

**Citation:** Monto, Martin A. and Steve Garcia. 2001. "Recidivism Among the Customers of Female Street Prostitutes: Do Intervention Programs Help?" *Western Criminology Review* 3 (2). [Online]. Available: <http://wcr.sonoma.edu/v3n2/monto.html>.

**Recidivism Among the Customers of Female Street Prostitutes:  
Do Intervention Programs Help?**

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**Abstract**

This study examines recidivism among offenders participating in a program designed to discourage re-offending among men arrested for trying to hire street prostitutes. Such programs now exist in San Francisco, California; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and are being developed in other cities nationwide. Though now defunct, Portland, Oregon's Sexual Exploitation Education Project (SEEP), was one of the first of these programs. This study finds that the rate of recidivism among men participating in the Portland program was low. However, recidivism among men who did not participate in the program was also low. The findings suggest that recidivism may not be a useful measure of effectiveness for programs aimed at men arrested for trying to hire street prostitutes.

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**Keywords:** prostitution, customers, clients, recidivism

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### **Recidivism Among the Customers of Female Street Prostitutes: Do Intervention Programs Help? <sup>1</sup>**

Research and policy regarding prostitution have traditionally focused on prostitutes themselves, without much attention to their customers. Feminists have argued that this inattention to clients is unfair and discriminatory (Sullivan 1992; Shrage 1992). Indeed, a mere ten percent of yearly prostitution arrests are of customers, a group comprised almost entirely of men (Alexander 1987; Miller, Romenesko, and Wondolkowski 1993). Davis (1993) has argued that policies focusing on the arrest of female prostitutes rather than their clients are consistent with a double-standard, one in which women are held to different sexual rules than men and often blamed for male deviance. The focus on the arrest of prostitutes has not proven particularly effective in stopping prostitution (Carmen and Moody 1985). Prostitutes are often compelled by poverty, drug addiction, or fear of violence from pimps and frequently face rearrest.

In order to reduce prostitution and hold clients equally responsible for its existence, a number of programs have begun to focus on customers, providing workshops or classes designed to educate men about prostitution and its exploitative nature. These so-called "johns schools" now operate in San Francisco, California; Las Vegas, Nevada; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Santa Clara, California, and are being developed in many other cities. One of the most ambitious of these programs is the now defunct Sexual Exploitation Education Project (SEEP) located in Portland, Oregon. SEEP began providing workshops to male customers of female street prostitutes in 1995 (Monto 1998). SEEP was established as a community organization independent of local law enforcement. It was developed from the experience of men and women affiliated with a pro-feminist organization called Stopping Violent Against Women, under the guidance of Portland's Council for Prostitution Alternatives (CPA) and the Portland Women's Crisis Line. In partnership with the Multnomah County District Court, SEEP provided an intensive seventeen hour weekend workshop, in which men convicted of prostitution were either required to participate as a

condition of probation or invited to participate in exchange for receiving a reduced fine. The program's ambitious goals are listed below:

- Re-framing prostitution from a victimless crime to a system of violence against women.
- Deconstructing male sexual identity to identify how men's socialization leads to an increased propensity for committing acts of violence against women.
- Stressing the choice and responsibility that men have to create egalitarian relationships without coercion or violence. (Sexual Exploitation Education Project, 1995, n.p.)

According to Monto (1998), SEEP's perspectives challenged many popular understandings of prostitution. The SEEP workshop informed men about the high levels of violence experienced by prostitutes, a perspective supported by the accounts of prostitutes entering Portland's Council for Prostitution Alternatives (CPA 1994) and many other sources (Davis 1993; Miller 1993; Silbert and Pines 1982). In addition, SEEP argued that such violence — along with coercion by pimps, dire economic circumstances, and drug addiction — meant that prostitution was not consensual behavior for prostitutes. With this in mind, SEEP asserted that efforts to reduce prostitution should focus upon the individuals for whom the encounter was a choice—namely, the customers.

The SEEP program ceased operations in 1997, due to the withdrawal of support from the district attorney's office. Now defunct for more than two years, the project provides a unique opportunity to evaluate the recidivism rates of men who attended. While there has been substantial research into the rehabilitative treatment of sex offenders, primarily through the assessment of re-offense rates (Hanlon, Larson, and Zacher 1999; Quinsey, Rice, and Harris 1995), no research has focused solely upon the evaluation of programs designed to discourage re-offending among the customers of prostitutes. This study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of the SEEP intervention program through an analysis of recidivism.

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## METHODS

### Subjects

The subjects of this study were two hundred fifteen men arrested while attempting to hire prostitutes and convicted of the crime of prostitution. Data were collected at the Multnomah County Courthouse in Portland, Oregon, via the Oregon Justice Information Network (OJIN), a public database of conviction records. All subjects were arrested in Portland, Oregon, although not all were residents of the city or its immediate outlying areas. The men were separated into three groups according to whether they attended the SEEP program as ordered in sentencing ( $n = 91$ ), were ordered to SEEP but were non-compliant by simply failing to attend ( $n = 24$ ), or were not ordered to SEEP in sentencing ( $n = 100$ ).

All offenders ordered to attend the SEEP program during its existence from May of 1995 to February of 1997, including both attendees and non-compliers, were studied. Using the criminal record numbers of these cases and scrolling through the numerically sequenced court database, we were able to identify a comparison group of offenders who were not referred to SEEP. These offenders were arrested under the same circumstances and during the same twenty-one month period as the offenders sent to SEEP. We selected the first one hundred adjacent prostitution convictions for comparison. Judges rotate through the Multnomah County District Court, and some required customers to attend the SEEP program, some offered to reduce the fine if customers agreed to attend the program, and some failed to mention the program. Hence, whether subjects were sentenced to the program had more to do with which judge was presiding over the court than with the qualities of the offenders or the nature of their offenses. Though it is possible for offenders to affect the disposition of their cases by hiring attorneys or demanding trials, we selected groups of men who appeared in court one after the other, who were convicted, and who generally received the same sentences. Our review of the criminal records of the subjects for the three years prior to these prostitution convictions (to be described shortly) points to the similarity between offenders sent to SEEP and those who were not.

While our primary comparison is between subjects attending the SEEP program and subjects who were not referred to SEEP, the third group of

men who were referred to SEEP but failed to attend is included to evaluate whether these non-compliant men are distinct in some way from other customers.

## **Variables**

We gathered information on prior and subsequent convictions, for a total of six variables. We recorded prior prostitution convictions, prior convictions for violent crimes, and prior non-violent convictions for the three years preceding the prostitution offense that led to the subject's inclusion in our sample. We also recorded subsequent convictions for prostitution, violent crimes, and non-violent convictions for the two years following the prostitution conviction that led to the subject's inclusion in our sample.

## **Analysis**

Reoffense rates were compared across the three groups, with emphasis placed on the contrast between the SEEP and non-SEEP subjects. The data were collected for all groups, and there were no missing data in any category. Simple *chi-squared* tests were used to evaluate whether there were significant differences between groups on any of the variables. However, because offense rates were so low, the frequencies of some categories were below the expected five cases necessary for a sound chi-squared test on a two-by-two contingency table.

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## **RESULTS**

The frequencies of prior and subsequent convictions are reported in Table 1. No statistically significant differences are found between groups on any of the items. As mentioned earlier, whether offenders were sent to the SEEP program had more to do with which judge was presiding than the nature of the offenses. Indeed, virtually all of the arrests occurred under similar circumstances. The fact that there are no significant differences in prior offenses between the groups under study supports our contention that the groups were similar prior to the arrest that led to their inclusion in this study. Because test statistics are far from significant, and because most of the tests were invalidated due to

small cell counts, chi-squared test statistics are not informative and are not reported in the table.

**Table 1**  
**Prior and Subsequent Offenses Among Clients of Prostitutes**

<b>Client Characteristics</b>	<b>Referred to Program and Attended</b>	<b>Not Referred to Program</b>	<b>Referred to Program but Did Not Attend</b>
<b>Prior Prostitution Convictions</b>			
None	90	98	24
One	1	2	0
<b>Subsequent Prost. Convictions</b>			
None	89	99	24
One	2	1	0
<b>Prior Violent Crimes</b>			
None	90	100	24
Other Sex Offenses	1	0	0
Non-Sex Offenses	0	0	0
<b>Subsequent Violent Crimes</b>			
None	91	99	24
Other Sex	0	0	0

Offenses	0	1	0
Non-Sex Offenses			
<b>Prior Non-violent Crimes</b>			
None	68	78	16
Traffic Infractions Only	17	12	5
Other	6	10	3
<b>Subsequent Non-Violent Crimes</b>			
None	66	81	15
Traffic Infractions Only	19	14	6
Other	6	5	3

The results reveal a low rate of prior and subsequent offenses for all three samples, especially for prostitution offenses. Among the group of subjects attending the SEEP program ( $n=91$ ) there were only one prior and two subsequent offenses for prostitution. Among those not referred to SEEP ( $n=100$ ) there were two prior and one subsequent offenses. And among those who were referred to SEEP but failed to attend ( $n=24$ ), there were no prior or subsequent offenses for prostitution. The rates of offense were also low for violent crimes, both prior and subsequent. One subject from the SEEP group had a prior conviction for a sexual offense other than prostitution, and only one subject not referred to SEEP had a prior conviction of a non-sexual violent crime. Of all the convictions tabulated, traffic infractions had the highest incidence rates for both prior ( $n=34$  of 215 cases) and subsequent ( $n=39$  of 215 cases) convictions. Though the frequent traffic offenses seem to indicate that customers of prostitutes have a relatively high rate of contact with the law, these findings are otherwise unimportant to the issue we are exploring. Subjects who were non-compliant appear to have

experienced greater contact with the law. Thirty-three percent (8 of 24) had prior non-violent convictions and 38 percent (9/24) had subsequent non-violent convictions. In comparison, 22 percent (22 of 100) of the subjects not referred to SEEP had prior non-violent convictions and 19 percent (19 of 100) had subsequent non-violent convictions. Among the subjects attending SEEP, 25 percent (23 of 91) had prior non-violent convictions and 27 percent (25 of 91) had subsequent non-violent convictions. This may suggest a greater propensity toward crime or a greater disregard for the law among the subjects who were referred to SEEP but failed to attend.

## **DISCUSSION**

With prostitution arrests numbering about 100,000 annually (FBI 1997), intervention programs for the arrested customers of prostitutes represent a creative approach to reducing the demand for prostitution (Monto 1998). Additionally, they represent an unprecedented opportunity to gain access to the customers of prostitutes, a category of individuals that remains understudied (Shrage 1992). Public domain data gathered from questionnaires administered to men attending such programs in San Francisco, California; Las Vegas, Nevada; and Portland, Oregon will soon be available from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR data set 2859). The present study evaluates the recidivism rates of men arrested for trying to hire street prostitutes, comparing men who attended an intervention program with men who did not.

This study does not employ a representative sample of men who patronize prostitutes. Virtually all subjects were arrested while attempting to hire a prostitute on the street as opposed to patronizing escort services, massage parlors, or brothels. Further, all men were arrested in Portland, a city noted for its commercial sex industry. Despite these limitations in generalizability, the data allow for sound comparisons between men attending the educational intervention program and men who did not attend. Additionally, the study allows us to establish a rate of recidivism among men arrested while trying to hire street prostitutes in Portland that can be combined with data gathered from other jurisdictions to yield information on how often arrested customers recidivate.

This study found no statistically significant differences in recidivism between the offenders who attended the SEEP workshop and the offenders who did not attend. While small sample size may be one explanation, the remarkably low rate of recidivism for all categories is notable. Overall, only 1.4 percent (3 of 215) re-offended during the two years following the conviction that led to their inclusion in this study. And only 1.4 percent (3 of 215) of offenders had a conviction during the three years prior to the conviction that led to their inclusion in this study.

Interestingly, the recidivism rate yielded in this study is very similar to the recidivism rate of the men participating in San Francisco's First Offenders Prostitution Program, the nation's largest intervention program for men arrested for trying to hire street prostitutes. In an unpublished but thorough study, reoffense rates of the first 706 men participating in the San Francisco program were followed for 18 to 36 months after their participation. Records for the county of first arrest (San Francisco County) and throughout the state were searched, yielding fourteen recidivists or two percent. Twelve men were rearrested in San Francisco County and two were arrested in other jurisdictions (Dutto 1998). No comparison group of offenders who did not participate in the program was gathered.

Low recidivism rates may reflect the circumstances in which customers of prostitutes are arrested. Nearly all men arrested for trying to hire prostitutes in Portland are caught in sweeps in which they approach a female police officer who is posing as a prostitute, an arrest strategy employed by law enforcement agencies nationwide (Monto 2000). Because it is relatively easy to avoid rearrest given adequate knowledge, and because regular customers may have established networks of prostitutes they know personally (Freund, Lee, and Leonard 1991), it is likely that first-time or occasional customers are over-represented among those arrested. In fact, Monto's (2000) sample of arrested customers, in which only twelve percent reported having patronized prostitutes monthly or more frequently, is dramatically different from the sample of customers approached on the streets of Camden, New Jersey by Freund, Lee, and Leonard (1991), in which 93 percent of customers did so. In other words, recidivism rates may be low because many of the men caught in sweeps are not regular users or because the

arrest gives them insight into law enforcement strategies that reduces the likelihood that they will be rearrested, even if they continue to patronize prostitutes.

Another possible explanation for low recidivism rates among both the men who attended the SEEP program and those who did not is that the arrest itself may serve as a deterrent. Numerous researchers have acknowledged the strong desire that clients have to keep their activities secret (McKeganey and Barnard 1996; Special Committee on Prostitution and Pornography 1985). Being caught by police, appearing in court, and confronting the possibility that others could learn of their involvement with prostitutes may be sufficient to discourage future offenses.

The low rate of recidivism may also reflect the two-year window of opportunity evaluated by the present study. It is possible that the proclivity toward reoffense would increase as the arrest and conviction fell further into the past. Increasing the duration of the study would likely yield higher rates of recidivism and might also indicate differences between offenders participating in the SEEP program and offenders who did not.

Perhaps the most important contribution of this study is that it reveals the challenges of evaluating intervention programs like SEEP. Extremely low rates of recidivism for both those attending the SEEP program and those not attending mean that recidivism is not a valid indicator of effectiveness for such programs. What methods would be effective for assessing these programs? Longitudinal studies tracking the sexual behavior of offenders, whether or not it results in arrest, would be ideal. Randomly assigning men to attend or not to attend intervention programs would further strengthen such a study. While random assignment within the criminal justice system is generally out of the question, longitudinal studies of offenders following their participation in such programs might be possible. While customers of prostitutes have a great desire for anonymity, other studies have shown them willing to participate in research (Freund, Lee, and Leonard 1991; Monto 2000). More practical but less persuasive before and after quizzes or post-intervention questionnaires or evaluations would also be informative. Creative evaluation research is needed to further address this issue.

### Endnote

1. This project was supported by Grant No. 97-IJ-CX-0033 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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