

Policing Incentives and the Cycle of Marginalization: The Impact of Police Bonus System on Trans Sex Workers in Türkiye

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex relationship between police enforcement practices and the trans sex worker community in Istanbul, focusing on the introduction of a police bonus system in 2009. Drawing on Asli Zengin’s *Violent Intimacies*, the study explores how this bonus system incentivized police officers to disproportionately target trans sex workers through ticketing practices, reinforcing a cyclical dynamic of increased sex work and police intervention. By constructing a causal loop diagram, the paper identifies key reinforcing mechanisms, including economic pressures, learning and adaptation among police and sex workers, and broader social and ideological influences. The analysis highlights how systemic discrimination and institutional incentives drive these feedback loops. Policy interventions should focus on empowering local activism, educating sex workers about their legal rights, and rebalancing the bonus system to target actual crimes rather than marginalized groups. The study concludes that shifting public opinion is essential to achieving long-term legislative reform and breaking the cycle of targeted policing and marginalization.

Keywords: Trans Rights, Sex Work, Extralegality, Causal Loop Diagram, Policy Reform

1 Introduction

Modeling in this paper draws on the ideas presented in Asli Zengin’s recently published book, *Violent Intimacies: The Trans Everyday and the Making of an Urban World*. Based on her observations while working with an NGO and conducting structured interviews with trans sex workers, Zengin examines how an intimate yet violent symbiotic relationship emerged between police officers and sex workers, rooted in extralegal activities. In particular, the book’s second chapter highlights how a bonus system introduced within the police force in 2009 fostered a cyclical dynamic between police officers and trans sex workers, revolving around ticketing practices and the resulting increase in sex work. [1]

To provide context on the fraught relationship between police and trans individuals in Istanbul, Turkey, it is necessary to revisit the period following the military coup of the mid-1980s. During this era of pervasive state violence, between 1992 and 1997, Süleyman, infamously nicknamed “the Hose,” became a notorious figure as the Head of the Beyoğlu Police Department. Known for his extreme brutality, which he had honed during his tenure in the Kurdish region, Süleyman presided over rampant human rights abuses targeting trans sex workers, particularly those residing on Ülkü Street. These abuses included frequent police raids, public humiliation, imprisonment, and torture. Süleyman’s moniker, “Hose,” stemmed from his notorious use of hoses as tools of punishment against trans women. His tenure culminated in the forced displacement of trans communities from Ülkü Street, leaving a legacy of systemic violence that persisted—albeit to a lesser degree—until Hüseyin Çapkın’s appointment in 2009. [2]

Between 2009 and 2013, under the leadership of Hüseyin Çapkın, a new era of police discipline and control emerged in Istanbul. Although police torture was officially curtailed under the AKP government’s “zero tolerance for torture” policy, Çapkın employed legal frameworks as punitive tools against marginalized groups, especially trans women. Police operations focused on tracking, profiling, and issuing fines to trans individuals, often for minor infractions or fabricated charges. These tactics resulted in frequent, albeit brief, detentions designed to disrupt and destabilize their lives. As part of these standardization efforts, a controversial bonus system was introduced for police officers in Turkey, offering financial rewards, vacation time, and promotions based on points accrued for crimes they “prevented.” As can be seen from Figure 1, this bonus system was disproportionately weighted, categorizing “transvestites” (“travesti”) and “known women” (“bilinen bayan”, prostitute) as criminal elements despite the legal status of sex work in Turkey [3].

| ÖNLEYİCİ HİZMETLER BÜRO AMİRLİKLERİ PUAN CETVELİ | | | |
|--|--|---------|--------------|
| S.N. | SUÇ ADI | PUANI | TUTUKLANIRSA |
| 1 | MOLOTOF-TERÖR OLAYLARI | 1.500 | |
| 2 | CINAYET | 1.000 | |
| 3 | GASP | 1.000 | 1250 |
| 4 | KAPKAÇ | 1.000 | 1250 |
| 5 | HİRSIZLIK | 1.000 | 1250 |
| | Evden | 1.000 | 1250 |
| | İş Yerinden | 1.000 | 1250 |
| | Oto | 1.000 | 1250 |
| | Otodan | 1.000 | 1250 |
| | Resmî Kurum | 1.000 | 1250 |
| | Çalıntı Motor | 200 | |
| | Tescilsiz Motor | 30 | |
| 6 | SİLAH | 50 | |
| | Yankesicilik | 50 | |
| | Dolandırıcılık | 50 | |
| | Açıktan Hırsızlık | 30 | |
| | Ruhsatsız | 250 | |
| | Ruhsatlı/Bulundurma | 50 | |
| 7 | NARKOTİK(Faili Elde) | 100 | |
| | NARKOTİK(Faili Elde Olmayan) | 10 | |
| | YARALAMA | 50 | |
| 8 | ARANAN ŞAHİS | 250 | 500 |
| | Parmak İzi Tespiti Aranan | 20 | 100 |
| 9 | SAHTE KİMLİK | 250 | 500 |
| | MEMURA MUKAVEMET(Hedef Kitle) | 20 | |
| 10 | TRAVESTİ | 10 - 20 | |
| 11 | BİLİNEN BAYAN | 10 - 20 | |
| 12 | MADDE BAĞIMLISI | 10 | |
| 13 | TERK OTO | 5 | |
| 14 | İZRAR | 5 | |
| 15 | KABAHAHTLER KANUNU | 2 | |
| 16 | KARAYOLLARI ÜZERİNDE SATICILIK YAPAN(Mendil Satan, Cam Silen Vb. Şahıslar) | 15 | |
| NOT: | | | |
| 1- Yukarıdaki puanlar failer ekipler tarafından alındığında verilecektir. | | | |
| 2- 1 günde birden fazla aranan şahıs tutanağı olan ekiplere; Birinci aranan şahıs tutanağı=20 İkinci aranan şahıs tutanağı=30 Üçüncü aranan şahıs tutanağı=40 puan gibi 10 puan artırılarak verilecektir. | | | |
| 3- 1 günde birden fazla NARKOTİK şahıs tutanağı olan ekiplere; Birinci NARKOTİK tutanağı=100 İkinci NARKOTİK tutanağı=150 Üçüncü NARKOTİK tutanağı=200 puan gibi 50 puan artırılarak verilecektir. | | | |
| 4- Buluntu Narkotik dışında Ticarilerden alınan her icraate 2 katı puan verilecektir. | | | |

Figure 1: Crime classifications and corresponding bonus points, as defined by police, were shared on social media in 2011.

This system devalued serious offenses, with its skewed criteria equating 10 glue-sniffers to 2.5 trans individuals or one assault. Trans people were disproportionately targeted and fined under the Traffic Law and Misdemeanor Law [2] for unrelated or fabricated offenses. These fines, often set at 69 liras—nearly [1] 14% of the minimum monthly wage of 500 liras—became a systemic mechanism for financial exploitation and harassment.

Following up on this structure, this paper aims to explore the complex dynamics between police enforcement practices and the trans sex worker community in Istanbul. It examines three key questions: (1) What causal mechanisms are triggered by the introduction of the police bonus system? (2) What motivates police officers to disproportionately target trans individuals with tickets and fines? (3) Under what conditions can the long-term effects of this punitive system be mitigated, and which feedback loops sustain this cycle? Answering these questions will provide a deeper understanding of the systemic and cyclical nature of this issue.

2 Causal Loop Diagram of Bonus System

Building on the rhetoric discussed in Violent Intimacies, we constructed the causal loop diagram shown in Figure 2. In this diagram, the colors represent different processes that contribute to the cyclical relationship driven by the bonus system. In this section, we examine each process, represented by a color, while also providing supporting sentiments from the book.

2.1 Sex Work Cycle

Highlighted in red in Figure 2, this section outlines the cyclical relationship between police officers and trans sex workers which is the anchor mechanism. In book, this mechanism is inferred as follows:

”First, as the police allegedly tried to prevent sex work on the street, they indirectly motivated trans women to do more sex work since most of them had no way other than prostitution to make money for their fines” Violent Intimacies, p.93 [1]

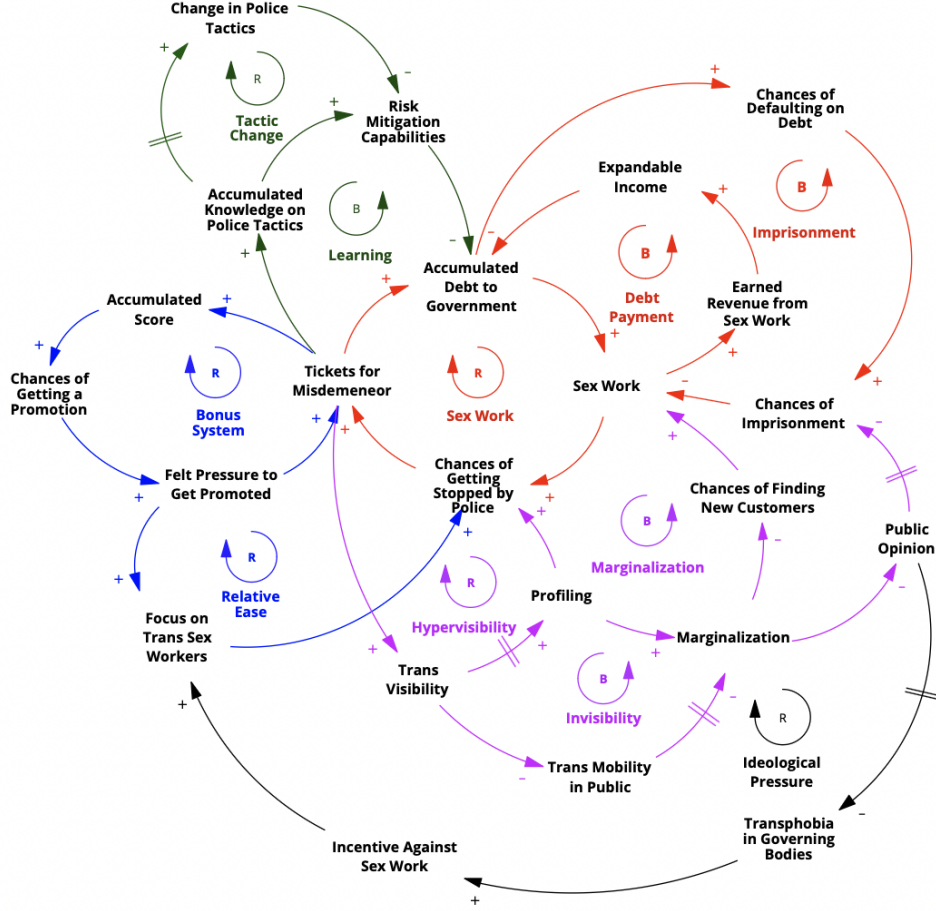


Figure 2: Causal Loop Diagram of the complex dynamics between police officers and trans sex workers as a result of bonus system. Loops indicated in red (sex work cycle), blue (bonus system), and green (learning and adaptation) represent first order relationships between trans sex workers and police officers while loops in purple (hypervisibility and invisibility) and gray (ideological pressure) indicate second order effects derived from this complex dynamic.

When trans sex workers receive tickets for various misdemeanors under the Traffic Law and Misdemeanor Law, they accumulate debt to the government which they need to pay in order to prevent punitive action. However, to pay these fines, they are forced to engage in more sex work, as they often lack alternative means of financial support. Increased sex work, in turn, makes them more likely to be stopped by police and issued additional tickets, reinforcing the cycle.

Within this reinforcing structure, there are two balancing loops. The first occurs through the repayment of accumulated debt, which is made possible by the increased income generated from additional sex work. This loop prevents the imprisonment of trans individuals by actively reducing their debt. The second balancing loop comes into play when debt repayment becomes unsustainable. As the likelihood of defaulting increases with accumulating debt, failing to follow-up with debt eventually leads to imprisonment, ultimately removing them from the streets and preventing them from generating income throughout their sentences.

2.2 Bonus System

The second mechanism, indicated in blue, arises from the bonus system established in 2009, which incentivizes ticketing as a pathway to promotion. Within this system, police officers accumulate points by issuing tickets, increasing their chances of promotion. As the likelihood of promotion grows, so does the perceived pressure on officers to issue more tickets to meet the weekly threshold required for advancement.

“(…) these were the bonus points that a police officer would receive if they capture the associated criminal type(…) this bonus system(…) provide police officers with a new means of recompense

in the form of pay, leave, and promotions. (...) For example accumulating a thousand points per week was sufficient to receive a vacation or financial bonus.” Violent Intimacies, pp.87-88 [1]

However, while this core mechanism can be argued to affect the issuance of tickets for misdemeanors broadly, and not exclusively for sex workers, an additional reinforcing structure emerges due to the relative ease of targeting trans individuals. As discussed in the background section, this relative ease stems from the systemic imbalance in the bonus system that disproportionately penalizes sex workers. Consequently, under the pressure to secure promotions, police officers may prioritize easier targets, such as sex workers, to quickly accumulate points. This dynamic further increases the likelihood of trans sex workers being stopped and ticketed.

2.3 Learning and Adaptation

It is also stated that both parties evolved over time through a mechanism indicated in green.

“First they used to fine trans women for being exhibitionist. (...) Then they started to make me out as a pimp on the ticket, even though I was selling myself. They would jail me and I would spend a month in prison. Now they started ticketing us using Traffic Laws. Girls started to carry tiny cams (...) to record police malpractice.” Gizem, sex worker. [1]

As police officers developed new tactics to issue tickets and push sex workers off the streets, the sex workers adapted by learning the legislation that could protect them, challenging unlawful ticketing practices, and fighting for their rights. Over time, as sex workers became familiar with police tactics and developed strategies to protect themselves, police officers responded by gradually introducing new methods of issuing tickets. This ongoing process of learning and adaptation is represented in green on the causal loop diagram. The delay marker on accumulated knowledge and changes in police tactics reflects the time required for both sides to adapt, resulting in an oscillatory relationship.

2.4 Paradox of Hypervisibility and Invisibility

Apart from the initial three mechanisms observable in the short term, the author discusses a second-order mechanism that exacerbates the growing disparity between trans individuals and the rest of society. As trans people are repeatedly ticketed by police on the streets, their visibility in society increases. This heightened visibility leads to a paradoxical phenomenon of hypervisibility and invisibility, represented in pink on the causal loop diagram.

“There is a complicated and intricate tension between trans hypervisibility and invisibility, between an unwanted inclusion in the public (as object figures) and an exclusion from the possibilities of full civic life. Visibility does not always bring empowerment or a recognition in its subjects, and it can, on the contrary, remove the possibilities of an ordinary life. Trans visibility (...) at the same time invites unwanted attention, material violence and more policing.” [1]

First, the targeted ticketing of trans individuals makes them hypervisible in society through an unwanted form of inclusion. Profiling and stereotyping these individuals impose societal pressures, further encouraging police to stop them, as officers receive both validation and gratification for doing so. Simultaneously, this increased public attention drives trans individuals into more secluded areas, pushing them into backstreets where they are less likely to encounter people outside their immediate social circles. This shift fosters an invisibility loop. By retreating from public spaces, trans individuals experience further marginalization, which is amplified by ongoing profiling efforts. This dynamic not only reduces their chances of finding customers but also diminishes public opinion toward them, deepening their social and economic exclusion.

2.5 Ideological Pressure

Indicated in grey, there is another reinforcing loop that becomes active with a delay, and its effects are only observable in the long run. As trans communities face increasing marginalization and declining public opinion, this initiates an additional loop where growing ideological disparity influences the ideology of governing bodies through elections.

“The new law... empowers us to arrest people suspected of homosexuality for a term of twenty-four hours... We have to be tough against persons who have such perverted thoughts and tendencies. The number of such persons increases daily. They become the cancer of society... We therefore shall introduce measures against these people everywhere, but especially in the big cities.” Yildirim Akbulut, Minister of Interior, June 1985

As more transphobic individuals attain positions in government, stronger and more pervasive incentives emerge within government processes to act against trans individuals. These initiatives enable governing bodies to gradually shift policies and exert greater oversight over police operations, further entrenching systemic discrimination in the long term.

3 Discussion

Building on the causal loop diagram, our primary mechanism is the bonus system, which reinforces structures that lead to increased sex work. If the bonus system were restructured to no longer target sex work, the number of sex workers would increase only in response to economic pressures on existing trans individuals, which are tied to the nation’s broader economic policies. However, given the historical prevalence of police violence against sex workers and the ongoing marginalization of this group, reforming the bonus system is unlikely to be achievable in the short term.

In terms of policy interventions, immediate action is needed to address the "Accumulated Knowledge on Police Tactics," which drives the learning mechanism that perpetuates police malpractice against sex workers. One effective policy lever is empowering local activist efforts. As police adopt new extralegal measures, these emerging "tactics" should be closely monitored by non-governmental organizations, and sex workers should be educated about their legal rights to prevent further abuse and exploitation.

However, as long as the bonus system targets trans sex workers or sex workers in general, these interventions cannot be sustained. Eliminating the incentive system entirely is unlikely, given the perceived benefits within the police force. Police officials have publicly stated on multiple occasions that the incentive system serves as a key source of motivation for officers, making its removal improbable. Nevertheless, the unjust inclusion of sex workers within the incentive system should be addressed immediately. The bonus system should be rebalanced to focus on addressing actual crimes rather than disproportionately targeting marginalized groups.

To achieve this, shifting public opinion is essential, as public sentiment is a key driver of second-order effects and a major catalyst for legislative change. Changing public opinion is only possible by reducing the marginalization of trans and sex worker communities. Long-term efforts should focus on dismantling the social and institutional barriers that isolate these groups. Only when public opinion begins to favor marginalized communities can meaningful legislative reforms to the bonus system be enacted.

4 Future Research Directions

For future work, a primary research objective involves extending the model into an agent-based framework that explicitly captures the interactions between trans individuals, police officers, and the broader legislative environment. An agent-based model (ABM) will provide a powerful tool for examining the complex, nonlinear dynamics that characterize these interactions and for identifying targeted interventions to break the cyclical loop of violence.

One key area of focus will be the influence of the bonus system and ticketing incentives on police behavior. The connection between promotion pressures and the disproportionate targeting of trans sex workers reflects both institutional incentives and learned operational norms. Senior officers’ historical experiences with trans communities often shape how new recruits engage with trans individuals, reinforcing patterns of discrimination over time. Understanding when and why new recruits adopt transphobic behaviors, despite personal beliefs, will be critical. The ABM will model the influence of peer learning and cumulative institutional pressures, with an estimated deployment of 600 officers during the study period.

Another crucial aspect involves the learning curve among trans individuals, which occurs through direct experience, shared knowledge, and support from NGOs and community networks. The model will track how information exchange and support systems influence adaptation to changing police tactics over time. The initial state of knowledge among newly entering sex workers will be conditioned by their connectivity with other trans individuals and institutions, reflecting the social diffusion of survival strategies. The ability of trans individuals to adapt will depend on the strength of these networks and the responsiveness of support systems to shifts in policing patterns.

The model will also explore how systemic discrimination and lack of alternative employment opportunities push many trans individuals into sex work. Entry into sex work is often facilitated by peer networks and environmental factors, excluding cases of trafficking. Friends who are already engaged in sex work often introduce others into the business, reinforcing the cycle of economic marginalization. The ABM will also account for how punitive measures such as ticketing serve as a catalyst for entry into sex work, creating a reinforcing loop of economic vulnerability and legal exposure.

Finally, the model will capture the dynamics of profiling by police, which is shaped by past interactions and compliance behaviors. While compliance might mitigate profiling efforts in some cases, it is often treated as a fixed trait. Some trans individuals are subjected to repeated stops and scrutiny, leading to significant

financial debts and long-term psychological stress. The ABM will investigate how profiling shapes the long-term experiences of trans individuals and whether avoidance and compliance strategies can offer meaningful protection or merely shift patterns of targeting. Understanding these dynamics will provide valuable insights into the structural factors perpetuating violence against trans individuals and help identify policy interventions to disrupt these cycles.

By integrating these complex dynamics, the proposed agent-based model will offer a deeper understanding of the structural factors reinforcing violence against trans individuals. It will also enable the testing of policy interventions and behavioral shifts, providing actionable insights for policymakers and advocacy groups seeking to disrupt the cycle of violence and improve outcomes for trans communities.

References

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