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U of M study: Workers in Minneapolis' adult entertainment industry feel pressure to sell sex

By Kristoffer Tigue | 03/27/17



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There can be upwards of 200 dancers working at adult entertainment clubs on a typical Friday night in Minneapolis.

The University of Minnesota's Urban Research and Outreach-Engagement Center (UROC) will be releasing a new report Monday that confirms what Minneapolis city officials have long suspected: that sexual services are being sold at many of the city's licensed adult entertainment establishments.

The findings come just two weeks after the Minneapolis Health Department announced it found bodily fluids at 11 of the city's 17 licensed adult entertainment establishments, which are mostly concentrated around Hennepin Avenue downtown.

The UROC report surveyed more than 50 workers or former workers in the city's adult entertainment industry, many of whom reported feeling pressured to perform commercial sex services for customers, in environments where unwanted touching and groping is common — and in some instances, where violent sexual assaults have occurred. Others reported feeling economically exploited by some clubs.



“The most significant concern is that there’s a fairly prevalent rate of customers pressuring entertainers for commercial sex,” said Lauren Martin, UROC’s director of research and the lead investigator for the survey. “The entertainers we spoke with indicated that that’s a constant theme among many customers.”

A blurred line

There can be upwards of 200 dancers working at adult entertainment clubs on a typical Friday night in Minneapolis, Martin said, and most of them aren’t offering sex to customers for money.

But because the atmospheres vary from club to club, she said, and because managers or employees don’t always set or enforce clear boundaries between dancers and patrons, there’s sometimes a blurred line.

For example, because some dancers in some clubs will secretly offer commercial sex in private rooms, customers sometimes expect that all performers will offer the same. “In many instances that can set up a scenario for sexual assault, where a customer thinks they are paying for something more than what the entertainer understands to be the arrangement,” Martin said.

Some clubs do a better job of enforcing boundaries, Martin said, but in many clubs, entertainers reported having to enforce those boundaries themselves without help from bouncers or managers. Others reported feeling pressured from both customers and even management to sell sex, or having to pay some of their tip money to bouncers and managers in order to get proper protection at work.

“Clubs with great security, clear boundaries, where bouncers and managers really take it upon themselves to make sure customers know the rules, where they act quickly to remove customers who are violating the rules — that’s a safer environment,” she said.

A public health issue

Other issues UROC identified in their survey included a lack of protocol for cleaning up infectious materials in clubs where bodily fluids were found, Martin said, which is a health and safety concern for both workers and customers of the clubs. “If somebody vomits or urinates, or if there’s semen, there’s no protocol and not a lot of support on how to clean up those materials,” she said. “There’s supposed to be provisions in place to make the workplace safe.”

Two weeks ago, the Minneapolis Health Department sent letters to 11 establishments where they found human semen, telling those clubs to clean up the bodily fluids and put in better measures to prevent the problem from happening again.

Dan Huff, the city’s environmental health director, said that while the health department is limited in its regulatory power in such cases, the main concern moving forward is ensuring the workers in those establishments are safe, and less about taking punitive measures. “Our concern is, ‘What are the workplace health and safety issues being faced by these workers and how do we ... have constructive and effective rules to protect the health and safety of these workers?’” he said.

Currently, city ordinances don’t do much in terms of protecting workers in the adult entertainment industry, Huff said, and the city will likely look into how they can update or create city laws to better serve those workers.

Minneapolis City Attorney Susan Segal said that over the last decade the city has shifted toward a more “victim-centered” approach for fighting sex crimes, opposed to simply prosecuting those caught doing it. Currently, she said, the city offers a program that connects people caught selling sex with advocates and other social services as an alternative to receiving criminal prosecution.

Treating these cases as a public health issue rather than a criminal justice one is another way the city is making that shift, Huff said, and he believes it’ll have better outcomes for everyone. “When you look at it from a public health perspective, our goal is that everybody is safe, everybody is healthy,” he said.

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