

COVID-19: Needs and Risk Assessment of Sex Workers in Metro Vancouver

Vancouver, BC

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Aboriginal Front Door Society

Health Initiative for Men

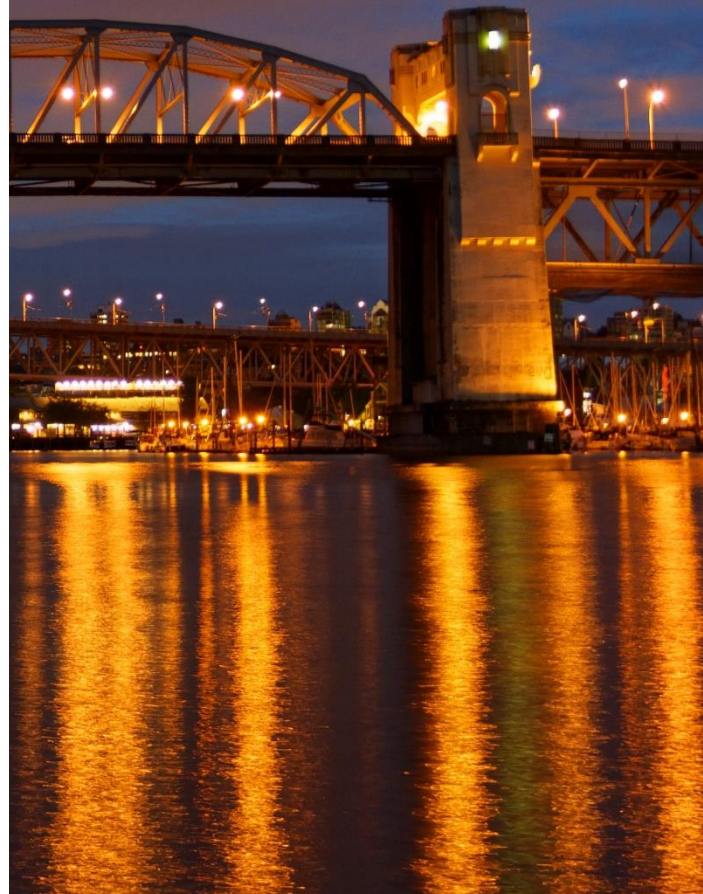
PACE Society

WISH Drop-In Center Society

Living in Community

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EDUCATRIX AND CONSULTANTS



This report and the accompanying data it draws from were developed and written on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples—Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō and Səlílwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) Nations.

This acknowledgment is especially important because, as historical and ongoing colonial relations have shown us, this pandemic will have a disproportionate effect on these communities.

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Executive Summary

On Thursday March 19, the City of Vancouver and Province of BC declared a State of Emergency in response to the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic. Sex workers are important members of our community and are uniquely impacted by the pandemic and the policies that are being implemented to curb its spread. This report and the accompanying survey were developed to gauge this impact and determine the needs of the community in this crisis.

This report is based on 95 responses from sex workers living around the Downtown Eastside (DTES) who were surveyed about the effects of the pandemic and policies intended to curb transmission of the virus. The report explains the findings of the survey in three categories. First, it explores the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the sex work community, including areas of concern, income loss, and the consequential impact on the affordability of amenities. 46.7% of respondents report that their business has been significantly impacted by the pandemic. Many respondents reported a dramatic decrease in income and abrupt difficulties affording everyday amenities and supplies such as groceries and medication. These difficulties increase and affect more people as workers, clients, and others adhere to isolation policies and as other strategies to prevent COVID-19 continue.

Second, we lay out some of the knowledge and resource gaps of sex workers in the Downtown Eastside (DTES). While respondents are well-connected to services and resources around their community, knowledge about how and where to access COVID-19 specific services or care (testing), was significantly different.

Finally, we look at the needs that sex workers have expressed. Sex workers are requesting access to clear and accessible information about COVID-19, testing locations, safe spaces, policies, and best practices. Respondents are especially in need of safe housing where they can safely comply with isolation policies.

A response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the policies implemented to help curb the infection rate need to take into account the needs of vulnerable populations (including sex workers) to be effective and to mitigate additional harms. In particular, respondents expressed a clear need for access to housing, a way to supplement their lost income, and access to clear and reliable information.

Particular attention needs to be paid to the health concerns of sex workers and unique barriers that may prevent sex workers from accessing emergency economic measures.

Housing

In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, health authorities have recommended self-quarantine, self-isolation, social distancing, and aggressive hygiene practices. Without access to housing bathroom or shower facilities, or consistent access to running water and soap, people cannot act on any of the measures recommended by the health authority in a way that is effective.

Income Replacement

Sex work support organizations are best positioned to help administer emergency relief funds for income replacement and provide direct services that meet the evolving needs of the community in an accessible way.

Reliable and Accessible Information

People need and want access to clear and reliable information. We recommend providing a mechanism for residents of the Downtown Eastside to access frequent, accurate and reliable information, like a one-stop shop for up-to-date information from all levels of government as well as community resources.

1 - Introduction

This evaluation survey was created to help gauge the needs of the Metro Vancouver sex work community in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. In the face of COVID-19, many people are struggling, and many sex workers find themselves at the intersection of forms of social inequity that have a dire impact on their health. The intent of this survey is to help fully understand the impacts of this COVID-19 on the lives, businesses, and families of sex workers in the communities we serve.

This report is based on data from 95 responses from sex workers largely in or around the Downtown Eastside between March 19 to March 23. The survey was created by the Metro Vancouver Consortium (Aboriginal Front Door Society, Health Initiative for Men (H.I.M.), PACE Society, and WISH Drop-In Centre Society), with input from Living in Community. Surveys were then distributed through WISH's Drop-In, the WISH MAP Van, and The Corner program (a collaborative program with AIDS Vancouver, HIM, and Vancouver Coastal Health). Participants were sex workers who were accessing these services and were willing to fill out the survey.

Surveyed participants were represented across genders, and the majority of participants were women (cis and trans). Survey distributors were intentional about including LGBT2Q sex workers. The majority of participants identified themselves as 45 and older. This is significant because DTES service organizations consistently lower the age of what is considered a senior. Other participants were split fairly evenly between 35-45 and 20-34. Only 2 participants identified themselves as being under 20.

Given the immediate scope of the DTES organizations' populations, other populations of sex workers were not surveyed, including people working in different areas around the city or specific venues. In particular, the experience of migrant sex workers and indoor workers were largely not captured in this preliminary survey.

The surveys had 13 brief questions that looked at how people were being impacted by the pandemic and social distancing practices, what resources and knowledge people had access to, and what their current needs were. Answers included ranges, yes/no, choices, and open responses.

The findings of this report are made possible by the tireless and invaluable efforts of frontline and peer workers who continue to care for our communities and the sex workers who gave up their time and care to participate in this survey.

2 - Findings

2.1 – Impacts of COVID-19 on the Sex Work Community

2.1.1 – Worry and Concern

Respondents were asked to rate their level of concern about COVID-19 on a scale of 1-5, where “1” was not at all concerned and “5” was very concerned. Most respondents (73.9%) rated their level of worry about COVID-19 and the pandemic a 3 or higher.

“I am very worried. It's killing a lot of people. My family is too important to los[e] one or more to [COVID]-19.”

Many respondents reported having additional health concerns and socio-economic realities that would make them especially vulnerable to contracting the virus as well as surviving it. In particular, respondents reported respiratory conditions (asthma, pneumonia, and previous lung damage). Others reported homelessness or impending loss of housing as a major factor for being worried about contracting and managing a COVID-19 infection.

Some folks who reported being less worried wrote about despair due to living with chronic health needs and other ongoing health hazards. Others reported suspicion of information about COVID-19, misinformation, and receiving conflicting information about the virus.

2.1.2 – Effect on Income

When asked to rate the impact of the pandemic on their work on a scale of 1-5 (where “1” is not at all affected and “5” is affected a lot), 46.7% of respondents placed their rating in the highest marker.

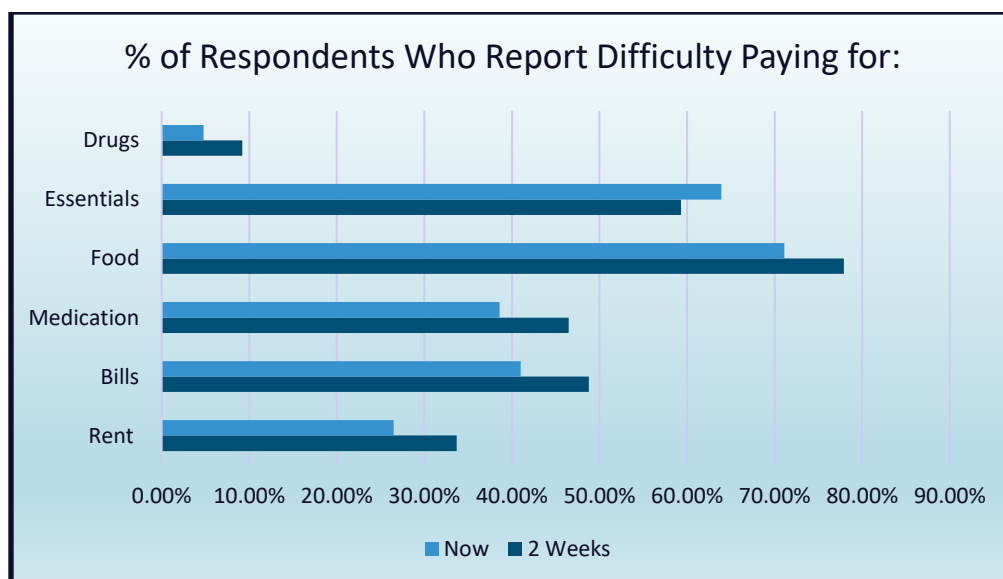
“I am too scared to go to work because I have to deal with the public and direct contact with cash.”

Effects on income include:

- Like many people in BC, respondents are largely unable to work.
- Respondents who do work report lower wages when they do. One respondent estimated a 75% drop in income since the first cases in BC.
- Respondents indicated increased stigma of sex workers.
- People have a fear of touching cash and other people.
- Many respondents also indicated that they are also significantly impacted by other businesses, services, and groups closing.

2.1.3 – Amenities

Respondents were asked about basic amenities and essentials for everyday living. Significant numbers of respondents indicated difficulty paying for food, medications, rent, and other bills and essentials. Respondents were also asked to estimate whether they would have trouble paying for basic amenities after an additional 2 weeks of isolation tactics and service shut down. The majority of survey participants estimated a significant decrease in their ability to pay for many categories or amenities after two weeks. We are still in the early days of the pandemic and isolation policies. While the duration of isolation policies and extent of infection is yet unknown, we estimate it will be far longer than two weeks and people's inability to pay for basic services will only increase without access to additional support services, financial resources, or rent relief.

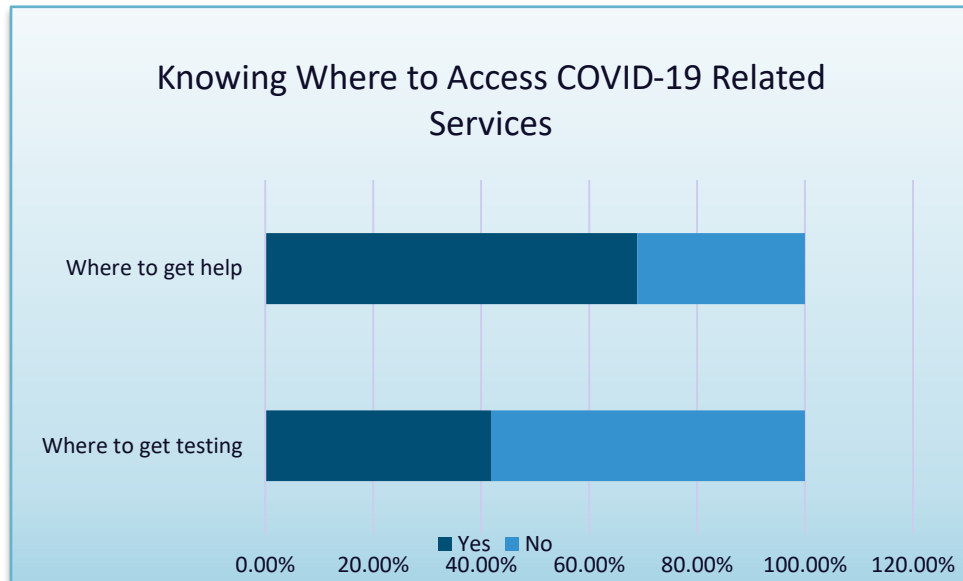


*3.5% difference in number of people who responded to the question

Of particular note is the category of “Drugs”. Nine respondents specified that in 2 weeks they will have extra trouble paying for drugs including methadone and cannabis. This is of significant concern where access to alcohol and drugs is necessary for staving off withdrawal, and ensuring that access to drugs does not compete with other vital needs such as food or self-isolation. Symptoms of withdrawal can be physically difficult and dangerous to people’s health. With certain drugs and medications, withdrawal can be deadly. Although the number of respondents who identified drugs as a cost concern comprises a smaller percentage than the other categories, these responses are statistically significant in that it was not an option on the original survey; participants specified it without prompt. In addition, other respondents with the same concern may have registered it under the categories of ‘Medication’ or ‘Essentials’ or refrained from expressing it due to stigma. The number of respondents at risk for withdrawal and associated health issues is then not limited to those explicitly identified.

2.2 - Knowledge & Resources of Sex Workers Related to COVID-19

Participants were surveyed with regard to their knowledge of services related to COVID-19. When asked whether they knew where to get help with experiencing symptoms related to COVID-19, most participants reported ‘Yes’. In contradiction, when asked whether people knew where to be tested for the virus, a significantly lower percentage of sex workers gave a positive response.



This reflects how respondents are knowledgeable about and integrated with local organizations and service providers in their community for general health concerns, resources, and support. However, the lack of knowledge about COVID-19 specific services like testing could indicate a gap in knowledge dissemination as well as barriers to accessing those services.

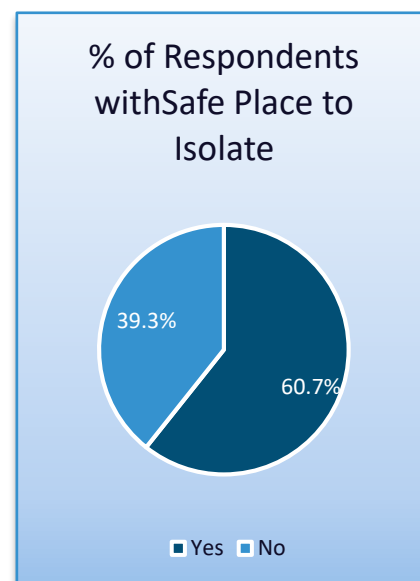
2.3 - Needs of Sex Workers in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

2.3.1 – Family Resources

A third of respondents indicated that they are also caregivers with dependents. Dependents include elderly family members, children, or ill family members. Many sex workers are caregivers and their families rely on them for income, support, and other forms of care work. This also means that increased marginalization, strapped financial options, and limited support not only impacts individual sex workers but also their entire family units.

2.3.2 – Housing

Access to safe housing and a safe place to self-isolate are essential to preventing the spread of COVID-19, reducing the chance of infection, and being able to survive an infection. A worrying 41.9% of respondents indicated that they were not safely housed and 39.3% indicated that they did not have a safe place to isolate. Access to safe and secure housing is an imperative in the pandemic and disproportionately affects sex workers in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.



2.3.3 – Information Needs

Like many people, respondents are actively interested and invested in their own health. However, 45.5% of respondents said they did not feel like they have enough info to keep themselves safe. Many respondents also indicated receiving conflicting information.

Respondents want to know:

- Time intervals regarding:
 - Duration of illness
 - How long the virus can live on surfaces
 - Duration of isolation measures
- Symptoms of the virus
- What COVID-19 related supports there are
- How to access emergency funding
- Best practices for preventing infection
- Where to get safe and sanitary protective equipment

2.3.4 – Community Asks

Sex workers know best about their own needs and the gaps in services that they experience. Respondents were able to indicate what they might need from and for organizations that serve them. These included:

- Support for direct services, particularly for street-based sex workers and sex workers without safe housing

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- Access to housing for self-isolation
 - Additional support services, including check-ins for folks who are isolated
 - Emergency relief funds to address the sudden and dramatic loss of income, as well as to take off the financial pressure to work
 - Access to healthy and nutritious food, clean drinking water, and sanitation stations
 - Access to clear and accessible information about COVID-19

Recommendations

A response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the policies implemented to help curb the infection rate need to take into account the needs of vulnerable populations (including sex workers) to be effective and to mitigate additional harms. In particular, respondents expressed a clear need for access to safe housing, a way to supplement their lost income, and access to clear and reliable information. Particular attention needs to be paid to the health concerns of sex workers and unique barriers that may prevent sex workers from accessing the emergency economic measures put in place by the Federal government to financially support people during the pandemic.

Safe Housing

People need safe housing. In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the health authorities have recommended self-quarantine, self-isolation, social distancing, and aggressive hygiene. Without access to safe housing, people cannot act on any of the measures recommended by the health authority in a way that is effective.

Income Replacement

Sex work support organizations are best positioned to help administer emergency relief funds for income replacement and provide direct services that meet the evolving needs of the community. In order to serve the community, it is imperative that emergency economic measures that are being implemented by all levels of government are accessible to all members of the community. Policy makers need to actively consider and remove potential barriers, such as individuals without bank accounts, filed taxes, or fixed addresses, and integrate these concerns into policy design.

Reliable and Accessible Information

People need access to clear and reliable information. Our respondents are largely invested in their own health and interested in information and best practices to curb the spread of COVID-19. We recommend providing a mechanism for residents of the Downtown Eastside to access timely, accurate and reliable information, like a one-stop shop for up-to-date information from all levels of government as well as community resources.

Appendix : A

COVID-19 Needs and Risk Assessment

To Sex Workers of Vancouver – We created this survey to help us gauge the needs of our community in these trying times. In the face of COVID-19, many people are struggling. Our hope is to fully understand the impacts of this novel virus on our lives, businesses, families, and clients. We plan to help inform policy makers and health authorities, including the DTES Task Force on COVID-19 (currently made up of the City of Vancouver, Vancouver Coastal Health, and BC Housing) with the results of this survey. We are doing everything we can to address and increase safety for all workers in the coming weeks.

1. My gender is:

2. How old are you?

Under
20

20-34

35-45

45+

3. Are you safely housed?

☐ Yes

☐ No

4. Are you worried about COVID-19?

Not Very 1 2 3 4 5 Very

Why or why not:

5. Is business being affected?

A little 1 2 3 4 5 A lot

How:

6. Is COVID-19 making it difficult to pay for: (circle all that apply)

- ☐ Rent
 ☐ Bills
 ☐ Medications
☐ Food
 ☐ Essentials
 ☐ Other _____

7. If quarantine and isolation continue more than 2 weeks, will you have trouble paying: (circle all that apply)

- ☐ Rent
 ☐ Bills
 ☐ Medications
☐ Food
 ☐ Essentials
 ☐ Other _____

| | Yes | No |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| 8. If you have symptoms that seem like COVID-19, do you know where to go or ask for help? | ✓ | X |
| 9. If you are recommended to get tested for COVID-19, do you know where to go? | ✓ | X |
| 10. If you needed to self-isolate, do you have a safe space to do that? | ✓ | X |
| 11. Do you feel you have enough info about COVID-19 to keep yourself safe? | ✓ | X |
| 12. Do you have any dependents (children, elderly, or ill loved ones) that you financially support? | ✓ | X |

13. What questions do you have about COVID-19? How can your community & DTES organizations support you best right now?

Thank you so much for your taking the time to complete the survey! Your answers will help inform policy and safety discussions for our community