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## Almost one-third of sex workers unable to call 911 due to fear of police

*NEW five-city Canadian study shows harms of “end demand” laws with police harassment linked to five times increase in inability to call 911*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Tuesday, January 26, 2021** Canada’s “end demand” legislation that criminalizes the purchase of sex and third parties impedes sex workers’ ability to seek police assistance when they are in danger, according to a new study from the Centre for Gender & Sexual Health Equity (CGSHE) at the University of British Columbia, and University of Ottawa.

The study, published in the peer-reviewed journal *Social Sciences*, draws on data from a community-based research project with sex workers in five cities across Canada. It highlights the serious harms to sex workers, including disproportionate harms to Indigenous sex workers, caused by an “end demand” approach to the sex industry. In 2014, the Canadian government implemented “end demand” legislation, which criminalizes clients, third parties, such as managers, sex workers working together with shared expenses and in a “commercial role”, and sex workers outdoors in narrow circumstances. “The ‘end demand’ criminalization framework reproduces many of the same life-threatening harms to sex workers as previous criminal laws. We see this most explicitly with the experiences reported by Indigenous street-based sex workers. Our research shows that the laws urgently need to be changed,” said **Dr. Anna-Louise Crago**, PhD, first author, CGSHE Project Lead, and Banting Postdoctoral Scholar at the University of Ottawa.

Alarming, the study found that almost one third (31%) of sex workers report being unable to call 911 due to fear of police detection of themselves, their co-workers, or their managers. Indigenous sex workers are twice as likely to report being unable to call 911. “‘End demand’ legislation forces sex workers to choose between foregoing access to police protection in a safety emergency and putting themselves, their co-workers or their managers in potential legal jeopardy,” Dr. Crago explained. “This criminalization framework was justified as necessary to protect the most marginalized in the sex industry and to assist sex workers in reporting violence against them. But our data demonstrate that the legislation has clearly failed to achieve its stated goals.”

Experiences of recent police harassment were directly associated with five times the likelihood of sex workers reporting being unable to call 911 in a safety emergency. “Police and proponents of end-demand legislation defend tactics, such as following sex workers, carding them, or detaining them without arrest, as necessary or “protective”. But the data show how such police harassment of sex workers threatens access to police protection in a safety emergency,” said Dr. Crago. “This is a finding with broader implications for the police targeting of Black and Indigenous communities with practices like carding and street stops.”

The study also offers the first known data in Canada on who is helping sex workers escape situations of violence and confinement. The most commonly reported source of assistance was other sex workers (40.5%), followed by friends, family or partners (29.7%), and clients (24.3%). Police were one of the least reported sources of assistance, at 5.4%. “People involved in the sex industry play a major role in helping

other sex workers to escape violent or dangerous situations,” said **Dr. Chris Bruckert**, PhD, co-author and Professor at University of Ottawa. “But, under current “end demand” laws, other sex workers, security personnel, clients and managers all risk criminalization if they call 911. Furthermore, the situations where sex workers get the most assistance are the ones that the current system discourages by making them illegal.”

Law and policy reform are urgently required, said senior author, **Dr. Kate Shannon**, PhD, Professor of Social Medicine and Executive Director of CGSHE at UBC. “This research highlights the urgent need to recognize the harms of the “end demand” criminalization framework on sex workers and the immediate need for law and police reform.” Dr. Shannon said the findings call for urgent policy recommendations, including full decriminalization of sex work and an immediate end to the targeting of sex workers by police and the practice of police carding and street stops linked to racial and social profiling.

[Click here](#) for key findings & urgent policy recommendations.

[Click here](#) to read the peer-reviewed journal article.

*Study data are drawn from a community-based study at CGSHE at University of British Columbia and University of Ottawa of 200 sex workers interviewed in Toronto, ON, Ottawa, ON, Montreal, QC, Surrey, BC, and Sudbury, ON. Research participants were interviewed between July 2017 and January 2018.*

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About the Centre for Gender & Sexual Health Equity at UBC: *The Centre for Gender and Sexual Health Equity is a UBC and SFU academic centre housed at Providence Health. The CGSHE’s mission is to provide leadership in gender equity and sexual health for all in BC, Canada and globally, through rigorous community-engaged research that meets the highest scientific and ethical standards, evidence-based policy development, and fostering the implementation of innovative, patient-centred and equity-oriented clinical and community practices through guidelines and education. CGSHE is located on the unceded traditional territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵw̓x̓w̓ú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlílwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.*

About the Department of Criminology at University of Ottawa: *The Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa is a vibrant bilingual environment focusing on critical criminology and foregrounding social engagement. The University of Ottawa’s strategic areas of research include “human rights, diversity, and social justice” and “governance, international studies and public policy.”*