



- ▶ **FULL REPORT**
- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Overview
- ▶ Background
- ▶ Current Situation
- ▶ Outlook
- ▶ Pro/Con
- ▶ Chronology
- ▶ Short Features
- ▶ Maps/Graphs
- ▶ Bibliography
- ▶ The Next Step
- ▶ Contacts
- ▶ Footnotes
- ▶ **About the Author**

Decriminalizing Prostitution

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Should buying and selling sex be legal?

By Sarah Glazer

Introduction



A 17-year-old girl is arrested for alleged prostitution in Los Angeles. The human rights group Amnesty International proposes decriminalizing the sex trade worldwide in an effort to make life safer for prostitutes. (Getty Images/Robert Nickelsberg)

Amnesty International has spurred a global debate on prostitution with a controversial proposal to decriminalize the sex trade worldwide. The human-rights organization argues that lifting bans on prostitution would make life safer for prostitutes. But critics say decriminalization would increase global sex trafficking and put many women at greater risk. Policies on prostitution are shifting throughout Europe and the United States. In response to concerns about trafficking and health risks, the German and Dutch governments have proposed tightening existing regulations that have legalized prostitution. New Zealand, on the other hand, has fully decriminalized the sex trade along the lines supported by Amnesty. Sweden has adopted what is known as the "Nordic model," in which only the buyers of sex are prosecuted. Seattle and 10 other U.S. cities are copying Sweden, hoping to stop prostitution altogether by eliminating demand for commercial sex. But critics, arguing that no way exists to halt the world's "oldest profession," say the Nordic approach simply drives the sex trade further underground.

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