

# COVID-19 benefits exclude sex workers in Canada

Despite the assurance that no one will be left behind in Trudeau's pandemic plan, sex workers have not received the same benefits as other Canadians.

[Cecilia Benoit](#)

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**T**he global impact of COVID-19 on people who sell sexual services has been shattering, worsening their already [precarious situation](#). Findings from a recent study of sex workers from [six metropolitan areas of Canada](#) show a high prevalence of structural disadvantage. Compared to other Canadian workers, sex workers are younger, more likely to identify as women and be Indigenous and non-heterosexual. They are also less likely to have finished high school or own their own home, or to be currently married or living common law.

Sex workers also reported poorer physical and mental health, higher unmet health needs and are more likely to have a long-term disability. In their struggle to pay monthly bills, one-third said they were currently employed outside of sex work, largely in part time, gig economy work, or temporary jobs in personal services that cannot be done remotely, including retail, restaurant and hospitality work. These are largely fields that have been deemed non-essential and ordered to close during the pandemic.

Two-thirds of sex workers interviewed said in the last 12 months, they received free food or meals, half of the respondents disclosed that they borrowed money from friends or family to help meet bill payments and one-third said they had not paid the full amount of their rent or mortgage or the full amount for utilities.

The barriers limiting sex workers' life chances are worsened by stigma about their work and [punitive criminal code laws](#). The stigma associated with the act of selling sexual services is so ingrained in our public institutions and everyday interactions that it goes unnoticed. Criminalization of sex work intensifies the stigma, hindering health and safety practices at work and restricting access to needed services.

Canada's current prostitution law, Bill C-36, the Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act (PCEPA), bans the purchasing of sexual services and receiving material benefits from prostitution and procuring services. It also makes it illegal for newspaper and magazine publishers, website administrators and web-hosting services to publish advertisements for any sexual services, and prohibits communicating for the sale and purchase of sexual services in a public place next to a [school ground, playground, or daycare centre](#). The federal government also forbids [foreign nationals](#) from working for an employer offering striptease, erotic dance, escort services or erotic massages.

This legislative framework thus directly criminalizes sex workers and also bans most activities linked to the sex industry. This negatively affects more disadvantaged sex workers facing other intersecting stigmas, including Indigenous and trans-sexual sex workers, [non-status migrants](#) and those who use substances. Canada's sex work laws are among the most extensive in terms of criminalization, leaving sex workers in a paradoxical position as both a victim and a criminal.



### **COVID-19 and the further marginalization of sex workers**

The coronavirus pandemic and its accompanying mandatory restrictions on in-person service delivery have further marginalized sex workers in their communities, and there have been no formal protection schemes put in place to safeguard them from further marginalization. During pre-COVID times, sex workers routinely moved across sex markets as they searched for work that provided secrecy and the [best earnings and working conditions](#). These strategies are no longer available.

When the pandemic first hit, establishments such as strip clubs, massage parlours and escort agencies, were forced to close, and independent escorts were constrained from offering sexual services in their work studios or own homes. While some of them have managed to move their work online, others struggle to stay afloat in the pandemic climate. Despite major job loss on all fronts, sex

workers have been unlikely to access Employment Insurance or the Canada Emergency Relief Benefit.

The reasons vary. Some do not have a Social Insurance Number and are reluctant to apply for one. Others are mainly paid in cash for their sex work and thus cannot show they make the minimum annual income to qualify. Still others are considered to be independent contractors rather than employees. For others, they have not filed taxes, fearing further stigmatization, unwanted exposure of migrant status or other worries.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has vowed [“no one will be left behind”](#) due to the pandemic. Yet the stigma and criminalization of sex work have left workers unable or unwilling to access most government income support programs because [they fear further stigmatization and police harassment](#).

Some monetary support has been available to sex worker-led agencies and allied groups providing mutual aid to sex workers through the government’s Community Emergency Response Fund, as well as funding from the Ministry of Women and Gender Equality and some municipal and provincial departments. Yet these grassroots community organizations lack charitable status and thus are not eligible for most government programs. While they have independently raised funds to provide economic and other supports for local sex workers, the demand is great, and many needs are going unmet.

Sex workers facing the greatest economic fallout have been meeting clients clandestinely, heightening exposure to COVID-19 for both parties, and placing the workers at great risk [to their health and safety](#). These various developments are likely to result in reduced access to health and social services, poorer health outcomes and increased social inequities as the pandemic continues throughout the fall and into 2021.

### **Recovery measures to reduce marginalization and protect health and human rights**

If there is one positive outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is that it has thrown off the veil shrouding commercial sex in our country by showing that sex work is indeed *work*. Sex workers were already disadvantaged in the capitalist marketplace prior to the pandemic and remain so as a result of government responses to date. The federal government should ensure that sex workers are supported by issuing a moratorium on the use of the criminal code laws against domestic sex workers. Non-status migrants should not be deported, and strippers and escorts should [not be unduly scapegoated](#) as COVID-19 restrictions are eased. Additionally, the government should allow for access to emergency monetary aid without strings attached during these difficult times. This would go some way to shore up their precarious situation.

Another line of attack would be to channel sufficient long-term monetary resources to sex worker-led organizations and allied groups with a proven record of providing outreach services. These organizations that run successful social programs for sex workers in their local communities and have established relief funds and emergency services in the past seven months should be provided resources to continue offering services. A ground-up empowerment approach that recognizes these predominantly women-run (and thus often undervalued) organizations as crucial societal assets would help ensure sex workers have the necessary funds to meet their essential needs and will not be forced

to work in dangerous conditions just to survive. In the longer term, sex workers and other marginalized groups need guaranteed access to a universal basic income or a similar national social equity scheme.

A mandatory five-year review of Criminal Code section that criminalizes sex workers was due in December 2019 but so far, the government has not met its obligation in this respect. Now is an opportune time for the justice minister to decriminalize adult sex commerce. The result would be greater safety for sex workers, increased occupational options and a reduction of the debilitating stigma that currently keeps them misunderstood, marginalized and largely left out of COVID-19 and other social programs.

**This article is part of the [Tackling inequality as part of Canada's post-pandemic recovery](#) special feature.**

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