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Is sex work an occupational choice?

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HOW do people become sex workers? Do they drift into the occupation or do they purposely choose it?

In a [new study of Canadian adult sex workers](#), published this week in a journal from [Sage Publishing](#), University of Victoria researchers have found that—as with conventional occupations—the initial decision to sell sexual services is a complex matter, involving the interplay of life events, socio-economic circumstances and the personal appeal of the work.

The findings suggest that universal approaches to managing, regulating or policing sex work are not justified and are unlikely to be uniformly effective.

“Sex work carries a social stigma, primarily because prostitution is typically understood as outside of wage labour,” says lead author UVic sociologist Cecilia Benoit, who is also a scientist with UVic’s Centre for Addictions Research of BC. “Our study uses an occupational choice framework to closely examine the multiple reasons for the initial engagement in sex work.”

The team conducted 218 in-person interviews with people of mixed genders from six urban centres across Canada and primarily found “many nuances of choice rather than a passive ‘drift’ into prostitution or extreme exploitation.”

As with most employment, the need or desire for money was mentioned as the most common reason for initial engagement in sex work. However, significant life events and personal appeal of the work were also factors.

Participants usually delivered sexual services in several settings that varied in the amount of control they had over the terms and conditions of the service.

The participants ranged in age from 19 to 61 years old (34 years on average) and 76 per cent of the sample identified as women, 17 per cent as men and 7 per cent as transgender or transsexual.

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