



Book Review

Corey S. Shdaimah, Chrysanthi S. Leon, and Shelly A. Wiechelt (2023) *The Compassionate Court? Support, Surveillance, and Survival in Prostitution Diversion Programs*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press

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Corey Shdaimah, Chrysanthi Leon, and Shelly Wiechelt's book, *The Compassionate Court? Support, Surveillance, and Survival in Prostitution Diversion Programs*, explores the criminalization of sex work¹ and presents a strong critical analysis of court-affiliated prostitution diversion programs (PDPs) in Baltimore, Maryland, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. PDPs are a form of problem-solving justice that present alternatives to incarceration for sex workers and provide participants with services such as substance abuse and trauma therapy, case management, and legal support. The authors' study contributes to the ongoing policy debate regarding sex work and the risks and benefits of alternative criminal justice models.

The Compassionate Court? is based on a qualitative longitudinal study with the initial data collection taking place between 2011-2014 and a follow-up taking place between 2020-2021. The study examined two new PDPs designed specifically for street-level sex workers: the Specialized Prostitution Diversion Program (SPD) in Baltimore, Maryland, and Project Dawn Court (PDC) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The book's eight chapters use the programs to explore and critique the motivations, visions, and goals of PDPs across the United States.

The authors' profiles demonstrate their distinct abilities to explore reactions to street-level sex work. Corey Shdaimah is a Professor of Social Justice at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, and has experience in various dimensions of social work, including interventions for street-based sex work, welfare policy and social justice. Chrysanthi Leon is a Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Women and Gender Studies, and Legal Studies at the University of Delaware, whose research has centered around sex work, penology, punishment and law. Shelly Wiechelt is an Associate Professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and the Associate Dean and Chair of the School of Social Work's Baccalaureate Program. Her research focuses on the shame faced by sex workers, substance abuse and trauma. Each author's background and expertise are extensive, and it becomes evident from the book that their experiences have influenced how they have constructed their collaborative research—with a unique awareness to the power dynamics that dominate court rooms and how the formation of PDPs mirror broader issues in a punitive criminal justice system.



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In ‘Introduction: Prostitution Diversion Programs—A New Paradigm or Business as Usual?’, the authors begin by situating their research within current sex work debates between sex workers, criminal justice professionals, advocates and academics. The authors highlight that in all of this noise, one voice is generally lost in policy formation—that of sex workers, themselves. Chapter 1, ‘Prostitution Diversion: Criminalization, Individual Responsibility, and Rescue’, provides an overview of the book and describes how PDPs function as an extension of the criminal justice system’s aim to punish and correct behaviors.

In Chapter 2, ‘Study Sites: Prostitution Diversion Programs in Baltimore and Philadelphia’, the authors describe the formation of the SPD and PDC. They outline the selection criteria for program participants, which are often restricted to certain populations, such as cis-gender sex workers who are facing more than one criminal charge against them. Program participants are given access to resources based on their personal situations, but they are often allocated to certain participants based on the subjectivity of program personnel. Here, the authors pose an important question: are PDPs effective if the services and supervision they employ are not distributed evenly?

Chapter 3, ‘“That Foot on Their Neck”: Coercion and Choice’, provides a critical insider perspective of sex workers that is often absent from theoretical and ideological debates. The authors use participants’ experiences to show that many of them do not view PDPs as a rehabilitative opportunity but only as an alternative to incarceration. The choice between jail and restricted freedom is described as *coercion*, which is further used within the programs to enforce compliance. Chapter 4, ‘“I’ve Been Raped, I’ve Been Robbed, But I Could Have Been Killed”: Intersections of Trauma, Substance Use Problems, and Prostitution in the Eyes of the Court’, adds to existing evidence that PDPs are not well-equipped to aid sex workers with substance use disorders. The authors recognize and describe the reality of trauma and substance use disorders while also analyzing critically how they are framed within PDPs to inspire ‘acceptable behavior’.

In Chapter 5, ‘“I’ve [Got] Hooker Court Every Month”: Shame and Shaming in Prostitution Diversion Programs’, the authors describe the differences in the SPD and PDC. While the differences boil down to selection criteria and the use of coercion, the authors ensure that readers do not walk away from the text without understanding that *all* PDPs perpetuate dominant narratives of shame against sex workers. This leads readers to draw the conclusion that despite the limited benefits that PDPs provide, they mostly contribute to harmful narratives of all prostitutes as victims in need of saving from themselves (but only if they meet the acceptance criteria first). Chapter 6, ‘“To Be Normal”: Building, Rebuilding, and Surveilling Relationships: Social Connection in the Shadow of the Courts’, explores the social connections of program participants in the shadow of the court. Relationships—namely, with family, children, intimate partners, and program staff—all present a benefit and risk for the participants’ success. The court intervenes when one of these relationships is seen as a threat.

Chapter 7, ‘“Figuring Out What Should Happen”: Transformative or Conforming Practice?’, focuses on the motivations, vision, and goals of PDP staff. The authors describe that PDP professionals respond to the cognitive dissonances between their criminal justice roles, professional obligations, and personal ethics by becoming moral entrepreneurs within their decision-making authority. In this capacity, they decide who gets treatment based on perceived good behavior, echoing the critique highlighted by the authors earlier in the book. Chapter 8, ‘“Better Than Nothing”?’, offers the reflexive accounts of the authors’ research experience(s). As the authors describe, the chapter ‘is a composite of our own reflections that reveal our evolution through the register of our distinctive voices. In writing this book, we brought different and often overlapping perspectives, partly due to varied training and research emphases’ (p. 133), demonstrating how they achieved a nuanced and holistic overview of the effects of PDPs on sex workers.

Overall, *The Compassionate Court?* presents a necessary critical perspective on PDPs. Because the authors’ research began at the formation of both the SPD and the PDC, the authors had a unique opportunity to trace its effects over two distinct time periods. The selected methodologies were ideal, as a longitudinal study contributed greatly to the validity and reliability of their findings. This is demonstrable in the use of the rich accounts of the participants that aided the authors in the formation of their arguments of PDPs as insufficient. There are some points where the overlap between arguments and contradictions within PDPs becomes confusing and even overwhelming at times, but the authors compensate for this with seamless introductions and conclusions to each chapter. Here, readers are provided with an entry/exit point that tie together the chapter’s main arguments with the research findings from each chapter.

The Compassionate Court? gives a voice back to sex workers. While a lot of qualitative research on prostitution and social work can accomplish this, the authors’ study provided an insider view on how a newer approach to criminal justice would impact the intended beneficiaries. In this way, the authors succeed in issuing a wake-up call to readers of any knowledge base: PDPs reflect the criminal justice system’s inability to address the systemic failures that incentivize the crimes that it seeks to prevent.

The authors have met their goal of contributing to the ongoing policy debate as they crafted *The Compassionate Court?* in such a way that it would be exceptionally useful in guiding policy makers, law enforcement officials and criminal justice system professionals. Researchers of any discipline will find the text useful in understanding qualitative methods and the benefits of longitudinal studies in policy analyses. Finally, if one has not heard of PDPs before, *The Compassionate Court?* may spark a fire in early career researchers or anyone who is interested in educating themselves about injustices in the United States' criminal 'justice' system.

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¹ Note about the terminology: as described in the book, people who engage in sex work as an occupation refer to it as 'prostitution' and themselves as 'prostitutes'. Thus, 'sex work' and 'prostitution' are used interchangeably in this review, as are 'sex worker' and 'prostitute' to pay homage to the lived experiences of the participants in the book's study.