

# Academics oppose banning indoor prostitution in Rhode Island

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Rhode Island lawmakers should not ban indoor prostitution because sex workers operating behind closed doors are less likely to be physically abused, use drugs or become a neighborhood nuisance, a group of 50 academics said in an open letter.

Rhode Island is the only state in the country besides several counties in Nevada where indoor prostitution is legal. The trade in Rhode Island flourishes in about two dozen massage parlors and spas that authorities allege are thinly veiled brothels, although outdoor prostitutes and their customers can be prosecuted.

Earlier this year, House and Senate lawmakers passed different bills seeking to close a 30-year-old loophole allowing paid sex inside. The academics issued their letter this weekend as lawmakers, prosecutors and police negotiate compromise legislation in time for a vote planned for September.

The letter written by George Washington University professor Ronald Weitzer and Nassau Community College professor Elizabeth Wood argues that Rhode Island's existing criminal laws should not be changed.

Research shows indoor prostitutes are generally older than those operating on the street and less likely to be assaulted or raped, suffer from substance abuse, carry sexually transmitted diseases or have a history of childhood abuse, according to the letter.

"It's not to say indoor work is risk free, but clearly it's much safer than the streets as several studies show," Weitzer said Monday in a phone interview.

The letter argues that many prostitutes choose to work indoors, contrary to claims that they are victims of human trafficking.

"Rhode Island's current system of treating indoor and street prostitution differently is a step in the right direction," the letter said. "Criminalizing indoor sexual services is not the answer."

Rep. Joanne Giannini, D-Providence, a bill sponsor, said she had not seen the letter and could not comment on it. Other academics have publicly supported Giannini's bill, including University of Rhode Island professor Donna Hughes, who studies the sex trade.

"I believe that prostitution victimizes women, and trying to get them out of prostitution does not harm them because prostitution is so harmful," Hughes said.

Hughes said the scope of human trafficking in Rhode Island's massage parlor remains unknown since police cannot arrest prostitutes who work there and then interview them in private, away from spa managers and other minders.

The loophole permitting the spas is the result of a legislative mistake.

In 1976, a group called Call Off Your Old, Tired Ethics — or COYOTE — filed a lawsuit arguing that Rhode Island could not ban private sexual activity between adults, even if money is involved.

The challenged law was so restrictive it also banned certain forms of sex between consenting adults, even when money was not involved.

Around the same time, residents in the West End of Providence complained their neighborhood was overrun with prostitutes operating in plain sight.

A new law in 1980 banned only paid sex and tried to crack down on streetwalkers and their customers. It does not target indoor prostitution.

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