005–2008

Name	Affiliation at Time of Project*	Research 2005–2008	NWS Planning 2006–2007
Artika Roller	PRIDE Program, Family and Children’s Services	X	X
Alex Nelson	District 202		X
April Foster	PRIDE Program, Family and Children’s Services		X
Bettye Howell (Pastor)	Shiloh Temple	X	X
David Hayhoe (Lt.)	Minneapolis Police Department	X	
David Johnson	Health and Family Support, City of Minneapolis	X	
David Valentine	U of M Anthropology Department	X	
Doris Johnson	U of M Physicians Clinic		X
Kimberly Lund (Lt.)	Minneapolis Police Department	X	
Laufelle Murphy	Minneapolis City Attorney	X	
Linda Koelman (Rev.)	North United Methodist Church	X	
Marya Anderson	PRIDE Program, Family and Children’s Services	X	
Mary Jo Meuleners	Red Door Clinic	X	X
Monica Nilsson	The Bridge		X
Trudee Able-Peterson	Street Works Collaborative	X	X
Vickey Smiley	Volunteers of America—Women’s Recovery Center		X

* Affiliations were accurate at the time of the last group meeting.

impact of prostitution on people who trade sex and on the community as a whole. We also applied for and received a grant from CURA's Neighborhood Partnerships for Community Research program that enabled us to hire graduate research assistant Liddy Hope, a Ph.D. student in family social science at the University of Minnesota.

Pilot and Full Implementation (2005–2007). Although the Northside residents' complaints about prostitution on their streets grew louder, we had no information from those who traded sex in the community. In effect, their voices were silent. Mary Jo Meuleners, a member of the advisory panel who now runs a sexual-health program at Hennepin County's NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center, summed up the research this way:

What is so critically important about the value of prostitution research is that it gives voice to an unheard and misunderstood group that at the same time is so frequently and harmfully judged. By listening carefully to their responses, we can begin to understand their needs. This understanding can guide policy makers, community leaders, and service providers in creating sensitive, effective, and compassionate strategies to address the complexity of prostitution and its related issues.

With help from the advisory panel, we designed a pilot project to test the waters and refine our research methods. In the summer of 2005, the NPCR graduate research assistant, Liddy Hope, helped me conduct interviews. We refined the pilot study design, developed a needs-assessment survey, and received approval from University of Minnesota and federal research ethics review boards. That fall, we conducted four very good interviews, but it was clear that our standard recruitment methods and project design had not worked very well.

In January 2006, we took a new approach and went directly to those who traded sex to ask them for input on recruitment, methodology, and survey instruments. After a total project revamp, we posted flyers that asked: "Have you traded or sold sex in the last five years? Do you live or work in North Minneapolis? 18 or older? If you answered YES, we would like you to do a survey about your life to help build

community resources and a prostitution prevention plan for youth." The expertise of people who have traded sex helped us create a project that worked—one that was street-based and used word-of-mouth recruitment, where no names were asked for, with drop-in hours, and a flexible and supportive approach.

Between September 2006 and January 2007, after posting the flyers, 155 people came to my office at Folwell Neighborhood Association in North Minneapolis to participate in our research. All research was conducted in English. We conducted 33 open-ended verbal interviews and 154 surveys. After review of the surveys, 135 were deemed valid and entered into an SPSS database. The survey contained more than 100 closed- and open-ended questions in six areas: housing, relationships, and family; work and money; medical/health; substance use; violence; and closing questions.

Findings

Our findings were both enlightening and troubling. The majority of respondents were African American (82%) women (87%) with children (76%). Poverty was a major concern: 90% were unemployed at the time of the survey, and most had experienced food scarcity and hunger along with homelessness. Participants experienced violence in all areas of their lives, including childhood

abuse, domestic violence, and attacks from clients and pimps; 84% had been victims of a major violent incident. We also found that about half first traded sex as a minor. For those who started as a minor, their average age of first sex trade was 13 years old; the earliest first sex trade was reported by a woman who had been sold at the age of five.

We heard from women firsthand about their struggles. One woman, talking about her reputation in the community, said:

I wish people would view me as a "normal" woman.

Another woman, talking about why she is involved in trading sex, said:

Do you think I like sucking a stranger's dick? My fridgerator's empty and my kids gotta eat.

Our society usually views women who trade sex as criminals, "part of the problem," or throw-away people, but our research found that they are survivors and an untapped source of community strength. Several women said they want to help others on the street and prevent kids from being exploited in prostitution. One woman said:

I'm too far gone, no one can help me, but I hope my survey can help someone else.



The recruitment flyer for the Prostitution Project, designed by local artist Io Palmer, was developed through a collaborative art process with women who have experience trading sex. The flyer was posted at community locations throughout north Minneapolis.

Table 2. Prostitution Research Projects and Student Researchers

Prostitution Research Projects	Timeframe	Research Assistants	Degree Pursued During Project
Sex Trading, Pilot Study	May–December 2005	Liddy Hope	University of Minnesota, Ph.D.
Sex Trading, Implementation Study	January 2006–February 2007	Liddy Hope	University of Minnesota, Ph.D.
		Lacy Weishalla	St. Cloud State University, B.A.
		Katherine Downing	University of Minnesota, M.P.H.
		Anne Cullen	Macalester College, B.A.
		Jhonnelle Lane	Minneapolis Community and Technical College, credit courses
		Garret Dahl	St. Cloud State University, B.A.
		Emily Martin	Willamette University, B.A.
Sex-Trading Study, Analysis	March 2007–Present	—	—
Business Study	Summer 2006	Wynfred Russell	University of Minnesota, Ph.D.
		Yeamah Brewer	Hamline University, B.A.
Residents Study	Fall 2006	Jenny Gustavson	University of Minnesota, B.A.
NWS Best Practices	Spring/Summer 2007	Katherine Downing	University of Minnesota, M.P.H.
GIFT Research	2007–present	Yael Gunn	University of Minnesota, M.S.W.
		Lauren Stark	University of Minnesota, B.A.
SOS Evaluation	2008–Present	Yael Gunn	University of Minnesota, M.S.W.
NWS Implementation	2009–Present	Megan Alama	University of Minnesota, M.S.W.

Note: CURA-supported students are in boldface type.

Our research and intervention efforts proceeded from our findings that women who trade sex are an asset.

After I analyzed the data and made presentations about our findings, a variety of separate but interconnected projects evolved out of this core research with people who trade sex (Table 2). During the same timeframe as the sex-trading study, we conducted three additional research projects as part of the original research design. With support from CURA, we hired Wynfred Russell and Jenny Gustavson to survey businesses and residents, respectively. We learned that businesses feel prostitution harms their establishments by scaring away customers, increasing criminal activity in their establishments, and harming the reputation of the neighborhood. From residents, we documented that street-based sex trading occurs in alleys, streets, garages, and bus stops, and that it damages property values and safety. We also learned that it not only exposes children to prostitution, but also contributes to the exploitation of youth in the neighborhood. Many residents blamed the women who sell sex

as the cause of the problem and viewed them very negatively. However, residents also recognized that “johns” (the men who purchase sex) may be the root of the problem and that women who sell sex are also victims.¹

In addition to student-supported research, we also conducted an ethnographic study of the impact of prostitution in the community that entailed participant-observation and interviews with police officers, probation staff, residents, and advocates. The ethnography, the business and residents studies, and the sex-trading study pointed to common ground among very diverse stakeholders—we all wanted to reduce harm. Prostitution is a difficult topic laden with ideology and stereotypes. People who trade sex are stigmatized, and prostitution is

¹ Findings from the studies of businesses and residents are available online: W.N. Russell, “The Effects of Prostitution on Businesses in North Minneapolis,” unpublished report, March 2007, www.cura.umn.edu/publications/NPCR-reports/npcr1249.pdf; J. Gustavson, “The Effects of Prostitution on North Minneapolis Residents,” unpublished report, March 2007, www.cura.umn.edu/publications/NPCR-reports/npcr1255.pdf.

harmful and dangerous both to them and the communities where it takes place. All of the stakeholders were fed up and angry. In our research we asked questions, valued the input of all, and avoided judgment of their responses. The context of “research” provided people the space to reflect on their views of prostitution rather than simply acting on knee-jerk opinions and stereotypes. The community partnerships that were formed through the research process (as well as additional ones over the years) are the backbone of our ongoing work. Research reports and public presentations also provided valuable new information about prostitution in the community.

Outcomes of Prostitution Research in North Minneapolis

This section describes three key initiatives that grew from the sex-trading study and that also received support from CURA through the provision of graduate research assistants: the Northside Women’s Space, Gaining Independence for Females in Transition, and Safety on the Streets.

The Northside Women's Space: A Drop-in Place of Respite and Connection.

As a direct result of the sex-trading study, we started developing a drop-in space for women who trade sex in North Minneapolis that would be a point of connection to resources and support. Two clear findings from our research with women who trade sex strongly articulated the need for a drop-in space. First, many of the women reported that they appreciated the research project because it gave them a safe and welcoming place to sit down, rest, and tell their story. They said they did not have anywhere to go for respite and safety where they felt supported and were not judged. Second, data from our survey showed that the majority of participants do not have adequate access to healthcare, food, social services, or positive support systems (friends, family, and community). Two findings in particular highlight the dire situation of participants with respect to basic needs: 64% said they needed access to a food shelf and 63% required emergency temporary housing. In addition, our research also identified many barriers that prevented participants from seeking help, including stigma (and internalized stigma), feeling judged, lack of insurance, fear of arrest, the chaos of life on the streets, and unreliable transportation, to name a few. Through our research, we learned that the best and most respectful way to make contact with people who trade sex is through flexible drop-in hours, and the idea for the Northside Women's Space was born.

In the spring of 2007, the drop-in space project was awarded a Northside Seed Grant from CURA to assist with developing a plan and identifying best practices. Katherine Downing, the graduate research assistant hired through the grant, interviewed service providers locally, nationally, and internationally to compile best practices for operating the drop-in space. This work ultimately culminated in a master's thesis for her degree program in public health.

In 2008, the drop-in space concept found a home and a community champion in Kwanzaa Community Church when the church's co-pastor, Reverend Alika Galloway, saw the data from the sex-trading study. As she explained:

As a North Minneapolis community member and pastor I was saddened by the statistics.... I was spurred into action because the research included the voices of those long silenced by

oppression and injustice. The research had guts, integrity, and held the truth of the women's lives in a sacred way. It was lived research that the community could use to seek justice and constructive change for ourselves. We were not the object but the subject. This is very rare in oppressed communities. As subjects we tell our truth, share it with ourselves, teach others, and transform lives.

Through the research connection, Reverend Alika and I recognized

a common cause and began working together to open the Northside Women's Space in Kwanzaa Community Church's building. We jointly hosted an open house for the space in January 2010 that was attended by more than 100 people. During the summer of 2010, Kwanzaa Community Church embarked on a major fund drive and I reconvened a new advisory panel with both some original and some new members. Kwanzaa Community Church was awarded a Northside Seed Grant from CURA for summer 2010. We hired



Reverend Alika Galloway is co-pastor of Kwanzaa Community Church in north Minneapolis and the co-leader of the Northside Women's Space.

Photo © Steve Schneider, 2010.

graduate research assistant Megan Alama to take the previous work and translate it into an operating plan for the space. The partnership with Kwanzaa Community Church will truly actualize the vision for Northside Women's Space that was first articulated by the participants in the sex-trading study.

Gaining Independence for Females in Transition: A New Corrections Approach.

Our research on sex trading also led directly to the creation of a new, evidence-based corrections approach for women on probation for prostitution. In 2007, I presented findings from our initial community-based research to the Northside stakeholders who had originally requested the study. Terri Hoy, a neighborhood probation supervisor with Hennepin County, was part of that group. With P.J. Bensen and Julie Rud, two probation officers under her supervision, Hoy approached me to see what the data might have to offer for probation practice with prostitution offenders. Hoy said, "I knew what didn't work with women charged with prostitution—doing the same old thing over and over again and expecting different results. With [the Prostitution Project] research we might find a way of intervening in their damaged lives." That conversation led to an ongoing collaboration and the creation of Gaining Independence for Females in Transition (GIFT).² The goal of GIFT is to reduce recidivism among women on probation for prostitution-related offenses by improving their life circumstances. As Hoy later reflected, "That is how the GIFT Research Project began—by asking 'who are these women?' 'What can we do differently?' 'What can we learn from them as a group?'"

The Prostitution Project study showed that most women who trade sex do so because of a combination of poverty, homelessness, lack of job skills, drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues, and other challenging life circumstances. Study participants said that, to be effective, services must meet these needs in a coordinated way. However, most women who trade sex that we talked to indicated that coordinated services were not available to them. Data from women who said they no longer traded sex was also illuminating. These women indicated

that they responded best to services and people who treated them with respect, understanding, and dignity—what is often called an empowerment approach. Women also derived strength and support from prostitution-specific programming built around undoing internalized stigma and shame using a trauma-informed perspective.

From 2007 to 2009, the GIFT planning team designed its approach based on this evidence, along with newly emerging gender-responsive corrections practices and research that Julie Rud, who works in Adult Field Services for Hennepin County Community Corrections, had conducted at the county. We designed the GIFT logic model as part of a comprehensive research and evaluation project to test whether the emerging best practices of the model led to a decrease in recidivism for prostitution offenses.

In 2008, the GIFT probation officers began piloting the new probation approach in preparation for an official launch. With support from CURA's Communiversities program, we hired Yael Gunn, who had been working as an intern for P.J. Bensen. Gunn used participant-observation to document how the pilot program functioned so that we could evaluate whether program practice followed our project design. We used Gunn's findings to fine-tune and fully implement the project. After more than two years of planning, GIFT was launched in January 2009. Preliminary corrections data analyzed by the GIFT research team suggests that GIFT is a promising practice for reducing recidivism among women on probation for prostitution. We will learn more in the next few years.

Safety on the Streets: Collaboration between Police, Advocates, and Women Who Trade Sex. The sex-trading study found that a staggering 84% of participants had experienced some form of violence. This violence occurred in many domains of their lives, including childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, attacks by clients ("johns") and pimps, and general abuse from neighbors, police, and others. The business and residents studies also showed that people who trade sex are sometimes verbally victimized by people in the community.

The survey we used for our study of sex trading was not specifically about violence. Although we asked some questions about violence, we did *not* ask participants to discuss this issue

in-depth because we were concerned about triggering adverse reactions due to post-traumatic stress disorder or the stress of reliving violence. As I presented our findings to stakeholders across the Twin Cities and began thinking about policy implications, I recalled many women we interviewed who had described very violent attacks perpetrated by a client. About this same time, a news story had aired concerning a Minneapolis woman, described as a "suspected prostitute," who had been murdered and left in a ditch outside of the Twin Cities. A woman I interviewed described a very similar attack that she just barely survived. She was not sure if it "counted" as a rape or assault because she was drunk at the time and because of her involvement in prostitution. When she tried to report the assault, she did not think the police believed her. An earlier study in England found that 69% of murders of women in prostitution are committed by a client.³ In response to conversations about these findings, Joy Friedman, program manager at Breaking Free (a nationally recognized agency that works with "prostituted" women), conducted an informal survey of program participants. She found that 21 out of 23 women had been physically or sexually assaulted by a client; only 3 had reported these very serious assaults to the police.

Using our data and their own experiences, a group of advocates and stakeholders began discussions with the Minneapolis Police Department's Third Precinct about prostitution violence. Our goal was to highlight this issue and see if we could find a way to facilitate reports of this violence to increase the numbers of arrests, charges, and convictions of these perpetrators. My interviews with police officers and a secondary literature search on the topic revealed that the men who perpetrate these assaults tend to be violent serial offenders. We found common ground among all participants to identify ways to arrest and convict these perpetrators.

From these initial meetings, a collaboration called Safety on the Streets (SOS) was formed as a pilot project in the Third Precinct. The goal of SOS is to facilitate reporting of physical and sexual assaults committed against women who trade sex. To do this, we first had to know what barriers women

² Additional team members include Paula Kruchowski, Minneapolis City Attorney; Judge Richard Hopper, Hennepin County District Court; and Richard Hughes, a supervisor with Hennepin County.

³ C.G. Salfati et al., "Prostitute Homicides: A Descriptive Study," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 23, 4 (2008): 505–543.

faced. The collaborative brought together police officers from the Third Precinct, advocates, and women who had traded sex to work together to identify potential barriers. The barriers included fear of arrest, negative prior interactions with police, lack of knowledge of rights, use of alcohol or drugs, desensitization to violence among women who trade sex, and internalized stigma. As a result of this work, we have jointly developed reporting protocols to overcome these barriers. In the process, we established a functional, adaptive, and working collaborative of diverse stakeholders. With support from CURA, Yael Gunn and I interviewed police officers, women who have traded sex, advocates, and others to understand the issues, help fine-tune our protocols, and write an evaluation plan that the collaborative can use.

SOS has already seen results. The Minneapolis Police Department has charged several perpetrators of sexual assault with felony-level crimes against women in prostitution, and they are conducting several other ongoing investigations. In addition, SOS has implemented other safety strategies based on our research, including a “bad date list,” which is a tool developed by and for women who trade sex to inform each other about clients who are violent so that they can avoid them. The PRIDE Program of Family and Children’s Services, which works with women trying to escape prostitution, is the lead agency for this effort on behalf of SOS.

Members of our team have conducted training sessions with police officers and others in the community on this issue. Talking about the role of our research in SOS, Joy Friedman from Breaking Free said:

Due to the work you do, our women now can report rape and something will be done about it; we are no longer silenced when it comes to

rape. Your work played a big part in this fight for a voice for our women.

The work of SOS is carried out among the collaborators, but our research provided a base of evidence from which to start.

Conclusions: Research, Public Policy, and Lasting Social Change

Many of us do our work differently as a result of the Prostitution Project research. CURA supported an influx of interdisciplinary research assistance through the students who worked on these projects. We were able to incorporate multiple disciplines depending on the specific needs of the project, including social work, anthropology, family social science, gender studies, sociology, and public health. Tempered by humility and participatory methodologies, our research has helped build capacity for individual and collective work around the myriad issues related to prostitution, including exploitation, oppression, violence, stigma, profound health disparities, and inequality. As a result of our research, we have shifted opinions, increased knowledge, seeded program development, fostered functional collaboration, and spurred action among stakeholders in north Minneapolis, the Twin Cities and the State of Minnesota. We have described three of these efforts here.

Locally, in north Minneapolis our work has raised the profile of sex trading as a critical issue facing the community and led to greater understanding. Community perception and understanding are not easy to measure and impacts take time to accrue. When we first began this work in 2005, it was hard to move a community discussion beyond the impulse to get women who trade sex off of street corners, and more vigorous policing was the main strategy on the table. In contrast, in February 2010, more than 100 people attended

Kwanzaa Community Church’s open house in support of Northside Women’s Space, demonstrating an understanding of the lives of women who trade sex and a desire for deeper, more lasting community healing around prostitution. We hope that the work developed out of the Prostitution Project research will lead to lasting social justice for people exploited in prostitution, as well as safer and healthier families and communities.

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