

## **Episode 94 - Dr. Shelly Wiechelt and Dr. Corey Shdaimah: Women's Experiences in Street-Level Prostitution: Implications for Court-Based and Social Service Programs (part 2 of 2)**

[00:00:08] Welcome to LIVING PROOF A podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Oduor Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to address you our regular listeners. We know you have enjoyed our podcast as evidenced by the more than 200000 downloads to date thanks to you all. We'd like to know what value you may have found in the podcast. We'd like to hear from all of you practitioners researchers students but especially our listeners who are social work educators. How are you using the podcast in your classrooms. Just go to our website at [W.W.W. dot social work dot Buffalo dot edu swards slash podcast](http://W.W.W.dot-social-work-dot-Buffalo-dot-edu-swards-slash-podcast) and click on the contact us tab. Again thanks for listening. And we look forward to hearing from you. Hi again from Buffalo. Many of you have probably heard of the Anchor Bar the birthplace of Buffalo style chicken wings. But did you know that at 9pm on weekends the Anchor Bar turns into a live jazz club and joins a long standing Buffalo jazz venues such as the Trough Music Hall. The Colored Musicians Club and UBS own Center for the arts as the place to be for live jazz.

[00:01:46] I'm Peter Sobota in the second of a two part podcast Dr. Shelly Wiechelt and Dr. Corey Shdaimah returned to conclude their discussion of their research into women engaging in street level prostitution in Baltimore City Marilyn doctors Wiechelt and Shdaimah elaborate on their findings on the role of the abuse of substances by the population and make a convincing argument for the use of a trauma informed perspective and thinking and developing responses to address the needs of this population. They leave little doubt that what many consider personal failings and are symptoms of the women who comprise this population are clearly attempts of the women to cope with the impact of the multiple traumas that they have endured. Also highlighted in the findings of the research are the women's perceived lack of choices and how practical their reasons are for entering and remaining in prostitution. Our guests detail the story of Kara one of the women interviewed to illustrate the cyclical relationship between the prostitution extensive experiences of trauma and substance abuse coupled with the coercion that many of the women feel to illustrate the reinforcing nature of this entire process. Our guests conclude by commenting on what they believe are more appropriate societal and policy responses to this population. Dr. Shelly Wiechelt is assistant professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore County School of Social Work. She conducts research on the interplay of shame trauma and substance abuse and develops collaborations between researchers and practitioners. Her research is primarily community based and includes studies on the provision of trauma informed services in substance abuse and mental health treatment settings with vulnerable groups including women urban American Indians and individuals with severe mental illness. Dr. Corey Shdaimah is assistant professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work with degrees in law and social work. Dr. Shdaimah research and writing focus on the intersection of law and street level social policy and researcher activist collaboration.

[00:04:00] Her recent research has explored the court's role in responding to truancy and alternative criminal justice responses to prostitution. Dr. Margaret Coombes is a regional office project Associate Research Foundation university in Albany. She is stationed out of the Rochester Regional Office Office of Children and Family Services New York living proof would like to recognize an error made in Dr. Coombes title in part 1 of this podcast Dr. Coomes title was incorrectly stated as regional office project associate University at Albany Office of Children and Family Services in Rochester New York. We regret the error. Dr. Coombes interviewed doctors Wiechelt and

Shdaimah by telephone simply being there is research that talks about emotional numbing and then maybe in terms of the substance abuse in order to do this type of job at such high risk in such a high amount of women that are actually injured whether it's physically emotionally mentally or actually died doing that you would have to. It seems like anybody in their right mind would have to be taking something to be able to do that night after night or day after day to be out there in such high risk area. Some of our women talked about using these substances in order to cut numb up and cope with their behaviors that they were engaging and it was hard for them to do some of the sexual acts that were involved in prostitution but found that when they drank a drug that the numbing of the drug or did help them to be able to kind of cope with the issues that they were confronted with in terms of their prostitution.

[00:05:49] So our findings around substance abuse really supported what we saw in the literature that all of our women did use substances with some of them as I mentioned earlier that we saw in the research literature that some of them use substances first and engage in the prostitution because they needed money to get the drugs but others of them did use substances begin to use substances in order to cope with engaging in the prostitution. So it didn't start to use drugs or alcohol until after they engaged in prostitution and some of them indeed started simultaneously. Now for some of them when they engage in prostitution their pimps or people who procure them into prostitution would simultaneously take them to drugs as a means of controlling them. I want to say something else that what you mentioned in terms of the extreme vulnerability of women who are engaged in street level prostitution which is confident with what you find in the literature and that for me also reinforced that element of perceived coercion right because most of the women we spoke to really knew the dangers and themselves experienced the dangers or the fears or had friends who were killed and had been raped and they had been harmed themselves. And so it really reinforced for me that when they said to us if we had any other viable choice we wouldn't be against prostitution.

[00:07:12] The fact that they knew these dangers and still went out there reinforced this perception of them that they were doing of choice if something went out there despite full knowledge of the dangers many of which they had already experienced themselves on a regular basis and that not that they're allowing themselves that they are in a situation where they continue to be revictimized which is why they could be similar to children that have probably victimization or children who grew up to be adults and continue to get into those relationships. So it's like that vulnerability that they had and the trauma that they continue to re-experience. I think for some women I'm not sure that it is a psychological seeking this again. I mean really you could give it that as a possibility to explore. But I just thought more like I really don't want to go out here. But I have to or I'm not. You know I don't have a roof over my head. It was much less of sort of psychological construction of seeking the harm than it was. I really had no choice because if I had a choice I wouldn't put myself in this danger which it says to me that they're not really seeking the harm due to some sort of a psychological something but it really is there the coercive circumstances or the lack of other choices that drive them out there. So lack of resources lack of other options. Yes and the perceived lack of other options. Yes. The perceived happens. Can you talk about some of the stories. Kara well before and we'll talk about care in particular I think it's important to recognize the rates of trauma that we saw amongst our women and we examined their extensive trauma looking at those using a stressful life experience scale and we want to understand how many events they experienced and what types they experienced and if they had any kind of trauma symptomatology.

[00:09:11] And we did find that the most of our women experienced more than five to 14 events they mean with 10 events both of them experienced 10 types of traumatic events across their lifespan. So these range from childhood physical abuse child sexual abuse to intimate partner violence to John violence. Can there symptomatology related to trauma on the PTSD checklist their score was mean of 57. So which was much higher than the norm in the general population which was 44 and 50 for the military. So we did find a high rate of experience of traumatic events across

the lifespan and high rates of symptomatology related to their traumatic experiences. Now I think that when you talk about trauma and trauma across the lifespan the stories the one that you mentioned Kara Kara was a woman who had began to engage in prostitution at a very young age. She grew up in a family where she indeed was experiencing abuse and neglect throughout her childhood. And she talks about how her mother would be in bed with other men while her father was away and how her mother tried to encourage her and her sister to engage in sexual behavior with these men. And at age 11 and 12 these girls went out in the streets and Kara began to prostitute herself while her younger sister watched out for her writing down the tag numbers of the cars to be sure she didn't come back that she can report what car she got in. And Kara says that she did this in order to survive in order to get money to take care of herself and her sister in terms of food. But while engaging in prostitution at that young age she also developed a heroin addiction. So the heroin addiction compounded her prostitution.

[00:11:16] Her involvement with heroin caused her to now need the money or in order to get the heroin so it became a sort of cyclical problem that her experience of poverty and abuse in childhood put her in a position that she needed to engage in prostitution in order to obtain money to get food and take care of herself and her sister. And by engaging in prostitution she discovered heroin and the heroin worked to numb her up. And so she now knew to heroin and she had a physiologic addiction to heroin and so she now needed to engage in prostitution in order to support the heroin use. And while she was using the heroin engaging in prostitution she was in you know exposed to people in the streets who were dangerous and violent and she had on multiple occasions been beaten up by johns. And she also had a male partner who beat her up. We even witnessed her coming into the facility while we were there beaten up by people in the street. So she experienced a great deal of violence and victimization across the lifespan. And she did at one time get into treatment for her heroin addiction and in fact became clean from heroin but then migrated to alcohol and developed a very serious alcohol addiction and was repeatedly hospitalized to avoid going into DT's and she had a number of other health related problems that emerge as a result of her substance abuse and life in the streets. A vicious cycle of violence and how it impacted not only her emotional well-being but also her physical. It's hard to get yourself out of that vicious cycle.

[00:12:59] How do you do both at the same time whether it's drug addiction along with the prostitution that it sounds like she was betrayed by her mom at a very young age to get into that kind of lifestyle. Yeah. When we met her actually she was 49 and turned 50 I think during the course of this study and we saw her several times. So she's still out there and this is very very many many years. And it also shows that mutually reinforcing nature. And so the idea that you can't Shelly was saying earlier you can't just address addiction and then hope people will get out of prostitution because there's multiple reasons. So one of the reasons that Kara was still engaging in prostitution she had these multiple problems and she would often be hospitalized because she had at the time that she has AIDS should happen because of her medical condition. So if she is not housed and if she doesn't have enough food to eat her medical conditions kick in. And so at some point during the study she had been living with her sister her sister kicked her out and she said she need to engage in prostitution otherwise she wouldn't be able to eat and if she wasn't being able to eat she wouldn't be able to keep up her physical health. And so it just shows how and that's why we really laid out her example in one of the articles because we just thought it really showed this not only the mutually reinforcing but sort of the progression and how this works in a way that really needs to be addressed not just in mental health but the material needs the physical health and the addiction all together.

[00:14:25] And if you just go at it one component it's not really going to work. It's not going to work. Basic needs need to be met medical needs be met. So those things have to occur at the same time and so how would you do that. It's so difficult. You've found some of these women in terms of they had the high level of exposure to trauma post-traumatic stress disorder or symptomatology

post-traumatic stress disorder and the rise of substance abuse. Was there anything else that you or any of the conclusions other findings that you want to talk about that were significant. Sure. I mean some of the other findings we had said earlier this idea that most of the women that we talk to all of them really said. One of them has a quote I don't remember if we used it one of the articles where we sent you. But you know we don't wake up in the morning saying one day saying I'm going to be a prostitute not my career goal. So this idea of coercion. So that was an important finding that we think that because of people you would mention the Pretty Woman glamour myth. So people are really saying and they wanted the court folks to understand that they want policymakers to understand it's understanding that this is not something that women choose. Some empowerment or glamour. They're doing it because they feel like they have no other options. So that's an important finding. And whether you agree or not so you might say well no one needs to buy drugs right. But they perceive this as. And that's why I use the term perceived.

[00:15:50] And it wasn't just for drugs it was for housing it was for you know it's cold. Where do I lay my head for food. Basic material needs but whatever the constellation it was a sense of being coerced by circumstances. The other thing is we definitely found a range of material needs housing was pronounced across the sample food medical care. There were material needs. And the idea that we don't really have the structural resources you know is very high just hard to find housing in Baltimore. So those kind of things were there these concrete needs. And I would say that forcing perhaps most interesting and the hardest thing may be to translate is the women we spoke to. And this underlying material needs. So even if they have material needs what they were really saying is please understand us we are human beings right because often they're not treated that they are human beings and we really want people to be open to the fact that we are human beings and we want to be understood right and they want empathy. And even when they spoke about their material needs it seemed like this idea that if judges or prosecutors or if the general public just understood that we are people who are making the best decision we feel like we can't under the circumstances then maybe they would be more empathic and maybe we would get real help to understand my situation better you're going to listen to me so you'll provide me with the kind of help that really might make me be able to desist from prostitution in the future. And I really link. And so the empathy was another desire for empathy.

[00:17:18] I would say was probably one of the more powerful findings that we have from the study. I think your research really gives them a faith. It makes them human and you feel empathy for each one of the women in their story. So you understand that they have needs and we need to address them. Can you talk about what the women how they felt about the court based diversion programs whether it was a specialized diversion program because it seemed like that was difficult. That once they get into a program sometimes they couldn't remain in the program because again they had this way to meet their needs and it was the only way that was working for them. So can you talk about how the diversion programs or the core programs work for them. Well their perspective on the court based programs was positive. They've wanted the poor to understand who they were and what their experience was. And they thought that if the court had a better sense of who they were and if the court was providing them with support and understanding rather than judgment and punishment and seen them in sort of a derogatory demeaning way. They wanted to be seen as human beings and they thought that this court based program would allow them to be seen by as human beings. They understood that there's a law against prostitution in the community and that they would be arrested for prostitution. But they felt that those who were arresting them and those who were dealing with them in the court system should understand who they were as people and try to help and support them.

[00:18:57] And many of them had positive experiences with judges in the past where others of them had terrible experiences where they were really demeaned and looked down upon some of them had been helped by police officers who were trying to support them and lead them to services and others

of them had been raped and abused by police officers. And so they had kind of a mixed view of the legal system although they understood that some had well-meaning intentions. They still wanted to feel powered in the system they wanted to feel respected empowered and not demeaned and so they saw this court based program as a way of coping with dealing with the court in the legal system and yet trying to get their needs met. And one of the things that they raised was once they got into the legal system oftentimes they couldn't even get a job and when they went to other agencies for help they were looked down on as you know you're you're a prostitute. And so this is why you have so many problems if you stopped prostituting you stop being bad. Then you wouldn't have these problems and they felt look down upon and demeaned and so that of course provoked them to not seek services and avoid the help and so they were really hopeful that this kind of program would provide them with services in which people were more understanding and more supportive and were likely to give them real solutions. You're raising one of the more curious things that we're continuing to investigate.

[00:20:30] The other thing that is you really have to understand their understanding of this system and the Program against the backdrop of their experience so they often need resources and have trouble getting these resources or accessing these resources if they even know about them. So that that this program has marshaled resources. They were also hopeful. Now maybe they can get it for me. So you have to think about that they're relatively positive attitude about the program against the backdrop of the dearth of services that they face. Right so it could be if these services were available in the community and they knew how to access them and they were able to get to them than they might not be so enthusiastic that court based program because they also weren't naive. They knew that there are dangers out of court based program. But when they compare it to the lack of alternatives it looks like it is hopeful. And we also wonder if the idea that they were hoping for a different experience of the criminal justice system meant that this program signaled that if there were prosecutors and police officers and judges who were creating this program it signal to them they do understand that I understand this a little bit better and maybe they will understand it so there was hope in that as well. And we were wondering too what does it mean that people have limited imagination we just can't imagine another alternative. We just can't imagine that this wouldn't be criminal in the first place that the only thing we can imagine is tinkering with making a better criminal justice. So I think we really have to understand the finding against the backdrop of what it is but we're very positive. And we all to underscore that for this particular sample.

[00:22:01] When we did our research interviews in the focus groups and the observations they were not in the program the program hadn't yet started the program started while we were in the course of doing the study. And so these were not people who had been in the program. That's a current project but that our findings are are sort of the idea of the program before them going into it. So not only does the court sometimes give them access to resources. But this study in taking the information to the community about what they need and how to be compassionate towards women and how to support them. They were feeling hopeful that this may work. Exactly right. And the idea that oh wow you mean there's actually a judge or a prosecutor who wants to create a program where they'll give us services even when we're arrested. I mean so that very exciting to them. And so it signaled to them that there must be some empathy there already. Otherwise they wouldn't even be thinking of this kind of a program. And so I think that that was also very hopeful. And I would imagine that the other promise of the court program Shelly had mentioned the idea if you are actually arrested and prosecuted and found guilty it's on your record. And so this diversion program and diversion programs are different but this particular one would not process that charge that they can on which means they could have that charge expunged. Right. So the idea of having a charge expunged was also enticing because some of the things we heard.

[00:23:30] Well we go to jail and then we come out or we're finding we a practitioner of records and that you want us not to prosecute but what other jobs are we going to get. So the idea of altering

the criminal record was another piece of this diversion program that are just not appealing. I'm sure for them in terms of expunging or not having criminal charges that would be helping them to access other resources so they don't have those charges against them. But I guess we get back into that debate about criminalization and charging the actual women more often than the judge. We've seen that as the problem as opposed to the johns or opposed to in terms of feminist perspective. These women haven't choices or access other resources. So can you described any of the services any other thing that they thought would be helpful for them in the community. What would be important to have access to. They thought that it would be important for them to have access to health care including mental health care substance abuse treatment housing employment was a very big concern for them because they didn't see a means of making money. And as I mentioned at once having charges made it difficult for them to get employment and so they want to have some kind of occupational training or as a means of getting support and they were also very interested in child care as kind of specific kinds of services that they felt they need. Now any of these services needed to be sensitive to their experience.

[00:25:10] And so we became aware that through our study and through our findings that it would be important for court based programs and other programs in the community that might work with women engage in prostitution really need to be trauma informed because the trauma experience was so ubiquitous amongst our women. And of course a will support that it's very common amongst others who engage in prostitution. But when you work with individuals who engage in prostitution it's really important to use a trauma informed approach and that care needs to really be integrated. So addressing substance abuse mental health trauma kinds of issues really need to be integrated. If we just shift people off will you go to this treatment program for substance abuse and when you're done there we'll hook you up with a mental health person and hopefully someone can deal with trauma. There is too piecemeal. And it doesn't tend to the overall problem and so any approach really needs to be empowering with the women it needs to be engaging them in a discussion about what kinds of services they need. And it really needs to be sensitive to helping them resolve and address that kind of intersecting web of issues related to trauma and substance abuse mental health health all of it really needs to be considered. So empowering engaging and ubiquitous in terms of being every every service being trauma-informed in this political climate. I don't know about Baltimore but I know about New York State. What is your feeling in terms of the information from your research. Do you think the community is ready for that. For trauma informed approaches and trauma informed approach but also access to those resources. Well it's a challenge and that's one of the things we noticed that a lot of our women were or had been engaged in substance abuse treatment.

[00:27:05] But the substance abuse treatment was not connected to any kind of pending redress or trauma issues. And it was not really trauma center. It was really basically saying you were involved in prostitution because you're a drug addict and if you stop being a drug addict and do this recovery program you will engage in prostitution which for the miss everything else so developing new programs right now with the economy and the shortage of funding I know is probably not very likely right now but existing programs can be trauma informed and existing programs can do case management and provide services in a more holistic way. I think we really have to look very carefully at the general policy implications. I don't hold out a lot of hope that prostitution will not be criminal but maybe we have to think about the way we're enforcing various policies. And I also don't think it costs a lot of money to think about being empathic informed. And I don't want to replace Concrete Services with empathy rake out. I feel for you. I'm sorry I can't give you housing but I love you. That's not really going to help. I don't want it to sound as glib as that. But I do think that if we were more open to each other and more open to the experiences that women have and their perceived lack of choices we might think a little bit differently about who we're arresting and what we're doing. And and even the way we treat people when they come before us whatever policy we're working under.

[00:28:36] And so I don't think that that costs money to be more open and empathic and to understand that people at least many of the people engaged in this really dangerous street level prostitution are doing it for a lack of other alternatives. And if that forces that more public conversation about the cost of this that would be great. I'm not sure it would. In speaking to people in various sites where they have programs like this I've been really struck with you know some people saying well we don't really have diversion programs for prostitution even though we have for drugs and for other offenses because the truth is you know it's a pretty low level crime. It doesn't bother us enough for us to do that much about it and it's women. So we don't really care so much about women are mostly women. And so for some people being really pessimistic about wanting whether their jurisdictions would be willing to invest resources in this particular population. But you could really take that all the way to the post. Well you could not. If it's not a priority right. We're going to first arrest the people that are selling drugs or killing people or engaged in crimes. That and I don't mean to minimize the way a neighborhood feels you know when people when it's played people in the neighborhood feel when neighborhood like my constitution. But when you think about the limited resources of the police department and our prosecution and our public defenders is it's really a wise use of resources to be punishing people who really would prefer not to be doing what they're doing right. And so this whole idea of criminal responsibility is problematic. You know maybe that's not the best use of our resources given the fiscal climate.

[00:30:11] So maybe there's room for a discussion like that to happen. So given that it may not be a priority or a high priority what do you think. What would you say that the public needs to know the prostitution. Is there anything specific that would change their mind and they'll need more of a priority. Well I think if they met Kara or they met out now really I mean I think that that's part of the value of the qualitative research rate. You came and spent the hundred hours that we've spent at jaana. I think a lot of people would feel really differently but I would like the public to know that most of the people being arrested if not everyone engaged in some form of sex work to use the broader term but not the people being arrested are doing so because they don't have other resources. And that that is dangerous and scary work and that if they are looking to help people there needs to be the provision of real alternatives that you can ask somebody to stop doing what they're doing to survive. I think that people need to understand that prostitution is very complicated and that there are different types of prostitution and that people may engage in prostitution for different reasons so our research was with women in street level prostitution. It wasn't with women in the high end escort services where women who identify more sex workers so not sure what their experience is.

[00:31:37] But I think that we need to understand people who engage in prostitution from a more broad perspective I think we tend to just look at women in prostitution and say those are the loose bad women. And so those loose bad women need to be looked at disdainfully and that if they engage in this behavior in a way that interferes with my community then they should be arrested and punished. Now they only interfere with my community I'm not that worried about it. So I think that people need to really recognize that these are not disdainful they had low horrible people that these are a variety of different types of people in a variety of different types of settings with a variety of different types of experiences and that those who they seem to be most troubled about. Those in street level prostitution many of those women are really in a position where they've experienced poverty they've experienced victimization they've experienced problems with employment and that they are you know in dire straits and that they need to be treated with dignity and respect and that we as a society need to create options for people that they don't have to make these kinds of choices and that perhaps as Corey mentioned perhaps we could consider ways of addressing this without punishing and further victimizing these women and further limiting their choices. I think you did though that you know some of these women understood the poverty victimization the trauma they've been through. I think you did paint a picture that said they had dignity they had respect and you know who they were and how they were human and they had basic

needs. And you said that actually because I'm sitting here thinking as we're talking that this conversation doesn't fully portray our experience I mean we laugh with these women and we would hug them. There is a real strength.

[00:33:43] If you're doing this for 10 years or 20 years and you're surviving you are a survivor. So there was a lot that we saw there that was just you know and that one woman said What would you rather have I steal from people you know she got to do something ethically and so. And we also saw women care for each other and help each other. And so you know it shouldn't all be about their victims their victims. These are women who have limited agency and there making choices within a very constrained menu of choices. But we were humbled by them. We were inspired by them. And to say that it's all this sort of pessimistic picture there's a lot to respect about that and their own stories. And I'm glad you mentioned that and I'm glad that this is coming in as part of the conversation as well. I think that the strength of the research here they women really have when you talk to them you can see they have they're very creative they're ingenious in how they figure out how to manage their lives and how they support each other both just doing the program and when you hear their stories about it when they support each other in the streets and I think what they were saying to us and what we learned from watching the program there was that if we just opened the doors they would walk through them. It was more where are the doors how do we access things. And oftentimes you know the doors are slammed in their faces.

[00:35:08] But if we would just treat them as human beings and recognize them as strong resourceful human beings and give them some access and opportunities to open doors they will walk through them in resort form. And when you do get that picture of them that they have survived this is how they tried to ensure they had access or could get into those doors. And I think you took out the rubber gloves and allowed them to tell you a little about themselves. How can the public or community help. Any recommendations. Well I think you know you mentioned you've commented a couple of times about the gloves and the rubber gloves and I think it's important for listeners to understand that we talk about that in our paper one of our participants said that people treated her as though they had rubber gloves on that they were they're going to catch something just by being near her that she was that disgusting and that the way she that particular person starts engaging in prostitution and actually is an AIDS educator in the streets right now. And she said that what helped her was when people started to talk to her without any rubber gloves on that they let her know that she was OK who she was where she was. Well she chose to engage in prostitution or not. And I think that that's really important that for the public to know that these are human beings and if we approach human beings with rubber gloves on as though they're diseased or disgusting then that's how they're going to feel and we need to approach people as human beings as equal as human beings. The only difference between me not engaging in prostitution someone else engaging in prostitution is really luck. Thank you very much.

[00:36:56] This is very informative. It's valuable research to social work to the community to hopefully change policy and how we implement services. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much. You've been listening to Dr. Shelly Wiechelt and Dr. Corey Shdaimah to discuss women's experiences and street level prostitution on living proof. Hi I'm Nancy Smith professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do. We invite you to visit our website at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). We are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.