

Sex workers need workplace regulations to improve safety

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A UBC study showed that workers are highly creative in reducing or reacting to violence in their profession, but their efforts are limited by the stigma around sex work and the lack of legal and public health protections for sex workers. Credit: University of British Columbia

Canada's sex workers, many of whom work indoors, are enterprising and vigilant when it comes to protecting themselves against exploitation, assault or robbery. They set a relaxing atmosphere, insist on a no-drugs rule, keep self-defence tools at the ready and maintain good relationships with landlords in order to avoid eviction.

These are some of the key findings of a new University of British Columbia study of [violence](#) against indoor [sex workers](#). The study, published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, included in-depth interviews with 85 indoor sex workers conducted between 2014 and 2016. Fifty-one per cent of the participants were women, 40 per cent were men, and the rest were transgender individuals.

"Earlier research showed that some indoor sex workers experience high levels of violence—they have as much as a 55 per cent chance of experiencing some type of violence in any given year," said lead researcher and UBC nursing professor Vicky Bungay. "In this study, we wanted to find out what factors put them at risk and the strategies they use to address that risk."

Workers all had strategies to hide, improvise or use self-defence tools to deal with potential assaults, said Bungay. Having other people around including roommates and neighbours was a tried and tested tactic. Workers also made efforts to talk with clients when they first arrived, to both assess them and put them at ease.

To protect their privacy and avoid being outed, workers conduct most communications via email and hide their belongings when clients are around.

"Most workers refuse to see clients who use cocaine or alcohol to avoid potential violence or arguments. To prevent nonpayment, they require payment up front or put the money away as soon as possible," added Bungay, who's also the Canada Research Chair in Gender, Equity and Community Engagement at UBC.

Bungay said the study showed that workers are highly creative in reducing or reacting to violence in their profession, but their efforts are limited by the stigma around sex work and the lack of legal and [public health](#) protections for sex workers.

"Sex workers being pressured to forgo condom use, or having to deal with clients' substance use because they can't rely on authorities to enforce a safe workspace—this highlights the need for clear-cut laws and policies that recognize their work and protect them from violence," said Bungay. "It's time to reexamine how Canada protects these individuals while also honouring the fact that they are not victims but are active agents of their own lives."

More information: Vicky Bungay et al, Strategies and Challenges in Preventing Violence Against Canadian Indoor Sex Workers, *American Journal of Public Health* (2018). [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2017.304241](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304241)

Provided by University of British Columbia

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