

Book Review of *I Won't Do Manhattan: Causes and Consequences of a Decline in Street Prostitution*

Anthony Carona

Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX

I Won't Do Manhattan: Causes and Consequences of a Decline in Street Prostitution,
by Robert R. Weidner.

2001. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing,
ISBN 1-931202-10-9. \$65.00

Throughout my years of employment as a police, court and jailhouse psychologist, I have become all too familiar with issues regarding the enforcement of prostitution laws. The decision to enforce and at what level varies widely between jurisdictions. It is often determined by situational factors ranging from local election politics, to pressure from community groups concerned about the appearance of the commission of this misdemeanor within their city. For the police officer, prostitution arrests may be seen as time consuming and detracting from more serious duties. The misdemeanor court system, over worked and often neglected, methodically grinds through its caseload with little rhyme or reason as to the disposition of cases. Disposition, in and of itself, becomes the goal. The city and county jails become little more than way stations for prostitutes, many having medical, alcohol and drug related problems. Throughout this cycle of arrest, disposition, and re-arrest, the human toll surrounding prostitution goes unnoticed.

In *I Won't Do Manhattan* Robert Weidner studies an intervention program aimed at decreasing the level of street prostitution in the borough of Manhattan. In this study, Weidner attempts to address the following hypotheses: 1) The reduction in street prostitution in Manhattan is primarily a product of displacement; 2) The sentences and policies of the Midtown Community Court, independent of the NYPD's enforcement efforts played a role in stemming street prostitution in Manhattan; and 3) Prostitutes found the Midtown Court's programs to be supportive and its sanctions to be more just, than the

centralized court's. He compares the traditional approach to the management of street prostitution to the implementation of a coordinated intervention effort between the Midtown Community Court, the New York Police Department (NYPD) and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). Weidner states that Manhattan has historically used a traditional approach that focused on the number of arrests as opposed to a decrease in crime. There was little coordination between police, courts and community. Street prostitutes referred to law enforcement as "the biggest pimp of all" in that fines and temporary incarceration were simply the cost of doing business in any given sector of town. Sentencing was grossly inconsistent suggesting it to be a reflection of a judge's attitude towards the women involved in prostitution.

In 1994, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani appointed William Bratton as police commissioner of New York City (NYC). Bratton reorganized the NYPD with a problem-solving directive designed to address "quality of life" crimes and to reclaim the open spaces of New York. His approach was based on the "broken windows hypothesis" developed by Wilson and Kelling (1982) that hypothesized, unchecked disorder promotes more serious disorder and crime. Prior to Bratton the Public Morals Division (PMD), consisting of fewer than 200 officers, was responsible for alcohol, gambling, and prostitution-related offenses throughout NYC. Bratton restructured the department to return enforcement authority for quality of life crimes to precinct commanders, therefore reducing dependence on special divisions and returning enforcement authority to the precinct level.

The Midtown Community Court (a misdemeanor arraignment court) provided intermediate sanctioning alternatives, such as community service sentences or social service

sentences for low-level offenses including prostitution. Mandated social services, such as health education and support groups, as well as voluntary health services were provided in the same facility as the court. Jail time was handed out less frequently compared to the Downtown Criminal Court, however, when utilized by the Midtown Community Court, sentences tended to be longer. This graduated system of sentencing was designed to find middle ground between traditional jail or "nothing" sentences, and required prosecutors and judges to more closely examine each case.

The third facet of intervention involved Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) defined as areas "in which property owners voluntarily tax themselves and use the money to improve conditions and thereby the quality of life within the boundaries of the district." In this intervention, unarmed public safety officers were hired to patrol business districts and to contact the NYPD when observing street crime. Fifty-three sanitation workers (all recovering substance abusers from a local rehabilitation program) were hired to clean sidewalks and remove graffiti. New zoning ordinances were passed that were designed to disperse sex-oriented business. In accordance with the broken windows hypothesis, the streets were cleaned up and appeared less inviting for more serious crime.

In his review of literature, Weidner discusses the state of the often-criticized misdemeanor court system in the United States. He points out that this system (accounting for more than 90 percent of all criminal cases), is the greatest "point of contact" between the general public and the criminal justice system, has become more focused on revenue generation than on due process, decrease in crime and rehabilitation.

Weidner further suggests that the need for money, although a factor, never stands alone as a reason for entering prostitution. He cites research suggesting that prostitutes experience a "state of irrelation" or displacement and nonbelonging with peers prior to their entry to prostitution. This is consistent with clinical observations I have made in my work with street prostitutes in a military community. In many instances, these young women were separated from friends and family and found themselves abandoned and in a market where prostitution can thrive. Weidner presents literature suggesting that excitement, independence, and dislike for routine work are other factors influencing the decision to enter prostitution.

Rounding out his literature review is a discussion of market forces and enforcement environments in which prostitution operates. He points out that the variables of community resistance and tolerance tend to distort the free market forces of supply and demand. Weidner goes on to say that place-based interventions tend not to account for the displacement of prostitution from one local to another, and ignore the more significant issue of the abusive conditions in which street prostitutes operate.

Weidner examined recidivism by comparing defendants who were processed through the Midtown Court and an approximately equal number of defendants, arrested in the Midtown Court's jurisdiction, who were processed in the downtown court in the year prior to the Midtown Court's opening. Findings suggest a marked decrease in arrest rates following the establishment of the midtown court in late 1993, although time-to-rearrest rate revealed no Midtown Court effect with both samples initially rearrested in rather short order. In light of the fact that enforcement efforts for minor crimes (quality of life crimes) was intensified throughout the city, the decline in prostitution arrest rates in the Midtown Court following 1994 suggests that the Midtown Court's interventions played a vital role in changing prostitution behavior.

The decline in arrest rates for the Midtown Court was also compared to arrest rates in the rest of Manhattan as well as in other Boroughs of New York. While there was a sharp decline in the Midtown Court area, the arrest rate for the rest of Manhattan remained relatively static. This dramatic decrease in the Midtown area however, significantly reduced the arrest rate for all of Manhattan. Prior to late 1993, Manhattan accounted for approximately six out of ten prostitution arrests in New York City. In the years following intervention, the rate for Manhattan dropped to approximately four out of every ten arrests for prostitution in the city.

In further efforts to assess the effectiveness of intervention, Weidner obtained qualitative data through interviews with prostitutes. He found that increased law enforcement efforts lead to several forms of displacement including method displacement (geographic change), and temporal displacement (change in time of business). Consistent with literature that discusses the difficulties in leaving prostitution as a lifestyle, Weidner found that few defendants chose desistance (leaving the lifestyle) as an option. He further suggested that as the street environment became more difficult, there was a change in the

hierarchy of the prostitution world and that, although most prostitutes did not want to change modality, many did leave the streets to work indoors. In summary, significant displacement did occur, however spatial displacement in no way overshadowed method displacement.

Interviews with defendants found that they considered the Midtown Courts system of graduated sentencing and mandated social services to be fairer than the Downtown Court. Prostitutes found the programs to be somewhat supportive, but few found the programs to be of help to them. Although feelings were mixed as to the actual help the prostitutes felt they received, prior research (Cullen, 1994) suggests that this type of supportive programming may help influence desistance from crime. The defendants also suggested that they felt they were fairly treated by the police and saw the police as simply doing their jobs.

In conclusion, Weidner presents a comprehensive program for dealing with not only prostitution but with other misdemeanor (quality of life) offenses. Prostitution in the target area did

decrease. Although this decrease appeared to be closely related to displacement in its various forms, it is to be remembered that arrest rates throughout New York City suggest that spatial displacement was not an overriding factor.

Furthermore, one might suggest that based on interviews with defendants, increased law enforcement efforts have not created any significant rift between these misdemeanants and law enforcement, and that the defendants generally saw the interventions as supportive if not particularly helpful. This is significant when considering that these defendants are to be found in most any community in the United States and that even the perception of support may draw them closer to productivity and a less destructive lifestyle.

REFERENCES

Wilson, James Q. and George L. Kelling 1982. "Broken Windows." *Atlantic Monthly* March: 29-38.