



'They won't change it back in their heads that we're trash': Sex work, stigma and policing

Background

Mounting evidence suggests that much of the harm associated with sex work is not inherent, but the result of criminalization and stigmatization. In Vancouver, there has been a continuous shift in the policing of sex work away from arresting sex workers, including a policing strategy that explicitly prioritized the safety of sex workers but continued to target sex workers' clients.

The Question

What are the experiences of women in sex work in Vancouver with stigma and vulnerability under a policing strategy targeting clients?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **in-depth interviews with 26 cisgender and 5 transgender women sex workers in Vancouver**. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), a longitudinal ethnographic and qualitative study on working conditions, health and safety in the sex industry led by GSHI/BCCfE and UBC, in collaboration with a range of community partners, with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Interactions with police had become more positive and safety-focused, however sex workers reported their experiences being shaped by **stigma, police inaction, and neighbourhood renewal**.

The 31 women interviewed reported:

- Being stigmatized by police as deviants or as victims;
- Reluctance in reporting theft, fraud or violence, especially by Indigenous women;
- Experiencing harassment by residents, community groups, and private security in the neighbourhood where they work, which are undergoing renewal; and
- Being displaced by police when faced with nuisance complaints.

"The minute that they're bringing the new condos next thing you know there's security cars, there's cop cars, god forbid there's a hooker on the condo street."

The Policy Implications

- This study shows how intersecting regimes of criminalization and stigmatization serve to marginalize sex workers and increase their structural vulnerability to violence and poor health.
- The criminalization of sex work and the co-existing stigmatizing assumptions of sex workers as 'at risk' and 'risky', both victims and victimizers, deny sex workers the opportunity to engage as citizens, facilitate the removal of sex workers from public space and perpetuate labour conditions that render sex workers at increased risk for violence and poor health.

Krüsi A, Kerr T, Taylor C, Rhodes T, Shannon K. 'They Won't Change It Back In Their Heads That We're Trash': The Intersection of Sex Work Related Stigma and Evolving Policing Strategies. *Sociology of Health & Illness*. 2016.