The Young Women's Empowerment Project (YWEP) is a member based social justice organizing project for girls, transgender girls and young women ages 12-23 who have current or past experience in the sex trade and street economy. Our mission is to offer safe, respectful, free-of-judgment spaces for girls impacted by the sex trade and street economy to recognize their hopes, dreams, and desires. The goal of our work is to build a movement of girls with life history in the sex trade and street economy so that we can unite and fight back.

YWEP is youth run. This means our staff all comes from our membership and is almost entirely between the ages of 12-23. YWEP defines a member as any girl or transgender girl who is currently or formerly involved in the sex trade and/or street economy, is under 23 and who attends at least one membership meeting per year. We do workshops all over Chicago and the country. We also reach 500 girls per year through our peer to peer outreach and an additional 100 through our syringe exchange. Our Youth Activist Krew and Girls In Charge work to deepen their political education and make decisions for our project- including building our base, hiring staff and creating our campaigns. We also do research, which we will talk about later in this paper.
Our Leadership Development

YWEP is based off our leadership ladder and our membership base. Our Leadership ladder works like a cycle. Members come in through our weekly Girls in Charge meeting, this is our base. Girls in Charge is responsible for making consensus on important decisions in the project, as well as interviewing board members. Girls come from all over Chicago, and have different backgrounds, but YWEP is where we can come together. Receiving stipends for their work, they spent most of the group learning about the movement, resilience, and sisterhood.

After attending four Girls in Charge meetings, they are eligible to be in our outreach worker training. Our outreach worker training is roughly 56 hours and is growing all the time. During the summer the training takes place for 4 to 8 weekends depending on how we schedule it. By the end of the training, girls are knowledgeable and are a resource to our constituency. They are paid for the entire training, and most are then hired as outreach workers, who are paid for two and a half hours of outreach per week. Once girls are at this level they have internship opportunities, where they can work for 8 hours a week of work. After they are interns, girls can become staff positions, and youth are always moving up.

As an entry level staff person, your job title is called a “leader”. At this level some co-facilitate groups and work on curriculum and workshops. Others are intensely involved in research and the administrative work. Whatever the main focus in the leader’s job description, that will be their main focus when they are promoted to Coordinator positions where they have more responsibility. For example, if they were co facilitating now they would be the facilitator. And then ladder repeats itself and a new leader would move up, and then the new coordinator would be supervising her. The highest level on our
leadership ladder is Co Executive Directors. Our first young person to move all the way up the ladder and become the Co Executive Director is Dominique McKinney. She became the Co Director in January 2009 and is in charge of running our site.

**Our Values**

YWEP’s values vary and run deep in all of our work, daily and annual alike. From self care to harm reduction, to popular education, and empowerment theory - our model is based off the idea that we believe girls are the experts in their own lives. Many times girls are taught that they don’t know what is best for them. A doctor knows what is best for her health, a social worker knows what is best for her emotional health or a judge knows what is best for her - period! At YWEP we strive to create spaces where girls are in charge. A place where girls are knowledgeable about these systems and the harm they can cause.

Institutional violence is when a system causes harm, or someone who is part of a system, causes harm. We don’t tell girls what to do, we don’t give advice and adults don’t take control of youth led projects. We create as many opportunities as possible for girls to be in leadership positions and adults DO NOT do all the important work and DO NOT make all the important decisions. Being empowered means that girls are active in the decisions they make about their lives. At YWEP we give girls skills to become active in their lives, by involving them in leadership development as much as possible and by educating them about their rights, their money and their options.

We bring social justice into our work by acknowledging and supporting resistance. Resistance is anyway you fight back (Resilience is anyway you heal from violence). We value the rebellion of girls impacted by the system. We encourage girls to look closely at the way things like racism, classism, sexism and homophobia play out and affect girls
involved in the sex trade and street economy. We understand that the sex trade is not about one person, but about a system of things that all work together to oppress women, people of color, lesbian and transgender people and others too. We offer education and support to girls so that they can begin to unpack what social justice means to women and girls involved in the sex trade. To some girls, this might mean working for rights, to other girls this might mean working to abolish the sex trade and to other girls it might mean both. One way that we incorporate social justice into our daily work is by working to build community. We do this by helping girls find connections with each other, by looking closely at how we might play out sexism (like by calling girls “ho's”) and by creating a respectful, free of judgment space where girls can get information about how to change the world.

Another one of YWEP's strong values, but also a tool, is Popular Education. Popular education is a way of talking about ideas that helps to get people thinking critically about things so that they can act together as a community to address inequalities and injustices. At YWEP we strive to expand our knowledge about each other and about the stories of social justice movements- our stories about our experience in foster care might sound like someone else's story too. When we share our stories, we can find common ground to and being to work together to resist and fight back.

Our Research
The Young Women's Empowerment Project released a report in September of 2009 called “Girls Do What They Have to Do to Survive: Illuminating Methods Used by Girls in the Sex Trade and Street Economy to Fight Back and Heal.” This research is unique because it is the only study that we know of that was developed and conducted by girls ages 12-23 in the sex trade and street economy. It’s also the only report we know of that
focuses on the resilience and resistance of girls involved in the sex trade and street economy. The full findings of this participatory action research study can be found at www.youarepriceless.org.

   Social justice for girls and young women in the sex trade means having the power to make all of the decisions about our own bodies and lives without policing, punishment, or violence. Our community is often represented as a "problem" that needs to be solved or we are portrayed as victims that need to be saved by someone else. We recognize that girls have knowledge and expertise in matters relating to our own lives that no one else will have. We are not the problem—we are the solution.

   Why we started this research: We decided that we would do this research to show that we are not just objects that violence happens to- but that we are active participants in fighting back and bouncing back. We wanted to move away from the one-dimensional view of girls in the sex trade as only victims to look at all aspects of the situation: violence, our response to the violence, how we fight back and heal on a daily basis. We want to build our community by figuring out how we can and do fight back collectively and the role of resilience in keeping girls strong enough to resist.

   We want to show that girls in the sex trade face harm from both individuals and institutions. Nearly all the research we could find about girls in the sex trade only looks at individual violence. Many people seem to think that more institutions or social service systems is the solution. YWEP agrees that institutions can be helpful at times, but we also wanted to show the reality that we face: every day girls are denied access to systems due to participation in the sex trade, being drug users, being lesbian, gay or transgender or being
undocumented. We know institutions and social services can and do cause harm in our lives. We present this research to show that the systems that claim to help girls are also causing harm. We want to show that girls in the sex trade are fighting back and healing on their own - within their communities and without relying upon systems.

We also wanted to show how girls in the sex trade fight back against the institutional violence they experience so we could share what is working. With the data we collected, we discovered that girls face as much institutional violence (like from police or DCFS) as they do individual violence (like from parents, pimps, or boyfriends).

We wanted to show how girls bounce back and heal from individual and institutional violence. We wanted this information so that we can collectively build a social justice campaign to respond to broad systemic harm. From this, YWEP’s first youth developed, led, and analyzed research project was born.

**Our research questions were:**

1. What individual and institutional violence do girls in the sex trade experience?

2. How do we heal/bounce back from this violence?

3. How do we resist/fight back against this violence?

4. How can we unite and collectively fight back?

We answered these questions using 4 tools: we did focus groups with our membership and outreach workers, we created a fill in the blank zine so that girls could document the ways they heal and fight back, we used ethnographic observation - by paying attention and writing down the experiences of our outreach contacts and we asked new questions in our workshops about how girls we taking care of themselves and avoiding violence.
Our Findings:
We had three main findings:

1. Institutional violence made individual violence worse - this means that when girls experienced things like rape or assault and then tried to get help, systems often did more harm to us. An example of this is a girl not being believed or even arrested when she is trying to file a report for rape.

2. We are DENIED HELP from institutions both passively and actively. This means that some systems are set up to fail us because they are too complicated or because we are simply told that we cannot access help because we are involved in the sex trade or street economy.

3. Resilience is a stepping stone to resistance. This means that the more we take care of ourselves, or heal - the more we have the power to fight back. We heal through breaking isolation and building community, by soothing ourselves with art, meditation, reading, baths and more. We fight back and resist violence by building critical awareness and recognizing that oppression plays an important role in our experiences. We fight back by speaking out and standing up for ourselves and our community. Harm reduction is a life philosophy that we use to resist violence. It’s more than just using a condom - it means learning to put our safety and healing first. We saw over and over again that girls are excited and inspired about making changes and practicing self care. We have now have proof that unconventional resilience methods are a stepping stone to resistance.
Our Campaign: Street Youth Rise UP!
After we compiled all our findings we reached out to our allies at the Ruckus Society and Detroit Summer to help us translate our research into a campaign that would improve the quality of our lives. We wanted to use our findings to make real changes in our community.

We named our campaign STREET YOUTH RISE UP! Our goal is to change the way Chicago sees and treats homeless, home-free and street based youth who do what they have to do to survive. Our campaign comes from our 2009 research findings which discovered that young people are being denied help from helping organizations based on their involvement in the sex trade and street economy, because they are homeless, because they are of color and/or Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgender. Our research also found that resilience is a stepping stone to resistance. We created our campaign to build our resilience and resistance to institutional violence.

Street Youth Rise Up has four components:

1. Healing in Action: We wanted to support our resilience with Healing in Action—which trains us in herbal first aid and self exams so we know what to do when we can’t get to a doctor. We use reproductive and healing justice values to educate ourselves and our community about taking care of own bodies through alternative methods such as self exams, Chinese medicine, evidence based herbal first aid and acupuncture.

2. Bad Encounter Line: A tool for young people to report encounters with helping organizations so that we can identify and educate those providers (explained more below)
3. Media: We turned the research and campaign work into media-like zines, advocacy tips, music tracks and we have been working on a computer game called “Getting to know the Game” which helps people understand the reality of how our lives are impacted by institutional oppression and system harm.

4. Chicago Street Youth in Motion (CSYIM): A group of young people from across Chicago who have come together to hold institutions accountable when they are denying young people help.

**What is The Bad Encounter Line (BEL)?**
The BEL tracks what systems are denying us help and what youth are doing to get their needs met. The BEL data gets turned into a zine 4 times a year and we share the information with our community. The BEL also feeds into our task force called Chicago Youth in Motion. This is a citywide gathering of street youth of all genders that meets once per month to figure out how to make social services and systems respond to us.

**How and why we developed the Bad Encounter Line**
The Bad Encounter Line was developed after and from the research. In the research, we saw that girls were facing tons of violence every day, and the highest number of them came from institutions. Everyone collectively knew that we wanted to find ways to fight back, and the idea of warning girls and making a form that girls could share how they fought back was one of our first goals, and that is where the conversation of the BEL came into place. We wanted to use the BEL as a way to warn youth about bad experiences that are happening with institutions. The goal was to inform youth, and give them an option to use harm reduction with institutions if they still need services. It also can help youth find other ways to take care of themselves without needing to use institutions. We hope to use the
information from the data to help direct our campaigns that directly work to help change the way systems work.

Figuring out how to get the information from the youth and make it available to everyone was a big issue. Because our outreach workers reach so many girls, we thought it was best to start there and think of was that they could spread and collect the information.

We held group meetings and focus groups to discuss the type of information we wanted to collect, and what questions would give us the best information and not overwhelm anyone that filled in a BEL form. We used a lot of insight we had from previous booklets we had made such as the Girls Fight Back Journals and even the outreach worker booklets. We knew it was important to keep questions simple, but also give thorough explanations and examples.

**How the BEL Works**

A youth can either pick up a form that is available at YWEP, they can go to our website to fill it out online, they can call us and leave us a detailed voicemail, or they can get a booklet from one of our outreach workers. After they finish filling out a form, they give it back to the outreach worker they got it from or give it back to any YWEP staff member. Naima Paz then types all of the collected data word for word into a spreadsheet. After this step, she breaks down each story into summaries of the event. These summaries are what get posted inside the zines that are then created and then distributed to different youth organizations and handed out to youth. Zines are created and distributed four times throughout the year, while booklets are filled out and collected at all times.

We do workshops so other organizations can learn about how to report institutional violence against the young people in their constituency. It also gives us a
chance to collect more bad encounters from a group of people we might not regularly encounter. Everyone at YWEP has played a role in making the BEL happen. The outreach workers bring bad encounter line forms to their contacts and bad encounter line forms are encouraged by group leaders to be filled out during girls in charge and the Youth Activist Krew. All staff help collect booklets and then our researcher, Naima types it up and creates the zines. Staff members and outreach workers then help distribute the zines and others are mailed to different orgs.

We collect bad encounter booklets at all times. We get them through phone calls, booklets, or even online. We collect them during any of our groups or open time. We also are using the data to be better prepared to help what our constituency needs and what areas of the city or social service specifically are denying us help. The BEL helps us narrow down and focus our task force’s plans so that we can directly affect and change how institutions treat us.

What are the findings from the BEL?
The overall finding that systems are failing our youth more often than most people think. It also showed a gap in Reproductive Justice work within the City of Chicago. Our April 2010 Bad Encounter Line zine shows that our constituency is denied help from social services and health care providers such as hospitals, clinics, police, and department of human
services based on their involvement in the sex trade. In April 2011, our findings in this chart above, shows girls in the sex trade and street economy experience institutional violence from health care providers almost as often as from Police.

The BEL had stories like this one submitted by someone under 18 and involved in the sex trade “When being held in protective custody [because they said I was a victim of human trafficking] they started withholding my sheets, then towels, then pillows, then food because they said I wasn’t telling them everything I could- when in fact I was. They also took my ID and paperwork I deserved…” We also heard lots of stories like this one, which actually is about 2 bad encounters by the Department of Children’s Services and the hospital too. It was submitted by someone over 18: “I don’t have insurance and went to the hospital to have my baby. They ended up taking my baby because they assumed I was in the sex trade because I didn’t have a father to put down on the birth certificate. I am still fighting to get my child back.” Here is another example of 2 institutions working together to create a bad encounter- it is a good example of our research finding about how institutional violence makes individual experiences worse. This was submitted by a young person under 18 “I went to the hospital for a rape kit and when I got there the police officer accused me and my advocate of not cooperating. The officer starting yelling at us both and said that I was going to jail for lying. The officer never filed a report but called Children’s Services and I got sent to a group home but nothing ever happened with the rape.”

We will only have reproductive justice when Chicago institutions become accountable to the homeless and street based youth they are funded to help. To this possible, we will continue our Bad Encounter Line to see how these service providers are helping us or not.
What have we done with the BEL findings?

YWEP outreach workers responded to the surprise that health care beat out police by writing and creating the UNIVERSAL SELF EXAM guide and workshop series with the help of Chicago Women's Health Center. We also wrote a zine called Healing in Action which has advocacy tips for going to the doctor, how to take care of yourself when you are going to the doctor and what to do if you have a bad encounter. This zine also has health care information about how to take care of ourselves with herbs and things you can find in the store in case we are turned down from help. We reached 200 youth with these guides and our workshops teach girls and transgender youth how to do their own self exams; use speculums; and do comprehensive chest, anal and testicular checks. We think this guide is the only one like it in the country and we distributed over 600 copies at the US Social Forum and the Allied Media Conference in Detroit during June 2010 and 2011.

Since September 2009, our BEL has collected a total of 127 reports. The neck and neck race to deny us help between police and health care continues—with health leading the overall reports of institutional violence as defined by the youth who are filing reports.

The task force has created a Bill of Rights for Street Youth, which we will get social services to sign onto so that they know what our rights are and so that they are accountable to us. We will ask the social services to follow our rights, display a poster of our rights in the space and to hand a copy out to every youth who comes to them for help. We also want them to hand out the Bad Encounter Line form so if the youth thinks her rights were violated she can fill it out and turn it in to YWEP. We are also writing a curriculum to train social services about our rights and we will leave this with them so that they do more trainings with their staff.
Words to Know:

a. **Sex Trade:** YWEP defines the sex trade as any form of being sexual (or the idea of being sexual) in exchange for money, gifts, safety, drugs, hormones or survival needs like housing, food, clothes, or immigration and documentation—whether we get to keep the money/goods/service or someone else profits from these acts. The girls that we know have a wide range of experiences in the sex trade. Some of us have been forced to participate, some of us have chosen to participate in the sex trade, some of us have had both kinds of experiences. Sometimes, this can be by choice but we can also be forced into the sex trade by someone else. There are many ways that girls can be involved in the sex trade and we believe that our experiences, though all uniquely different, are united by the way we experience the intersections of misogyny, racism, classism, transphobia and homophobia. Others feel that the question of choice is irrelevant or more complicated than choice/no choice.

b. **Street Economies:** The street economy is any way that girls make cash money without paying taxes or having to show identification. Sometimes this means the sex trade. But other times it means braiding hair, babysitting, selling CDs/DVDs, drugs or other skills like sewing and laundry. We say street economies because there is more than one kind of economy playing out on our street at any given time. These economies are complicated.

c. **Empowerment** means having the tools and resources you need to live the life you want. To reduce the sex trade to one girl’s experience, or to make blanket statements about the sex trade based on some girls’ experiences, good or bad, is to dis-empower and erase the realities of girls whose experiences are different. Girls in the sex trade are members of many communities, including the ones we create with each other for support and survival.
Empowerment means the ability to make community, to make change, and to make decisions.

d. **Home free:** this means that we have a right to decide our housing options. Some girls feel like living on the street or leaving their housing behind is empowering. We respect all girls right to choose where and how they get shelter.

e. **Street-based:** this means the corner or the block is your home base.

f. **Violence:** YWEP uses the term violence to mean any kind of harm that can happen to a girl in the sex trade. It can include, but is not limited to physical violence. It can also be emotional violence, abuse, or threats. For example, being kicked out of a shelter because you are using drugs is a form of violence because you are being denied your right to safely sleep indoors.

g. **Individual Violence:** Refers to any violence that happens from one person to another, such as a parent, boyfriend, or pimp. An example of individual violence is a girl's sister punching her.

h. **Institutional Violence:** Refers to any violence from an institution or agency, such as DCFS or the police. An example of institutional violence is DCFS refusing to give you the benefits you are entitled to receive.

i. **Resilience:** Resilience refers to the ways we bounce back or heal. Some forms of resilience are personally soothing like aromatherapy, medicinal drug use, bubble baths, or food. Other forms are about connection – hanging out with girlfriends, reading books about the movement, or educating younger girls about how to protect themselves.
j. **Resistance:** We use the term resistance to mean any way of fighting back. It can mean avoiding violence by taking another way home or educating yourself and the youth in your neighborhood about your legal rights.

k. **Harm Reduction:** Harm reduction means any positive change. We do not force anyone to stop participating in any risky behavior. Instead, we work with them to come up with options that work for them to stay safer when engaging in that risky behavior. We apply this to the sex trade, but also to any other high risk behavior as well. Harm reduction means practical options, no judgment, and we respect choices that girls make.

l. **Transformative Justice:** Transformative justice is a model that acknowledges that state systems and social services can and often do create harm in the lives of girls. Transformative Justice supports community-based efforts for social justice beyond the government or other state-sponsored institutions. This means that we do not work on making new laws or policies because we don't believe that the law can bring fast and positive change to ALL girls in our community. Instead of following models for social change that talk about us without including us, we seek to create a movement for social justice that recognizes and honors our talents as leaders and innovators with us at the forefront.

m. **Participatory Action Research (PAR)** This is a way to involve the whole community in research. It relies on us as the experts and not an outside researcher. We shape the way our story is told. PAR leads to action because it moves us to identify and respond to the things we learn about ourselves and find our own solutions to the problems we face.