



The impact of construction and gentrification on an outdoor trans sex work environment

Background

Trans sex workers often face a high level of violence, often shaped by racism and economic barriers. This study aimed to investigate how road construction and gentrification impacted trans sex workers in an outdoor environment in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

The Question

How do environmental and structural changes to an outdoor work environment impact trans sex workers in Vancouver, Canada?

The Study

The issue of changes to the work area arose during qualitative interviews with 33 trans sex workers that were conducted between June 2012 and May 2013. In response, ethnographic walks that incorporated photography were undertaken with trans sex workers. Participants were recruited from an open prospective cohort of sex workers (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access) and three open prospective cohorts of individuals who use drugs (The At Risk Youth Study, Vancouver Injection Drug Users Study, and AIDS Care Cohort to Evaluate Access to Survival Services).

The Results

Changes to the work environment were found to increase vulnerabilities in three areas:

- **Violence** – Disrupting traffic patterns increased sex worker vulnerability to violence by exacerbating unsafe working conditions and decreasing client traffic.
- **Displacement** – Gentrification resulted in a loss of work space and increase in resident complaints about sex work being conducted in the area.
- **Policing** - Within a criminalized context, construction and gentrification contributed to harassment from police and residents.

“Scarlett discussed how she has complaints from the café on that block because they don’t like that traffic comes down to the area for sex work and not for their business. She felt frustrated by this response since she has been working there for over 15 years and is a business owner herself in her line of work.”

The Policy Implications

- This study cautions against environmental and structural changes that disrupt trans sex work settings, foster displacement, and enhance structural vulnerabilities. Such gentrification promotes middle-class lifestyles and deems sex work as inappropriate, further marginalizing trans sex workers who are already impacted by colonial practices that construct racialized, trans, and sex workers' bodies as 'disposable.'
- Trans sex workers must be meaningfully included in community consultations and urban planning discussions.
- This study supports structural interventions that address cis- and heteronormativity and the effects of colonization to improve the health, safety, and economic security of trans sex workers. This study also supports the decriminalization of sex work as a method of increasing the safety and protecting the rights of trans sex workers.

Lyons, T., Krüsi, A., Pierre, L., Small, W., and Shannon, K. The impact of construction and gentrification on an outdoor trans sex work environment: Violence, displacement, and policing. *Sexualities*, 2016.