

# Dispelling Myths and Understanding Realities

Working Conditions,  
Health Status, and Exiting  
Experiences of Sex Workers

WRITTEN BY Cecilia Benoit and Alison Millar

SPONSORED BY Prostitutes Empowerment, Education and Resource Society (PEERS)

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**Dispelling Myths and Understanding Realities:  
Working Conditions, Health Status, and Exiting Experiences of Sex Workers**

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## Errata

Please note that there is a technical error in the report in regard to by-laws in the Capital Regional District (CRD) of BC (see pp. 7-8). When preparing the report, we were under the understanding that the City of Victoria by-law No. 93-134, the so-called "Escort and Dating Service Bylaw", was no longer in place due to new developments to harmonize bylaws across the municipalities that make up the CRD. We have since learned, however, that the City of Victoria escort bylaw is still in place. The fee for the escort business license is \$1,500 a year, and \$250 per escort worker is also charged. There are 3 agencies licensed in Victoria proper, and 14 licensed ones in the neighbouring municipality of Saanich, where the licensing fee is similar to other businesses.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, we would like to thank the sex workers who participated in the interviews that inform this report. Without their voices, this project would not have been possible. In addition, a special thanks goes to our research assistants who devoted not only their time and energy to the project, but also a dedication to extend and deepen our understanding of sex workers' lives. Barbara Taylor deserves special mention for help in interviewing research assistants and commenting on the research instrument, among countless other tasks. Judy Lightwater was also invaluable for her project co-ordination and community networking skills. We commend the Ad Hoc Advisory Committee - Linda Canham, Sherri Lee, Linda Poffenroth, Jannit Rabinovitch and Chris Downing - for their valuable expertise and advice. We thank Mikael Jansson for his time and patience in helping us design the research instrument, code and clean up the data and get the analysis off the ground. We also thank Munaza Chaudhry for her careful editing and formatting expertise and Judy Adler for her informative conversations and careful comments about doing research with those who have little power. Our gratitude extends as well to the following organizations: Sandy Merriman House, the Needle Exchange, AIDS Vancouver Island, the BC Health Research Foundation for their major financial contribution; and the Capital Health Region, BC Centre of Excellence on Women's Health and the University of Victoria for the additional financial and in kind support. Finally, we would like to graciously thank PEERS for its multi-faceted support for this research project, without which it would have been difficult to bring to a final conclusion.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background

Much of the research to date on the sex industry and its workforce has adopted a social problem orientation. Individual sex workers, almost always depicted as street walkers (those who are observable to the public and invariably the source of complaints by residents in neighbourhoods where the street trade is active) have been the main focus of analyses, with much attention given to background factors that lead them into the sex trade, risk behaviours while working in the trade, and the short and long-term physical, sexual and mental health outcomes of sex trade involvement.

A small body of literature, however, has taken the view that the sex trade/industry is far more complex than most believe, involving a number of sex occupations/venue locations other than street prostitution where it is estimated less than 20 percent of activity takes place. The sex trade is not unlike other types of service work that are found in high income countries such as Canada, involving a bundle of tasks done directly to please the recipient of the service (customer/client), or indirectly to fulfill the expectations of a boss or manager overseeing the delivery of services. What these 'square jobs' have in common with the sex trade is that an exchange of services makes it possible for the worker to make a living. The research reported here looks at the sex trade from a work perspective, arguing that there is an urgent need to *give voice* to sex workers located in indoor as well as

outdoor venues as a first step in understanding the challenges they face.

### **Methodology**

Following the methodology used in an earlier study investigating the sexual exploitation of children and youth in the CRD (Sexually Exploited Youth Committee, 1997), this current study trained ex-sex workers as research assistants who became involved in activities ranging from recruiting respondents, interviewing them, inputting questionnaire data into the computer program, and transcribing the tape-recorded interviews. This strategy and others reported below helped to make the project a genuine community-academic collaboration. A non-random sample of currently active and exited<sup>1</sup> adult<sup>2</sup> female (n=160), male (n=36) and transgendered (n=5) sex workers residing in Victoria, BC and the surrounding 13 municipalities that make up the Capital Regional District (CRD) were asked about whether they experienced their sex trade activity as a job or not, the degree of control they experienced in their current venue, their health status, and their access to health and related services in the metropolitan area.

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<sup>1</sup> Exited or ex-sex worker, for the purposes of this report, is defined as someone who has retired from the sex trade for a minimum of two years at the time of interview. It is believed that those who had been out of the trade for two years would have been able to leave behind most aspects of the identity of and activities involved in being a sex worker.

<sup>2</sup> The study focused on the situation of respondents involved in selling sex services who were 18 years of age or older at the time they were contacted by our research assistants. One of the authors (Benoit) is currently investigating the situation of those under age 18 who are involved in the sex trade in the CRD. (See Benoit and Jansson, 2001-2005).

## Summary of Key Findings

- For the vast majority of our respondents, the sex trade is their main means of making a living, that is, it is their *job or occupation*. The majority of them have worked in more than one venue during their sex trade career, sometimes moving from outdoor to indoor work and other times the reverse. The relative permanency of sex work as a job and the fluidity of movement across venues reported by our respondents suggest that the distinction between indoor and outdoor sex work is not as clear-cut as most previous academic research suggests.
- In terms of experiences within the trade, the data show that across certain dimensions, such as control over job safety and freedom from harassment, those working on the street experience comparatively less occupational control and more harassment than counterparts located in indoor venues. However, as noted by the respondents, third party control extends beyond that of the traditional street pimp to include escort managers and others who mediate between the sex worker and client. In regard to other key dimensions of work control - earnings, pace of work, and clientele and activities performed - those working as private contractors through agencies are often at a considerable disadvantage, even compared to counterparts working independently on the street. In the absence of minimum

work standards, workers in escort agencies, massage parlours and other indoor employment venues have no legal avenue to protect themselves against exploitative conditions of employment.

- The findings further indicate that, compared to the other venues examined, sex workers operating independently out of their own homes are in the best relative position to determine their own cost of labour, net earnings, pace of work, clientele and the sex activities performed while working.
- Despite these findings regarding the relative permanency of the sex trade as an occupation and of the variability within the trade in regard to work location and worker control, at a more general level the criminal nature of the sex trade in Canada has a dramatic impact on workers' rights and safety and leaves all respondents at serious risk.
- Along physical, psychological, emotional and social dimensions, the majority of our respondents report that their health is not what they would like it to be. While most research on the sex trade has focused mainly on sexual health matters, the findings indicate that the health issues affecting sex workers range far beyond these traditional concerns. Mental health and level of self-esteem are related not only to being marginalized

and rendered invisible as adult workers but are also associated with respondents' early childhood experiences that included frequent household change, abuse and neglect.

- Contrary to popular belief, only a minority of respondents escape from their situations through the use of illicit addictive substances, with use slightly higher for those currently working as sex workers than those who have exited. Similarly, only a minority of respondents indicated that addiction was a factor in determining their entry (and subsequent reentry) into the sex trade. Addiction is also co-related with poor health for respondents using illicit substances.
- Even those respondents who have permanently exited the trade continue to struggle post-retirement with mental health and related problems that do not end simply by their leaving the sex trade life behind.
- Our respondents said that they are in need of a variety of frontline and preventive health services. Unfortunately, some of the needed services are either inaccessible, unavailable or ineffective in addressing their needs.

- All of our respondents struggle to resist the popular depiction that portrays them as mere victims. Despite past and present hardship, they describe themselves as active agents with varying degrees of control over their work and health. More than anything else, this report aims to confirm respondents' *agency*, to give them a voice and an opportunity to be heard.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

As demonstrated in this report, all respondents experienced marginalization in the sense that they are unable to access many of the rights and protections other Canadian citizens enjoy. Because of this situation, we suggest some general recommendations, followed by more specific recommendations depending on the sub-group of sex workers.

#### ***General Recommendations:***

- Educate the public about the reality of sex workers' lives;
- Campaign for changes in policy and legislation to make sex work safer;
- Make available better education and training for police and other criminal justice personnel to encourage them to be more sensitive and understanding of the dynamics of sex trade work across all venues;
- Provide ready access to safe, stable, and affordable housing;

- Provide ready access to appropriate and sensitive health and social service providers who are knowledgeable about the needs and concerns of sex workers;
- Make available a continuum of services so that sex workers receive the care they need when they need it;
- Provide economic and political support for experience-based advocacy organizations.

***Recommendations for those Currently Working in the Sex Trade:***

- Educate sex workers about what is legal and illegal about the sex trade;
- Institute formal job contracts for sex workers when employed by others (such as in strip bars or clubs);
- Institute formal work agreements for sex workers when working with third-parties (such as in escort agencies or massage parlours);
- Provide services that are specific to the needs and schedules of sex workers, including child care for dependent children and outreach services around-the-clock, seven days a week.

***Recommendations for Survivors Wanting to Leave the Sex Trade and those who have Exited:***

- Make available more outreach workers offering assistance to sex workers wanting to exit the trade;
- Provide ready access to second-stage supportive housing;

- Provide access to appropriate mental health services for exited sex workers dealing with low self-esteem and other psychological problems stemming from the stigma attached to their former work life;
- Provide access to academic education, including the means to complete high school;
- Provide access to vocational training that is affordable and meaningful;
- Provide access to employment opportunities that match their skills and interests;
- Provide access to exiting programs specifically targeting adults.

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*Interviewer:* Do you think that people tend to view sex trade in a negative light?

*Annie:* A lot of people look at the sex trade like it's really, really bad. The way I see it, it's not the greatest thing, but it's not the worse thing possible... I believe that the only way to consider it, so it's not so negative, [is to] open people's eyes a bit more often.

## **PART I: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background<sup>3</sup>**

Most research views the sex industry and its workforce as a social problem. The individual sex worker - almost always depicted as a prostitute working on the streets - has been the main unit of analysis, and much attention has been given to background factors that lead *her*<sup>4</sup> into the sex trade in the first instance, to risk behaviours while working in the trade, and to the short and long-term physical, sexual and mental health outcomes of sex trade involvement.

A small body of literature, however, has taken the view that the sex trade/industry is not unlike other types of legitimate service work involving a number of sex occupations/venue locations other than street prostitution. Viewed from this angle, sex work involves a bundle of tasks done directly to please the recipient of the service customer/client), or indirectly to fulfill the expectations of a (boss or manager

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<sup>3</sup> Our report makes extensive use of sex workers' narratives. In order to protect the identity of the 201 respondents who gave so much of themselves to this research, pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

<sup>4</sup> Few researchers acknowledge that males also sell sex for a living, although this is slowly changing.

overseeing the delivery of services rendered. The research reported here builds on this latter perspective, arguing that there is an urgent need to 'give voice' to sex workers located in indoor as well as in outdoor venues as a first step in understanding the challenges they face.

In doing so, the research team set out to answer the following questions associated with the sex trade in the CRD:

1. What are the backgrounds of the respondents? Do they all share common key demographic and early childhood characteristics?
2. What set of circumstances are associated with entry into the sex trade?
3. Is sex work a temporary or a relatively permanent activity?
4. Are respondents able to make a living wage from their work selling sex services?
5. How are the working conditions of more visible venues of sex work (e.g., the street) different from less visible venues (escort agencies, bars and clubs, own homes, etc.)?
6. What is the sexual, physical and mental health of respondents?
7. What do respondents think of the health services that they use?
8. How are personal and work characteristics related to length of time that respondents spend in the sex trade? How easy/difficult is it to exit from the sex trade?
9. What are the 'pulls' and 'pushes' of staying in versus leaving the industry?
10. How do current social policies meet the needs and concerns of those who perform/have performed sex services for a living?

As will become apparent below, respondents presented us with a complex picture of what it is like to be a sex worker. All of them struggle to resist the popular depiction that portrays them as mere victims of another's doing. Despite the obvious hardships they have had and continue to endure, they nevertheless describe themselves as active agents with varying degrees of control over their work and personal lives.

A word about the report's format. We have tried to strike a balance between the use of quantitative and qualitative data by combining numerical findings with short vignettes and direct quotes from the open-ended part of the interviews. These features, we believe, give the reader a rich picture of respondents' diverse situations and at the same time embellish the quantitative data that serve as the report's backbone. We have also included a glossary (Appendix 2) where we define frequently used terms in the report.

*Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, is a seaport city located on the southern tip of Vancouver Island where today approximately 317 000 people reside, either in the city proper or its adjacent 13 municipalities that together make up the Capital Regional District (CRD).*

## 1.2 The Research Setting

The first time I worked, I worked out of a nightclub [in Victoria] and that is where I would pick up my dates. It was mostly Japanese tourists actually that came in there a lot and were looking for little blondes. I thought [the tourists] were very upscale with fancy hotels and whatever.

*Sara, former nightclub worker*

Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, is a seaport city located on the southern tip of Vancouver Island where today approximately 317 000 people reside, either in the city proper or its adjacent 13 municipalities that together make up the Capital Regional District (CRD). The metropolitan area has many attractions. It is the site of the provincial government, a cultural centre of Northwest coast Aboriginal art and traditions, and the location of one of the province's main research universities, as well as a number of colleges and other educational institutions. Additionally, because of its mild climate, the CRD is home to a large number of the country's retirees, and the region's many attractions also make it a prime vacation destination for Canadian, US and other tourists.

Another positive feature of the metropolitan area is that it has managed to avoid the spatial concentration of poverty that has developed in recent decades in most other Canadian urban areas, reflected in the increase in number of poor neighborhoods. This does not mean that the CRD is without poor residents, however. Though neighborhood

***Though neighborhood poverty is comparatively low, currently over 15% of the area's residents fit Statistics Canada's definition of "poor/low income."***

***It should also be noted that the unemployment rate for the metropolitan area - at 6.7% in 2000 - is one of the highest among urban districts in central and western Canada.***

poverty is comparatively low, currently over 15% of the area's residents fit Statistics Canada's definition of "poor/low income" (Reitsma-Street *et al.*, 2000)<sup>5</sup>. This figure is slightly lower than the overall Canadian figure of 18% for 2000, but it still means that almost 50 000 residents have a difficult time making ends meet. Moreover, particular groups, depending upon their background characteristics, are much more likely to be poor. For example, four out of every ten individuals below the age of 25 years live in poverty, and females outnumber males in their poverty rate. It should also be noted that the unemployment rate for the metropolitan area - at 6.7% in 2000 - is one of the highest among urban districts in central and western Canada. Finally, because of the CRD's comparably high housing costs (the CRD had the third highest average rent among Canadian cities in 2001), 8 out of 10 families and 7 out of 10 individuals living on low income are forced to devote more than 30% of their gross income to housing. With a housing market that is unaffordable for many residents, homelessness is a growing problem in the CRD and marginalized women figure prominently among this group (Reitsma-Street *et al.*, 2001).

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<sup>5</sup> The closest measure to a poverty line that we have in Canada is the Low Income Cut-Off level (LICO), calculated by Statistics Canada. According to this measure, a family has an income below the LICO if that family spends more than 64% of their after tax income (or 55% of their pre tax income) on the necessities of food clothing and shelter, including corrections for different family size and the cost of living in the particular community. For example, in 1998 a family of four living in a large urban area (over 500 000 people) with an after tax income below \$27 890 lived below the LICO. Similarly, this same family would have to earn a before tax income above \$33 063 in order to be living above the LICO (Reitsma-Street, Hopper and Seright, 2000).

*The sex trade is a vibrant part of the CRD's service sector.*

*This study has attempted to capture the voices of the city's more permanent off-season sex trade workforce, recognizing that many of them also work during the tourist season.*

### 1.3 The CRD Sex Trade

Given what has been said above, it should come as no surprise that the sex trade is a vibrant part of the metropolitan area's service sector. According to our respondents, the region's sex trade is best categorized as "off-/on-season." During the so-called "off-season" (winter-early spring), the sex trade serves a local clientele drawn from a wide array of occupational groups within the urban economy. During the "on-season" (summer-early fall), the sex worker sees a new clientele from the region's active seasonal tourist industry. During this time, the anecdotal evidence suggests that seasonal sex workers migrate to the CRD looking for work and that the sex trade provides summer employment for some college and university students. This study has attempted to capture the voices of the city's more permanent off-season sex trade workforce, recognizing that many of them also work during the tourist season. Our rationale in conducting the interviews for the most part during the fall and winter months was that sex workers living in the city during these months would have a more rounded knowledge of the local trade than their transient and temporarily-occupied counterparts. This being said, a full understanding of the CRD sex trade would necessarily involve examination of the situation for migrant workers. It is possible that these migrant workers may not be doing as well overall as the locally-established respondents who are featured in this report (for data comparing migrant

*Our research suggests that the sex trade in the CRD is similar to that of other medium-sized or larger cities across the country, including that its reported workforce is largely female and its clientele almost exclusively male.*

and domestic sex workers in the Netherlands see Vanwesenbeck, 1994).

Our research suggests that the sex trade in the CRD is similar to that of other medium-sized or larger cities across the country, including that its reported workforce is largely female and its clientele almost exclusively male (Lowman, 1986; Williams, 1991; Downe, 1998; Brock, 1998). One noteworthy difference among Canadian cities is that some municipalities (including Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary, Windsor and Winnipeg) have bylaws that deal specifically and differently with escort agencies as compared to other businesses (Lewis and Maticka-Tyndale, 2001). The cost of an escort agency license in Calgary in 2001, for example, was \$3600 and the comparable figure for Edmonton was \$4000. By contrast, non-sex trade related businesses in Calgary paid anywhere between \$50 to \$600 for licensing fees and in Edmonton, \$25 to \$440. Some municipalities also require each individual escort worker to be licensed (the fee in 2001 was \$600 for escort workers in Calgary and \$100 in Edmonton). Calgary by-laws also prohibit escorts from working as independents, while the city of Edmonton requires that they pay a licensing fee of \$1500 (City of Edmonton, 2000, City of Calgary, 2001). By contrast, escort agencies in the CRD and its surrounding municipalities are not governed by special by-laws and are only required to attain a business license, similar to other small business operators offering services in the city

*Research shows that the visible street trade represents only a small proportion of the industry, with as many as 70 to 90% of sex workers located in off-street venues in metropolitan areas in Canada and the US.*

*Our primary aim was to interview sex workers located in off-street locations.*

*We hoped to discern whether the off-street workers were better or worse off than street workers or those who were no longer active in the sex trade.*

(e.g., the cost of an escort license in Saanich in 2001 was \$60). Escort workers in the CRD are not required to have a license to work in the agencies or independently (The Corporation of the District of Saanich, 1999).

Another difference that may affect the organization of sex work in the research site is that the CRD is a popular tourist area, and its local authorities and municipal police forces may be more focused on keeping the streets visually attractive and free from people communicating for the purposes of buying or selling sexual services than comparable sized metropolitan areas without an extensive tourist trade. Regardless of the impact of tourism, research shows that the visible street trade represents only a small proportion of the industry, with as many as 70 to 90% of sex workers located in off-street venues in metropolitan areas in Canada and the US (Campbell, 1991; Jackson and Highcrest, 1996; Bortich, 1997). We assume that this is the case as well in the CRD and local studies support this assumption (Sexually Exploited Youth Committee, 1997; Carter and Walton, 2000). Hence our primary aim was to interview sex workers located in off-street locations. For comparative purposes, however, we also thought it important to interview a sample subgroup currently working on the street and a parallel sample that had exited from the trade for two years or more. In doing so, we hoped to discern whether the off-street workers were better or worse off than street workers or those who were no longer

*Prostitutes, Empowerment and Educational Resource Society (PEERS) is a non-profit organization that is largely staffed by ex-sex workers who offer street outreach services, counseling and job skills training to women and men wanting to exit the sex trade as well as those currently working in the trade.*

active in the sex trade. We present our findings after discussing our methodology.

#### 1.4 Getting the Project off the Ground

*Research Leader:* What were your first impressions of the research project when you met [the project coordinator and myself]?

*Research Assistant:* Well, I didn't know who you were. I didn't know if you wanted very much contact with us sex workers [or] if you were just coming in and doing your job and leaving, right? I think I was worried about how open-minded or accepting you would be with sex trade people; how much we might have to fight you or something! [But] when you guys came to the meetings, I learned that this was PEERS' project, this was our thing that we were doing for our community. We were getting support from the university and from women who believe in doing research and helping women. My whole idea of the research project changed after that.

The research informing this report is best described as a community-academic partnership. Prostitutes, Empowerment and Educational Resource Society (PEERS) is a non-profit organization that is largely staffed by ex-sex workers who offer street outreach services, counseling and job skills training to women and men wanting to exit the sex trade as well as those currently working in the trade.

*The aim of applying for research money was to collect data on adult sex workers that would be useful to PEERS' outreach services and educational programs.*

*It was also widely recognized that the research was likely to provide recognition of the valuable knowledge held by sex workers, and would provide modest employment opportunities for a small number of them.*

In 1995, PEERS helped 98 clients; in 1999, the number had risen to 500. However, due to a paucity of reliable information on the working conditions and health status of sex workers, especially those located in off-street locations, members of PEERS and its Advisory Board concluded that research should assume a more central role in the organization's activities. This led to the initiation of the current research project.

The aim of applying for research money was to collect data on adult sex workers that would be useful to PEERS' outreach services and educational programs. (Initially the intent was to improve PEERS' services and programs for those sex workers keen on leaving the trade, but gradually the focus shifted to learning more about how to help those currently active as well as those wanting to exit the industry.) It was also widely recognized that the research was likely to provide recognition of the valuable knowledge held by sex workers, and would provide modest employment opportunities for a small number of them.

After passing the letter of intent stage of the BC Health Research Foundation (BCHRF) competition<sup>6</sup>, "Community Research Grant," PEERS sought the expertise of a non-profit management consultant and an academic from the University of Victoria to help reshape the grant application into a collaborative research project focused on the working conditions and health status of sex workers. The grant

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<sup>6</sup> Recently renamed the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research.

*This multi-faceted research team, with representatives from PEERS, the university, community organizations, the city, and provincial government played a central role in shaping the research project into a genuine community-academic partnership.*

*Ten former sex workers were eventually trained in various aspects of research, and all spent a stint of time working as full-fledged research assistants.*

application was successful, and PEERS was awarded almost \$150 000 to finance its 2-year project. An ad-hoc Advisory Board was organized to include representatives from a number of partnership organizations (Capital Health Region, Sandy Merriman House and the Ministry of Attorney General). This multi-faceted research team, with representatives from PEERS, the university, community organizations, the city, and provincial government played a central role in shaping the research project into a genuine community-academic partnership.

### **1.5 The Research Methodology**

The research project began in earnest in May 1999. A number of active and exited sex workers applied for the advertised positions of interviewer, data input assistant and transcriber. This was the first time that any of the applicants had ever found their sex trade experiences an *essential requirement* of a 'square job'! In all, ten former sex workers were eventually trained in various aspects of research, and all spent a stint of time working as full-fledged research assistants. It is important to note that most of the hired research assistants had worked in a variety of venues, such as escort agencies, massage parlours, their own homes, strip clubs, bars, and on the street. A few had managed their own escort agencies. Most had exited the sex trade in the last two years. The combination of these elements meant that research assistants and respondents shared common work

*The research assistants and respondents shared common work experience, trade language and a basic understanding of the working conditions found in the city's sex trade.*

experience, trade language and a basic understanding of the working conditions found in the city's sex trade.

We compiled a list of 147 potential respondents who were active in the sex trade in the CRD and who agreed to be interviewed for our project. The respondents were recruited through a variety of means: PEERS programs, personal contacts of the research team, local advertisements in Monday magazine, the Times Colonist and the Martlet (the University of Victoria's main student newspaper) and announcements on public bulletin boards, shops and clubs. Many of our respondents who were involved in the street trade at the time of contact were located through Sandy Merriman House, an emergency shelter for women in the CRD. It is important to note that this recruitment strategy may to some extent skew our research findings on street sex workers. Additionally, a graduate student at the University of Victoria who was working as a researcher on this project was subsequently successful in attaining a student scholarship from the BCHRF to support a study of sex workers who had permanently left the sex trade. After consultation with PEERS staff, the graduate student researcher came up with a working definition of "exited" as those individuals who had been out of the sex trade for a minimum of two years at the time of interview. It is believed that those who have been out of the trade for two years would have permanently exited that way of life. Although the final analysis of 54 exited sex

***A final sample of 201 respondents (147 active and 54 exited sex trade workers) was obtained, allowing access to information on the backgrounds, venues, and health conditions of a much larger sample of sex workers in the CRD than originally anticipated.***

***It should be emphasized that our respondent sample is not representative of the entire population of sex workers in the CRD area.***

workers is incomplete as of the release of this report (see Millar, A. forthcoming), preliminary analysis is included in this report in order to make comparisons to the main group of respondents.

In sum, through a variety of means, a final sample of 201 respondents was obtained allowing access to information on the backgrounds, venues, and health conditions of a much larger sample of sex workers in the CRD than originally anticipated. This sample size also allowed us to identify and compare many more sub-categories than would have been possible with data gathered on only 50 or even 100 participants. It should be emphasized, however, that our respondent sample is not representative of the entire population of sex workers in the CRD area. Motives for non-participation, including not wanting to talk about their past or current situation, fear that their identities might be revealed, and not being permitted by third parties are some of the reasons why our study group may be biased in a particular direction. It may well be that non-responders are in particular work situations and suffer greater ill-health than our respondents. On the other hand, it can be argued that more economically marginalized sex workers agreed to participate in the study because they were in need of the \$40 honorarium offered to potential respondents and we would predict that the less well-off a respondent, the more marginal his or her working conditions and health status.

*The questions asked were about demographic information, education, household background while growing up, factors precipitating entrance into the sex trade, working conditions while in the trade, health and safety issues and challenges to exiting.*

The development of the research instrument was also a collaborative effort, involving a number of revisions until all members of the research team were satisfied. In its finalized form, the research instrument, three parts closed-ended and one-quarter open-ended questions, took between one-and-a-half to two hours to complete. The questions asked were, among other things, about demographic information, education, household background while growing up, factors precipitating entrance into the sex trade, working conditions while in the trade, health and safety issues and challenges to exiting. The entire interview was tape-recorded and the closed-ended answers filled in on the questionnaire. These data were later entered into a statistical program (SPSS), and two people were trained to transcribe the open-ended component of the research instrument verbatim. The closed- and opened-ended components were then checked against each other to ascertain reliability. All completed questionnaires were subsequently shredded and the cassette tapes containing the recorded interviews destroyed (see Appendix 1 for further details on the many benefits gained for the members of the research team, and on the challenges posed in conducting this community-academic research collaboration.)

## PART II: SELECT CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

I was the oldest of five kids. In our family there seemed to be not a lot of communication or expression of caring and emotional support. I just remember it being quite an oppressive home. We had to be good and quiet all the time. The emotional closeness just wasn't there. Both my parents worked really hard so by the time they got home they didn't have the energy left over to be emotionally supportive to the kids. So I grew up to be independent, emotionally independent.

*Serena, a former exotic dancer*

I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth and I believed that it would carry on for the rest of my life, that you needed something and it would be there, everything would be done for you. [However when] I was twenty-one the silver spoon was taken away.

*Gordana, agency worker*

### 2.1 Gender and Age

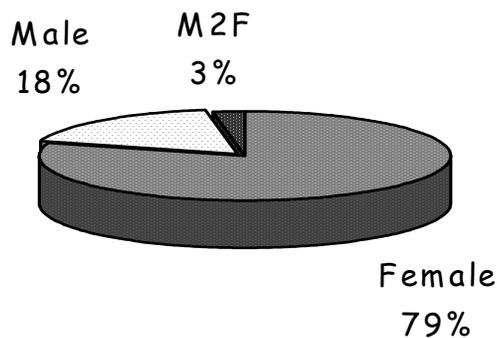
The research instrument was completed by 147 active and 54 exited sex workers (n=201). Because few demographic differences were found between respondents who at the time of interview were in or out of the trade, the data presented below, for the most part, are for the two groups combined. Reflecting the gendered nature of sex work (Brock, 1998; Carter and Walton, 2000), the majority of those interviewed (n=160) identified as female (Figure 1). Those identifying as male (n=36) comprised just fewer than 18%. The remainder

*Few demographic differences were found between respondents who at the time of interview were in or out of the trade.*

*Our respondents' mean age of 32 years does not fit the dominant media image of sex workers as comprising mainly sexually exploited children and youth.*

(n=5) identified themselves as transgendered (male-to-female/M2F). Due to the small number of transgendered respondents, any gender differences reported below will focus on male/female differences only.

Our respondents varied greatly in age with an age range of 17<sup>7</sup> to 60 years of age. Their mean age of 32 years does not fit the dominant media image of sex workers as comprising mainly sexually exploited children and youth (Badgley and Young, 1987).



**Figure 1: Gender of Respondents**

<sup>7</sup> Only one respondent was less than 18 years of age at the time of interview. The interviewer did not notice that the respondent fell below the cut-off age of 18 years until after the interview was over and the completed questionnaire was examined. We decided to keep the respondent in the sample because she was nearly 18 years of age when the interview was conducted.

*The vast majority of respondents (89%) were born in Canada. Among those who were born abroad, all but one person came from other high-income countries.*

## 2.2 Ethnicity and Place of Birth

The vast majority of respondents (89%) were born in Canada and none of those interviewed can be easily classified as victims of the global trafficking of sex workers (see Jiwani and Brown, 1999). Among those who were born abroad (just over 10%), all but one person came from other high-income countries (United States, United Kingdom and continental Europe). Furthermore, the 22 respondents who were born outside of Canada are best classified as long-term residents, having lived here between 13 to 50 years, with an average of 29.6 years for the sub-group. Approximately 45% of all respondents were born in BC, 20% of whom were born in the CRD. The remainder of the Canadian born came largely from Ontario, Alberta, or Manitoba. On the other hand, even those respondents "from away" cannot be easily categorized as transitory residents of the city. Half of these respondents had stayed in the metropolitan area for more than 5 years at the time of interview.

As shown in Table 1, our respondents do not stand out in regard to visible minority status. Among our respondents, 6.5% fit the Employment Equity Act definition of a visible minority, i.e., persons, other than Aboriginal people, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour. This figure is, in fact, slightly lower than the distribution of visible minorities - 7 % in 1996 - in the region's population (Statistics Canada, 2001a). Our respondents do stand out, however, in terms of Aboriginal status (Status and Non-Status Indians, Métis and

*Our respondents do not stand out in regard to visible minority status, but do stand out in terms of Aboriginal status (Status and Non-Status Indians, Métis and Inuit people). Nearly 15% of respondents placed themselves in this category, half of whom identified as Métis.*

*The median level of education completed by respondents was grade 10; less than 40% had graduated from high school.*

Inuit people). Nearly 15% of respondents placed themselves in this category, half of whom identified as Métis. This figure is substantially higher than the percentage of Aboriginal people in the city as a whole - 2% in 1996 (Statistics Canada, 2001b).

	Frequency	Percent
Visible Minority	13	6.5
Aboriginal	30	14.9
Other	158	78.6

**Table 1: Visible Minority and Aboriginal Status of Respondents**

### 2.3 Education

In regard to educational background, the median level of education completed by respondents was grade 10. As Table 2 shows, less than 40% had graduated from high school, a figure that is representative of both male and female respondents. In terms of educational attainment, then, the respondents stand out from the general population, where in 1996, 65% of women and men in Canada aged 15 and over had completed high school (Statistics Canada, 2000). It is also interesting to note that educational attainment was even lower for respondents who had retired from the sex trade (only 37.7% had completed high school) and few have returned to complete their high school education since retirement. Only 13% indicated that they were currently in school and 16.7%

were receiving training, whereas the corresponding proportions for currently working respondents were 15.0% and 12.9%, respectively. Aboriginal respondents reported the lowest high school completion rates of all: 33% versus 40% for the sample overall. There was also a relationship between age of entry into the sex trade and educational achievement: respondents who had entered the sex industry before age 18 were less likely to have completed high school (31.9%) compared to respondents who entered at age 18 or older (45.3%).

	Frequency	Percent
Less than a high school education (<grade 10)	55	27.5
Some high school education (completed grade 10 and/or 11)	67	33.5
Completed high school (grade 12)	78	39.0
<b>TOTAL</b>	200	100.0

**Table 2: Educational Attainment of Respondents**

*Exited workers have lower incomes than current workers, \$18 000 and \$11 446 respectively.*

## 2.4 Income

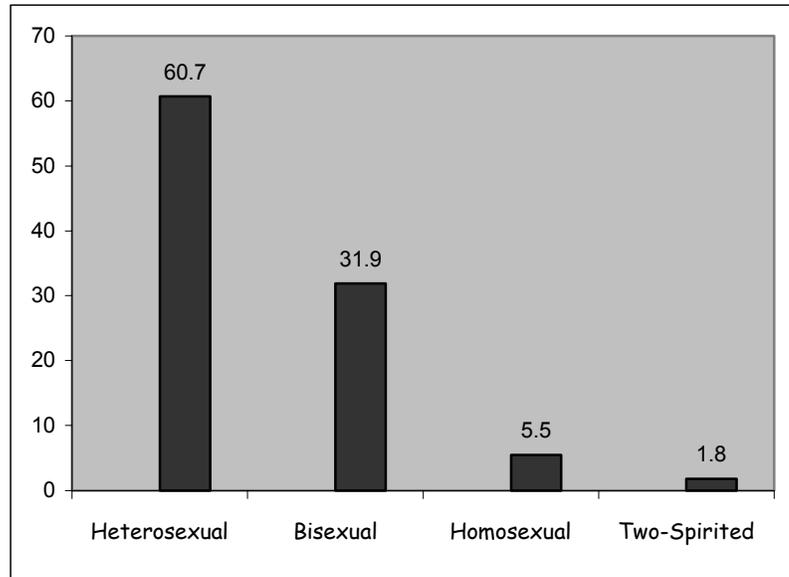
Comparisons of gross annual incomes reveal that exited workers have lower incomes than current workers. The median income from sex trade activities for currently working sex workers, as calculated from their last 12 months in the industry, was \$18 000 (\$20 000 per year for females and \$10 000 for males). The substantially lower income of male sex workers is consistent with previous research (Weinberg et al 2000). The median earnings per annum for exited respondents employed in a square job amounted to \$11 446. These incomes are lower than that of the general population: in 1997, the average income in British Columbia was \$21 044 for women and \$33 214 for men (Statistics Canada, 2000: 147). Noteworthy is the dramatic difference in the income of male sex workers and other males.

## 2.5 Sexual Orientation

Respondents also differed from the general population in regard to sexual orientation. As shown in Figure 2, 60.7% classified themselves as heterosexual, 31.9% as bisexual, 5.5% as homosexual and 1.8% as two-spirited. Further, males were far more likely than female counterparts to identify themselves as homosexual (19.4% versus 1.9%) or bisexual (47.2% versus 29.4%). Canadian population data on sexual orientation are not available, although US data indicate that 2.8% of men and 1.4% of women define themselves as partly or entirely homosexual and less than 1% of US adults describe

*Of our respondents, 60.7% classified themselves as heterosexual, 31.9% as bisexual, 5.5% as homosexual and 1.8% as two-spirited*

themselves as bisexual (Laumann *et al.*, 1994). Due to the nature of sex work, certain conditions seem to support same-sex and bi-sexual personal relationships. This might explain why respondents who had exited the trade were more likely to identify themselves as heterosexual (70.4%) compared to those who were working in the sex industry (just over 50%). Another possibility is that homosexuality, bi-sexuality and transgender status are 'pulls' that draw individuals to sex work and at the same time the stigma associated with these orientations might 'push' gay, bi-sexual and transgendered people to sex work (Elias, *et al.*, 1998). More research is needed on this topic before any conclusions can be drawn, however.



**Figure 2: Sexual Orientation of Respondents**

*Among respondents currently working, most had worked for pay outside the sex trade at some point in time. However, for the large majority, the sex trade was their only current means of income.*

*Well over half of exited respondents at the time of interview indicated that they currently were not working for a salary or wage.*

*These descriptive data suggest that exited sex workers are even more economically marginalized than their active counterparts.*

## 2.6 Occupational Characteristics

Among respondents currently working, most had worked for pay outside the sex trade at some point in time. However, for the large majority, the sex trade was their only current means of income. Only 15.6% of those working in the sex trade were presently in another job where they received a salary or wage. Females were slightly more likely than male respondents to have a job outside of the sex trade. It is not surprising that having left the sex trade, more exited respondents were working in 'square jobs.' However, well over half (57.4%) of exited respondents at the time of interview indicated that they currently were not working for a salary or wage. Thus, in comparison with the general population, exited respondents are much less likely to be gainfully employed. In 1999, 75% of Canadian women aged 25-44 and 71% of those aged 45-54 held jobs where they reported earning a salary or wage; the comparable figures for men were 85.7% and 83.8% (Statistics Canada, 2000); whereas, only 40.9% of female and 44.4% of male exited respondents were currently employed. While some unemployed exited respondents were financially dependent upon a partner/spouse, others relied on social assistance and, in a few cases, a disability pension. In sum, these descriptive data suggest that exited sex workers are even more economically marginalized than their active counterparts. For most of the exited respondents, finding legitimate employment that offered the same financial pay-offs of the sex industry was

simply unattainable.

## 2.7 Household Characteristics

The living situations of the respondents varied considerably from the general population as well. In the CRD, 63% of all households own their own dwellings (Reitsma-Street *et al.*, 2000). In 1997, the comparable figure for unattached Canadian women aged 15-64 was 43% and 29% for female lone parents (Statistics Canada, 2000). However, home/dwelling ownership was the case for only 3.5% of respondents (i.e., only 7 individuals in total). While, as shown in Table 3, the majority of respondents reported having stable living situations (i.e., owned or rented an apartment or house or living with family/guardians), a substantial minority (nearly one-quarter) resided in relatively unstable/very unstable circumstances. Current and exited sex workers differed markedly in their living situation, with current workers being much more likely to have no permanent address and either relying on the services of a shelter/transition house or hostel, living in a squat, bath house or trick pad, living with a trick, or living on the street. Due to their unstable housing situation, many respondents reported living in multiple abodes and moving around frequently from place to place. As one respondent put it: "I haven't had my own place for five years. I've been on the street and in shelters."

*Current and exited sex workers differed markedly in their living situation, with current workers being much more likely to have no permanent address.*

	Frequency	Percent
Stable (rent/own house or apartment, live at home)	155	77.1
Relatively unstable (hotel/motel)	7	3.5
Unstable (squat, hostel, shelter, bath house, trick/trick pad)	38	18.9
Very Unstable (living on the street)	1	.5
Total	201	100.0

**Table 3: Stability of Current Living Situation**

## 2.8 Relationships and Children

Despite research which suggests that sex workers often confront difficulties in starting and sustaining love relationships because of their work activities, (McKeganey and Barnard, 1996, Hoigard and Finstad, 1986), 60.1% of females and 46.3% of males interviewed said that they had an intimate relationship (i.e., had a 'partner or lover') at the time of interview and active sex workers in our sample were not any less likely to be in such a relationship than those who had exited the trade. The median length of time reported for those who answered yes to this question (n=116) was one-and-a-half years with their partner/lover. According to Statistics Canada (2000), 70.9% of females and 66.2% of males between ages 25-44 in the general population have a partner. In terms of quality, only three currently working respondents rated the quality of their current relationship as "abusive." None of the exited respondents who were currently in relationships did so.

*60.1% of females and 46.3% of males interviewed said that they had an intimate relationship (i.e., had a 'partner or lover') at the time of interview and active sex workers in our sample were not any less likely to be in such a relationship than those who had exited the trade.*

*Of the 160 females interviewed, over 90 percent had been pregnant at least once - the average number of pregnancies among these women was 3.19*

*Among female respondents, 52.8% had ended a pregnancy with an abortion at some point in their life.*

*18.4% of active sex workers and 42.6% of former sex workers said they were looking after a dependent child.*

Of the 160 females interviewed, over 90 percent had been pregnant at least once - the average number of pregnancies among these women was 3.19. Only 15 respondents said that they had never been pregnant. Additionally, 52.8% of female respondents had terminated a pregnancy with an abortion at some point in their life. Due to the marginal nature of many of their work-related activities, respondents are at great risk of losing custody of their children. It is not surprising, then, that only a small proportion of those interviewed who had given birth to (or fathered) a child reported that they were currently taking care of dependent children. Among active sex workers, 18.4% said they were looking after a dependent child (27.5% of females and 13.9% of males), compared with 42.6% of former sex workers (47.7% for females and 22.2% for males). These data thus highlight the vulnerability of children whose parents - primarily mothers - are currently in the trade.

## **2.9 Summary**

Female respondents outnumber males more than five-to-one. This suggests that the sex trade in the CRD is a female-dominated occupation where mainly female workers provide sex services to an almost exclusively male clientele.<sup>8</sup> Yet it is important to keep in mind that over half of all

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<sup>8</sup> However, it may be that our research team (all females) was not able to recruit potential male respondents to the study to the same extent as females. Only further research can answer this question.

working women in Canada can be found in only two job categories located in the middle and low end of the pay scale. Clerical and administrative support work draws 24.7% of working women, most of whom are secretaries or other office workers. Another 31.6% of employed women are in sales and service work (Statistics Canada, 2000). Most of these jobs are in clothing and food-service industries, in child-care and health-care (Benoit, 2000). Respondents stand out from the general population in regard to the fact that a high percentage identified as either homosexual or bi-sexual. This is especially so for male sex workers. Our study's respondents also reported a relatively low percentage of high school completion. Finally, the housing situation of respondents is far less secure than that of residents of the metropolitan area and the general population. Keeping in mind the respondents' low median annual incomes and the fact that the CRD region has one of the least-affordable housing markets in Canada, it comes as no surprise that transient housing and homelessness characterize the situation of many of those interviewed. Respondents' relative marginalization along the dimensions described above also holds when we look at their family and other support systems before entering the sex trade.

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## ROSIE

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*Rosie's father was an accountant and her mother a clerk typist. Dispelling a common myth that all sex workers have been physically and/or sexually abused, neither happened to Rosie. What she recalls is a childhood in which her father was largely absent, though he did take her from time to time on outings and camping. Rosie's mother gave more of herself in regard to time and emotional support to her daughter, but had little positive to say about Rosie's personal achievements, which included completion of high school and two years of post-secondary education. By the age of 23, Rosie was married and her first child was on the way. The following year she was pregnant again. A year later her partner had left her alone with an infant and toddler in tow. Rosie does not speak much about what happened next, except to say that social services came and took her first two children about the same time that she entered the sex trade. A stillbirth was later followed by the birth of her third child. Rosie reared her youngest on her own, by doing periodic "square" jobs (receptionist, sales attendant), combined with relatively steady employment in the sex trade. She says that "while the majority of sex workers start the trade much younger. I started after I had my kids." Rosie has worked for a time in three different sex trade venues: on the street, in an escort agency run by others, and as co-operator of an escort business. Rosie considers herself lucky because pimps who often harass sex workers and can be violent towards them have never subdued her. "I've always felt that way and I've never had a pimp and I never will. I didn't want anything to do with them. I have never supported a man." When asked about whether she would do anything different if she had her life to live over, Rosie says "that's always a really hard question to answer, because I think its my life experience that has gotten me to the point in my life where I am today. I'm really grateful for some of my experiences that I have had... It was through all the hard times that I learned to appreciate the good times so I don't think I would change much."*

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### PART III: HOUSEHOLD DYNAMICS WHILE GROWING UP

*Interviewer:* What was it like growing up in your family?

*Lisa:* There were lots of double standards and sexual innuendoes. I don't have any memories of being sexually abused but my sister remembers seeing me getting sexually abused when I was four, but I have no memory of it. There were lots of things in my family. My parents would fight and my dad used to come sleep with us. There were four girls in the family, but I have no memory of being sexually abused...I was pregnant when I was fourteen. I quit school and left home at fourteen. I was very rebellious and very angry.

#### 3.1 Household Instability

For a large number of respondents, childhood was characterized by instability, with frequent changes in their family situation. Almost 40% of those interviewed had experienced four or more changes in their family/living situation by the time they had reached eighteen years of age. Conversely, less than one-fifth reported living in one stable situation while growing up. Moreover, the average age at which respondents first began living without a legal guardian was 16 years, with 11% of respondents living on their own before they were 14 years old. Many were thus obliged to 'fend for themselves' at an early age.

*For a large number of respondents, childhood was characterized by instability, with frequent changes in their family situation; less than one-fifth reported living in one stable situation while growing up.*

*The average age at which respondents first began living without a legal guardian was 16 years.*

*The majority of respondents (57.2%) had at some point in their lives been in foster care/group homes/other state-funded institutions.*

As shown in Table 4, while the majority of respondents were living with both biological parents at the time of birth, by the age of five, less than half were still living with both parents. By the age of 10, the figure had dropped to 34.4%. The comparable figures for the general Canadian population for the latter age group in 1994-95 was 72.9% with both biological parents (Marcil-Gratton, 1998). Further, the number of respondents living with neither biological parent (in formal care, with other relatives, adoptive parents or on one's own) was also disproportionately high and increased steadily with age. In fact, the majority of respondents (57.2%) had at some point in their lives been in foster care/group homes/other state-funded institutions. While there were no notable differences along gender lines, Aboriginal respondents were much more likely than their non-Aboriginal counterparts to have been in both formal care and with an adoptive parent. Table 5 gives a snapshot of these findings for respondents at age 10.

	Age 1	Age 5	Age 10	Age 15	Age 18
<b>Both Biological Parents</b>	70.0%	45.3%	34.3%	20.6%	11.2%
<b>Mother only</b>	11.5%	19.4%	19.4%	9.5%	6.1%
<b>Father only</b>	0.5%	3.0%	4.5%	4.5%	4.6%
<b>Mother and Step Father</b>	1.5%	7.0%	10.4%	6.5%	.5%
<b>Mother and Friend/Partner</b>	1.0%	2.0%	3.5%	2.0%	0%
<b>Father and Step Mother</b>	.5%	2.5%	3.5%	1.0%	1.0%
<b>Other Relatives</b>	1.5%	2.0%	2.0%	5.0%	2.0%
<b>Adoptive Parent</b>	6.5%	11.9%	10.9%	7.0%	3.0%
<b>Foster Parent</b>	2.5%	6.0%	5.5%	8.5%	3.0%
<b>Formal Care*</b>	4.5%	1.0%	4.5%	15.5%	4.5%
<b>On One's Own</b>	0%	0%	1.5%	12.1%	35.5%
<b>Alone With Child</b>	0%	0%	0%	1.5%	4.6%
<b>With Partner Only</b>	0%	0%	0%	5%	19.8
<b>Other</b>	0%	0%	0%	1.0%	1.5%
<b>Neither Biological Parent</b>	15.0%	20.8%	24.4%	55.9%	76.6%

\* Formal Care includes: Group Home, Child Welfare, and Combined Formal Care.

**Table 4: Living Situations of Respondents, Select Years**

	Formal Care	Adoptive Care
<b>Aboriginal</b>	23.4	23.3
<b>Non-Aboriginal</b>	7.7	8.8

**Table 5: Percentage of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Respondents in Adoptive Families and Formal Care, Age 10.**

*Almost 90% of respondents reported some kind of physical, emotional or sexual abuse.*

### 3.2 Childhood Abuse

As Table 6 shows, the majority of both current and exited respondents came from homes marked by a difficult childhood characterized by frequent abuse. In fact, almost 90% of respondents reported some kind of physical, emotional or sexual abuse. In regard to gender, virtually the same percentage of males and females had experienced abuse while growing up (88.9% versus 88.1%). There were larger differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal respondents reporting abuse: 93.3% versus 87.7%. There is a lack of comparative data for the general population. Crime reports do suggest, however, that girls and women are much more likely to be victimized by someone they know rather than a stranger. Canadian data support this gendered finding. Bagley and King (1990) estimated that at least 15% of female and 5% of male Canadians have been abused. An Ontario study similarly reported that 1 in 8 girls and 1 in 23 boys had experienced sexual abuse while growing up (Gadd, 1997). A 1998 BC study of 41 000 youth in grades 7 to 12 found similar findings: 20% of female respondents had experienced physical abuse and 15% sexual abuse. The corresponding figures for male respondents were 13% and 3% (The McCreary Centre Society, 2001).

*Half of our respondents said that their father/male had abused them physically using a variety of means and 48% said that their mother /female guardian abused them using similar means.*

	Frequency	Percent
None	23	11.4
One form (physical, emotional or sexual)	43	21.4
Two forms of abuse	63	31.3
All three forms	72	35.8
Total	201	100.0

**Table 6: Overall Abuse Endured By Respondents**

In total, half of our respondents said that their father/male guardian abused them physically using a variety of means - hand, wooden spoon, rope, metal ends belt, chair, willow switch, razor strap, whatever was nearby, etc. The comparable figures for mother/female guardian were not much different: 48% of respondents said that their mother/female guardian used a similar range of weapons as mentioned above for the father/male guardian. Hagan and McCarthy (1997) found that the majority of homeless youth (60%) in their Toronto sample had experienced physical abuse from one of their parents/guardians before leaving home. This study also found that a significant number of female parents/guardians had used force in dealing with their children.

Emotional/psychological abuse, as described by our respondents, involved among other things ongoing belittlement, humiliation in front of others, severe emotional

*Despite the comparatively high instances of abuse suffered by respondents while growing up, a substantial number of respondents also spoke of positive experiences during their childhood.*

detachment of parent/guardian, and long-term neglect. Among our respondents, 52.3% had experienced emotional abuse of this sort from their father/male guardian and 51.5% from their mother/female guardian.

Over half of the respondents were also victims of sexual abuse while growing up, with female respondents (55.3%) much more likely than male counterparts (33.3%) to be victimized. In an overwhelming number of these cases, the perpetrator of the sexual abuse was a father/male guardian or other male relative. Finally, it is worth noting that the majority of those who had been sexually abused reported that it had occurred a number of times, and just under a quarter of them said that they had multiple abusers.

Despite the comparatively high instances of abuse suffered by respondents while growing up, a substantial number of respondents also spoke of positive experiences during their childhood. Almost 70% of respondents reported that their female guardian frequently cuddled them when they were hurt or feeling down, and 43.3% indicated that their male guardians did so. As explored in the next section, the descriptive characteristics of respondents and their household dynamics while growing up help us to some extent understand why respondents entered the sex trade in the first instance.

*Sophie doesn't say much about her childhood except that she was raised in a single parent family and never knew her father. Her mother worked hard to support the two of them, which left little time for Sophie. What she does remember is moving around a lot while growing up and feeling extremely isolated and never really belonging anywhere: "I felt like I never really fit in...in high school [I was] just different, that's why I quit school and went to work in the bars," she explains. So she left home after dropping out of grade 11 and hasn't seen or talked to her mom since. Although Sophie, now age 33, has been out of the trade for 7 years, she still had difficulty talking about her past. In fact, her experience in the sex trade is something that she doesn't share with too many people: "Its something that I don't really share openly...my close friends [are aware] but my family members aren't," she admits. Despite spending seven years in the trade, Sophie has little contact with those still working in it, including the girls she used to work first in the strip club and later at the escort agency with. One reason for this she explains was the difficulty she had exiting and the constant temptation to go back. In fact, before leaving permanently, Sophie made five unsuccessful attempts to exit. Each time she found it extremely difficult to give up the freedom of having "quick money" at her disposal - like her other friends in the trade- and found herself returning when she once again fell short of money for rent or food. However, a few negative experiences with drunk and aggressive clients finally convinced Sophie to leave for good: "It took a while but it finally got through to me that it [wasn't] safe anymore," she says. Contrary to what most people believe, says Sophie, her situation did not magically improve once she left the trade for good. For a long time, she had difficulty finding steady employment that she could support herself on - something she attributes to the presence of a criminal record, "that holds me back," she says angrily. She says that if it weren't for the unconditional support of her husband, whom she met two years after leaving the trade, she'd still be reliant on governmental assistance.*

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## PART IV: ENTRY INTO THE SEX TRADE

*Interviewer:* How did you come to be a sex worker?

*June:* I was a simple housewife and the mother to my children. I worked, had normal non-exciting jobs but I had a steady income. I didn't ever think that I would become a sex worker.

*Interviewer:* What happened at that time?

*June:* We bought a house. We had eighty thousand of repayment owed to the bank. I worked every single night; five nights a week but I didn't make enough money. I didn't know that [when] I was working at night [my ex-husband] was doing breaking and entries. I came home one night and I had the police outside my door. My ex was arrested and then I lost the house. I couldn't finance the house and I didn't have any support. There was no income so I looked for a higher paying job and that's when I got offered the job as a sex worker.

*The median age at the time of initial sex trade activity of the respondents interviewed for this project was that of a young adult - 18 years.*

### 4.1 Age of Entry

Contrary to some research which suggests that most of those entering the sex trade tend to do so at a very young age (Silbert and Pines, 1982a; Lowman 1991), age of entry of the respondents interviewed for this project was that of a young adult - 18 years. Female respondents' median age at the time of initial entry was slightly younger (median age=18) than that of their male counterparts (median age=19), and Aboriginal respondents were younger still (median age=17). Analyzed slightly differently, just under half of the respondents (n=95)

said that they 'turned their first trick' before reaching their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, while the remainder of respondents (n=105) said they did so at age 18 or older.

#### 4.2 Reasons for Entry

Respondents mentioned a variety of circumstances that precipitated their entry into the sex trade. As shown in Table 7, six circumstances stand out.

*Just over one-third of respondents said that they entered the sex trade because they were curious or enticed to the life, which often included its promise of quick, easy money.*

	Frequency	Percent
Enticement	69	34.5
Economic Duress	57	28.5
Drugs & Alcohol	35	17.5
Forced Involvement	25	12.5
Runaway/Isolation	8	4.0
Other	6	3.0
Missing	1	
Total	201	100.0

Table 7: Circumstances to Entering the Sex Trade

*For over one-quarter of respondents economic duress was the main motivating factor.*

Just over one-third of respondents said that they entered the sex trade because they were curious or enticed to the life, which often included its promise of quick, easy money. As one stated, "My life before I started working in the sex trade? I was just going to school and I was extremely curious about prostitution." For over one-quarter of respondents, however, economic duress was the main motivating factor. These respondents mentioned, among other things that: "I was

raising kids on welfare alone and needing money," or "I lost my job and needed money to pay bills, needed money to pay my rent." These respondents said that they had few alternatives to entering the sex trade, had no other way to support themselves and their dependents, that there were no other viable options. As one respondent put it: "I was doing it to survive. I was doing it to pay my rent and put food on the table."

*For a smaller number of respondents involvement with illicit drugs also played a major role in shaping the decision to enter the sex trade in the first instance.*

*An even smaller number gave as their reason running away from home and/or feelings of isolation*

Beyond enticement and basic survival, for a smaller number of respondents involvement with illicit drugs also played a major role in shaping the decision to enter the sex trade in the first instance. The sex trade for these respondents was a vehicle/strategy to support their drug habit. For still a smaller portion of the sample, their entry may be characterized as forced involvement, either at the hands of a pimp or other individual: "[I was] sold to a pimp," or "my mother brought home a date and told me I should do it," or was directly related to a prior history or experience of abuse/victimization, "I was raped," or to escape "the abuse at home." An even smaller number gave as their reason running away from home and/or feelings of isolation. As one respondent noted, "I was a runaway and was traveling and I needed shelter and food."

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## CHARLIE

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*Charlie was born in a large east coast Canadian city 21 years ago and moved to Victoria when he was 12 years of age. He describes his sexual orientation as bi-sexual. He lived with both biological parents during his first years of life, but by age 5 his father had left and his mother had a new male partner. Charlie's memories of his childhood are mixed: he said that when he was 3 years of age his biological father sexually abused him and continued to do so until he left Charlie and his mother for good. He said that his step-father never sexually abused him but used to hit him often - with shoes, belts, anything that was nearby when in a rage. On the other hand, Charlie's memories of his mother are positive and he still seeks out her companionship in adulthood. Unwilling to take the physical abuse anymore from his step-dad, before his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday Charlie had moved out and was fending for himself on the streets in Victoria. He has been on his own ever since. Charlie's first years away from home involved movement from place to place. He continued to go to school for a while and managed to complete grade 9 before dropping out altogether. Charlie has never had a square job. He started in the trade at age 15 and has worked more or less full time ever since. Charlie actually approached his first customer in a washroom. He said that he was seeking friendship and approval from his peers. His best friends were already in the sex trade. He had a pimp for a short while and was beaten up on more than one occasion. But that time has passed and today he said he feels privileged because he works independently out of his own home, organizes his own work schedule and keeps all of the money he earns. The downside is that he is sometimes forced to have sex with more than one client at a time and to perform activities that he would prefer not to. Charlie does not know how long he'll stay in the sex industry. He has mixed feelings about it but does not have any alternatives at the moment. He says that he has made some very good friends through the sex trade - with some Johns and also with co-workers. He also likes the money part of it. What Charlie likes least about the trade is the low status it affords him, his feelings of shame and the ridicule he confronts from the police and the general public. Charlie said that he is generally happy at the moment and when he feels lonely he calls his mom or one of his two best friends. When asked if he could have lived his life over what would he have changed, Charlie answered in two ways: change my childhood and finish school.*

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## PART V: WORKING IN THE SEX TRADE

Some people stereotype you and they think that a hooker on the street, an independent escort or somebody that's in an agency are all the same. They're all the same, they're all whores. I don't listen to them. I don't listen to them. Personally, for myself, I like myself and if they don't, don't look at me and don't talk to me. There are other people out there that are willing to accept that fact that I am working. I am making a living and supporting myself and children and that's all there is to it. It is work.

*Jan, escort worker*

*Of the 201 respondents interviewed, the majority (62.5%) can be considered long-term workers, having worked in the industry for five years or more.*

*Among currently active respondents, 37.8% had worked in two different venues, while 35.1% had worked in three or more. Working in two different venues concurrently was also not unusual.*

Of the 201 respondents interviewed, the majority (62.5%) can be considered long-term workers, having worked in the industry for five years or more. In fact, 9% had been involved in this line of work for 20 plus years while 23.6% had worked in the sex trade for two years or less. For the total sample, the median time worked in the trade was 6 years (6 years for females, 5.5 for males). Respondents described their involvement in the sex trade as either 'part-time' or 'most of the time.'

Respondents' career within the sex trade shows a great amount of transition, with the majority having worked in a variety of venues, including street prostitution, massage, escort, and stripping, movies and phone sex. Of those currently active, 37.8% had worked in two different venues, while 35.1% had worked in three or more. Working in two different venues concurrently was also not unusual. As one

*Rather than a consistent progression beginning with street prostitution and ending in indoor sex venues, the respondents who had worked in more than one venue tended to go back and forth.*

respondent explained, “[I work] both on the street and off the street. Both stripping and in the sex trade.” Rather than a consistent progression beginning with street prostitution and ending in indoor sex venues (as some of the research literature suggests), the respondents who had worked in more than one venue tended to go back and forth. One respondent recalled, “I started off working in the night club. I worked on the street. I went back and worked in an escort agency and from an escort agency I went out on my own.”

Another respondent's work pattern looked like this:

Then when I was older and I started working for an escort agency, it wasn't too bad, it was okay. I preferred it when I got my own clients and then I didn't have to go through her [the manager]. I had my regular clients and I got to know them and I could just see three or four of them a week if I wanted to. If I got slow, then I'd go back to the agency again and get some more. So I kind of did it that way, I worked both. So I felt that I had more freedom to do that so the venue did change.

These data suggest that while the sex trade is a job for the vast majority of respondents, there is not an obvious career ladder where workers start out at an entry-level position and then move up after acquiring experience or other assets needed for upward mobility. Furthermore, when respondents were asked about change in their level of control over sex trade activities across their careers, less than half (44.3%) had experienced an increase in control, while there had been a decrease for 20.9%. The rest reported 'about the same'

*When respondents were asked about change in their level of control over sex trade activities across their careers, less than half (44.3%) had experienced an increase in control, while there had been a decrease for 20.9%.*

*The importance of including off street venues in our understanding of the sex trade is evident given that an indoor venue was reported by 61.2% of our respondents as their current or last venue worked in.*

degree of overall control across their careers. As is shown below, the sex trade occupation/venue is more or less attractive to respondents depending upon the dimension of work that is considered. While working independently at home was seen as the most attractive work situation by respondents, even this finding needs to be put in the context of potential harm and harassment by others (more on this below).

### **5.1 Conditions of Work**

The importance of including off street venues in our understanding of the sex trade is evident given that an indoor venue was reported by 61.2% of our respondents as their current or last venue worked in. Table 8 presents a more detailed breakdown of work venues for respondents. The little research on different venues that is available suggests that street workers are more vulnerable to exploitation by third parties, especially pimps, than those working in less visible, indoor venues (Boritch, 1997; Davidson, 1998). It is important to realize, however, that third party control can occur off- as well as on-street, involving bosses other than stereotypical pimps. For indoor sex workers, imposed "house rules," for example, may seriously limit sex workers' ability to control their working conditions and their access to basic rights, including police protection.

*To find out whether street workers were actually worse off than their counterparts in indoor venues, we asked our respondents a number of questions about their control over various dimensions of their job.*

	Frequency	Percent
On-Street	78	38.8
Agency	57	28.4
Home-Based	33	16.4
Other Indoor*	33	16.4
Total	201	100.0

\*Other indoor includes hotel/motel, bar/strip club/peep show, or massage parlour

**Table 8: Current or Last Work Situation in the Sex Trade**

To find out whether street workers were actually worse off than their counterparts in indoor venues, we asked our respondents a number of questions about their control over various dimensions of their job. Four key dimensions - earnings, pace of work, clientele and activities performed, and job danger and harassment - are examined below. Interestingly, only a small percentage (2.1%) said that a pimp monitored their activities at work. Worker control over more specific dimensions of the job complicates the picture, however, as we will first see in regard to earnings. We want to re-emphasize that we cannot interpret this percentage as indicating that only very few sex workers in our cities are controlled by pimps. As previously stated, it is highly likely that workers controlled by pimps are underrepresented in this sample.

*When asked how much money they had earned in their sex trade occupation over the last 12 months or in the last year they worked in the industry, there was amazingly little variation across venues*

*Those working as escorts were only able to keep a mean of \$78 of every \$100 earned, as was also the case for those working in other indoor locations apart from their own homes. By comparison, street workers and those working out of their homes were able to keep virtually all that they earned.*

## 5.2 Earnings

Income generated from the sex trade will vary depending on a range of factors, including but not limited to, work location and employment status (independent versus working for another individual). When asked how much money they had earned in their sex trade occupation over the last 12 months or in the last year they worked in the industry, there was amazingly little variation across venues: agency escorts had a median income of \$15 000, those working independently out of their own homes, \$18 000, those in other indoor locations (hotel/motel, bar/strip club/peep show, or massage parlour) also earned \$18 000 and street workers took in \$17 500.

The percentage a sex worker is actually able to keep for him or herself is of considerable importance in trying to understand their work situation. Not surprisingly, when asked what percentage of every \$100 earned they kept, a somewhat different picture emerges for respondents across venues. Those working as escorts were only able to keep a mean of \$78 of every \$100 earned, as was also the case for those working in other indoor locations apart from their own homes. By comparison, street workers were able to keep a mean of \$93/\$100 - virtually all that they earned, which was also the case for sex workers working out of their own homes. The small portion of home-based independents in this sample who were unable to enjoy this economic freedom reported that they had a 'boyfriend' commanding a share

of what they earned from their sex trade activities.

Many agencies, for example, charge a fixed 'shift fee' to respondents employed there. Alternatively, some agency workers were required to surrender a varying percentage of their overall earnings. One respondent expresses the variation: "You do a trick, you get paid \$150. But you walk away with \$110 if you're lucky. In some agencies [you walk away with only] \$90." Another respondent further describes this aspect of escort agency employment with negative overtones:

They [management] want all of the money. It wouldn't be so bad if you only had to give up a certain percentage, just a little bit. Most agencies take up to half of your money. That's for [management] sitting around and doing nothing.

It should be noted that this was not the case for all of the agencies mentioned by respondents, a few of which were said to run like cooperatives where the work, costs and profits are equitably shared. Unfortunately, only a minority of agency workers had access to such an option.

In sum, these indoor venues operate in many ways like early industrial sweatshops where weavers, carders and spinners were also subject to the whim and wishes of bosses/managers (Benoit, 2000), and workers in escort agencies are vulnerable to economic exploitation by those in positions of control. In contrast, those respondents who were self-employed, street workers and those working out of

public view in their own homes, were able to pocket virtually all of the money they earned from each sex trade transaction. In this respect they are much like other self-employed workers, the vast majority of whom earn low wages but have low overhead costs and are therefore able to keep a large part/all of what they do earn (Statistics Canada, 2000).

### 5.3 Pace of Work

Another key dimension that affects workers' feeling of autonomy on the job is control over the pace or timing of activities. We attempted to measure this dimension by asking respondents about their degree of control over the number of clients they see per time period/shift. As indicated in Table 9, sex workers on the street trade enjoyed substantially more control over the number of clients they saw compared to agency workers and those working in bars/strip clubs/peep shows.

*Sex workers on the street trade enjoyed substantially more control over the number of clients they saw compared to agency workers and those working in bars/strip clubs/peep shows.*

	Full/A lot of Control	Some Control	Very little/No Control
Home-Based	81.9%	12.1%	6.1%
On-Street	78.5%	12.8%	9.0%
Agency	49.2%	21.1%	29.9%
Other Indoor	51.6%	15.2%	33.4%

**Table 9: Reported Amount of Control Over Number of Clients Seen Per Shift**

By maximizing the number of transactions escorts enter into and limiting how much time they devote per client, agency managers were able to increase their relative profits by exploiting the sex worker's labour. Working under such conditions, escorts often expressed frustrations: not until they have earned the prescribed 'shift fee' do they start earning money for themselves. Present is also a certain amount of competition with the other workers operating under the same pressure to service many clients as efficiently as possible. Even though it is management that assigns clients to particular escorts, her/his colleagues can accuse those escorts who are assigned more 'tricks' of 'stealing the clients.' One respondent explains the situation like this:

When you work for somebody else you are only one number in a row. Either the person that you work for likes you or they hate you the next day. Either you get work or you don't get work. There is a lot of jealousy. I think that's very hard for people. Not everybody can look like Marilyn Monroe so you get put aside and another one gets preferred.

Workers in indoor venues also find that what management promises and subsequently allows can be very different things. One of them put it like this: "we don't have any control over how many shows we get. Our contracts half the time aren't honoured." Another stated, "I didn't have a lot of control as to what hours I worked. I basically worked from one o'clock in the afternoon till about three o'clock in

the morning. [I]f you were sick or tired and you wanted to take the night off there was no chance."

Respondents subject to third party control mentioned as well that they were sometimes required to pay 'fines' for breaking management rules. One respondent spoke about her experience in an escort agency:

A lot of times I was fined for parking my car in the driveway or being five minutes late. You think about it, a parking ticket is less than what I was being fined. I was fined fifty to one hundred dollars every time I was late. That was not right. In some circumstances, that's a whole person that you have to see for nothing.

In contrast, independent street workers enjoyed a considerable amount of freedom over the pace of their sex trade activities. Indeed, many respondents who had worked both on the street and in escort agencies said they had more control over the timing of their work activities on the street. One respondent commented, "I think that by just going out on the street you've got control over yourself right there. You're not paying anyone, it's up to the individual."

However, the organization of the street trade and its greater visibility means that business is usually restricted to late evening/nighttime. Subsequently, those soliciting on the street found that their freedom to determine their own hours was to some extent constrained by the nature of the trade.

*Many respondents who had worked both on the street and in escort agencies said they had more control over the timing of their work activities on the street.*

*Home-based sex workers reported the most flexibility in terms of work pace.*

*Respondents also report that venues differ with regard to their control over which clients they see and what sexual services they perform.*

Home-based sex workers reported the most flexibility in terms of work pace. One sex worker explained the benefits of working independently from his own home: "This is the advantage of being an independent, you can do whatever you like." Similarly, a respondent working out of her own home put it this way: "I get as many as thirty calls a day and I only take about three. I am very selective [and] I refuse quite a few people. [W]hen I come in [to where the client is] I let them know right away that I'm the one in control."

#### **5.4 Clientele and Activities Performed**

Respondents also report that venues differ with regard to their control over which clients they see and what sexual services they perform. As Table 10 shows, self-employed/independent sex workers, both those working out of their own homes as well as on street, had comparatively more say in this regard compared to those employed in agencies. When a third party decides upon the terms of employment, the sex worker often has little choice in the clientele and what activities are demanded during the commercial exchange. An escort employee who turns away customers or refuses to provide select services will soon find herself/himself owing money to management. Such resistance places workers at risk of losing their job and thus their main source of income. Not surprisingly, respondents

working in agencies reported having the least amount of discretion over having sex with a client.

	Full/A Lot of Control	Some Control	Very Little/No Control
Agency	57.9%	17.5%	24.6%
On-Street	70.5%	15.4%	14.1%
Home-Based	74.2%	19.4%	6.4%
Other Indoor	65.5%	17.2%	13.7%

**Table 10: Reported Amount of Control Over Saying No to Sex with a “John” by Venue**

*Respondents located in indoor venues other than agencies also reported more discretion over whether or not to specifically have sex with a client/customer.*

Interestingly, respondents located in indoor venues other than agencies also reported more discretion over whether or not to specifically have sex with a client/customer. One reason for the high reported control amongst this latter group may have to do with the “adult entertainment” nature of the branch of the sex industry in which they are located. Sexual intercourse with clients is not part of the formal contract sex workers have with the managers of strip clubs and bars that advertise nude entertainment and may not even be expected informally to “please” customers. In such work situations, refusing sex with a John is the norm rather than the exception. The illegal nature of the activity may also mean that management forbids intercourse between worker and patron at their establishment and workers can say they have the support of management in saying ‘no’ to a John.

## 5.5 Work Safety and Freedom from Harassment

I worked in the massage parlour. When we went on outcalls, it was almost kind of dangerous. I had one guy pull a gun on me at one time.

*Amy, independent*

It was a lot harder to work on the street. There was a lot more risk, I'd say. I felt a lot more at risk of being hurt because I'd end up in parking lots or the middle of nowhere because nobody wanted to get caught by the cops.

*Cindy, former street worker*

*Many respondents spoke of the potential for danger as an inherent risk of sex work.*

*The physical injuries incurred while working in the sex trade were relatively common and often serious.*

While most commercial sexual encounters between client and worker proceed in a straightforward manner, the potential for violence is ever present. In fact, many respondents spoke of the potential for danger as an inherent risk of sex work: "Of course it is not an easy job, and you don't know what you're walking into." They all agreed that the "occupational hazards" associated with sex work are more serious than square jobs where workers have access to minimum government imposed rights, as well as access to police under circumstances of duress. As described in more detail in a later section, the physical injuries incurred while working in the sex trade were relatively common and often serious. Moreover, almost all of those interviewed for this study said that they had been exposed to dangerous working conditions on at least one occasion. Indeed, the majority of

respondents mentioned their fear of abuse as the worst thing about working in the sex trade.

Street workers are especially vulnerable to violence (see also Lowman and Fraser, 1995; Miller, 1993a). For the sex workers in this study, the significant risks posed to one's personal safety while working on the street were all too apparent: "Working on the streets is not really a good environment because there are girls that get burned [robbed], they murder them and they rape them. My best friend died from that." Many respondents said that the fabric of the street environment prevented street workers from having any real control at all over their own personal safety. As one respondent put it: "It would be a lot safer if you didn't have to stand outside and be on the street." Another stated that: "It's just not safe for these girls out there, it just isn't. I just heard about another bad date." In addition to a work environment that often entails working alone, at night, and in dimly lit areas, the current Federal legislation that makes soliciting in a public space illegal limits the street worker's ability to screen out potentially violent and dangerous clients (Hacker, 1999). One respondent describes the potential risks of speedy curbside negotiations: "Girls working the streets constantly have to worry about what's going to happen if they get into a car and who's going to pick them up... who knows what happens when you get into a car."

*Almost all of those interviewed for this study said that they had been exposed to dangerous working conditions on at least one occasion.*

*Many respondents said that the fabric of the street environment prevented street workers from having any real control at all over their own personal safety.*

In contrast to street workers, those working indoors tend to experience somewhat safer working conditions (see also Pyett and Warr, 1997). Many respondents reported feeling safer and less vulnerable working in escort agencies. As one respondent put it: "On the street I had like three bad dates in one week one time. I worked escort for three years and I haven't had one bad date. I think escort work is very safe." Some of the safety features of agency work, according to respondents, were the close proximity to other workers, the ability to better screen out dangerous clients, and a more regular clientele. One described it like this: "Escorts [were] a lot safer. I didn't worry. There was always somebody near by. It was worth the safety. [Clients were] usually screened [and] there were a lot of regulars and I felt a lot safer." Another respondent recalls how she provided safety to workers when she ran her own escort agency:

It was ten years ago when I ran my larger business. It was 100 dollars for an hour and the girls kept seventy-five percent of it. I handled all the advertising and I made sure they had a safe ride there, and they called me from there. We had codes, if everything was not safe. I had backup to go and get them immediately. I had a lot of compassion for the girls that worked for me.

*The most common reported perpetrator of abuse against sex workers was the client. Respondents reported that they had been robbed, stalked, physically and sexually assaulted by "bad dates."*

However, not all agency workers are so advantaged. Among other things, respondents said that the madam/boss sometimes failed to shield them from aggressive clients. As one respondent elaborated: "There's a girl that has been sodomized in a hotel room and ... the agency send another girl out and another girl out and the same thing happens and happens." Other indoor workers such as dancers may also fear for their safety, as one noted: "You are threatened sometimes as a dancer. There have been girls who have been stalked by guys who come in all the time." Even if agency managers and bar owners wanted to help, they are often reluctant to do so, especially if it means involving the police. Any police attention is perhaps too much for these establishments since there are factors over which the management has little control - such as drug trafficking or soliciting - that can lead to the closure of the business. Sex workers operating out of their own homes are also not immune to the threat of violence, as one respondent commented: "I had one trick threaten to kill me when I was working out of my home."

The most common reported perpetrator of abuse against sex workers was the client. Respondents reported that they had been robbed, stalked, physically and sexually assaulted by "bad dates." A small number of respondents recalled times when they had been forced or coerced by clients into having unprotected sex. Male sex workers are also vulnerable, as one commented: "Yeah, I've been stabbed

*A number of respondents also reported having experienced various forms of harassment by pimps, managers or madams, and in a small number of instances the police, as well as the general public.*

*Virtually all of those interviewed expressed alienation from the protective services of the police and expressed a reluctance to report violent incidences or turn to the police for help.*

three times from a John on separate occasions." Negative experiences while working were not limited to bad dates, however. A number of respondents also reported having experienced various forms of harassment by pimps, managers or madams, and in a small number of instances the police, as well as the general public. One respondent who had worked for a pimp had this to say: "when I was working under a pimp or with a pimp, the working conditions "sucked." Another noted that "A lot of women get beaten by pimps - I've seen it so many times."

Virtually all of those interviewed expressed alienation from the protective services of the police and expressed a reluctance to report violent incidences or turn to the police for help. As noted in Tables 11 and 12, the police do not factor at all into respondents' first choice of who to turn to when they face a crisis situation, and only 1.1% of respondents chose the police as their second choice in a crisis. Respondents made comments such as, "Are you kidding? I never call the police, that's the last thing you do"; or "The police, I mean, my god, I don't think they care about us." Another stated that "I think the police should... you know, when somebody has a bad date they should stop blaming the girls and start going after the guys." Many felt that because of the nature of their job, they could expect little help from the police, and that their complaints would

not be taken seriously.<sup>9</sup> Other incidents impinge upon sex workers' willingness to turn to the police in times of danger. For example, 39.4% reported being belittled by the police sometimes or frequently, and 23.4% answered that the police sometimes or frequently caused them to be emotionally distressed.

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<sup>9</sup> We would like to note, however, that because our data are retrospective and thus span a number of years, we are unlikely to have captured important recent developments in community policing. Among other things, in the last decade police agencies across BC have increased their efforts to improve rapport with sex workers. As well, anecdotal evidence indicates that community-based policing, police training, and increased police liaison with sex worker advocacy agencies have achieved some success in this regard. Since 1997 the Provincial Prostitution Unit and other organizations have conducted training workshops with communities and police to focus on enhancing the safety of sex workers while targeting enforcement against pimps and johns. One component of this training is aimed at increasing police and community awareness of and sensitivity to the issues that sex workers face.

	Frequency	Percent
Lover/Partner	62	31.6
Friend(s)	44	22.4
Mother/Guardian	37	18.9
PEERS	10	5.1
Therapist/Counselor(s)	10	5.1
Relative(s)	8	4.1
Unidentified Other	8	4.1
Father/Guardian	4	2.0
Social Worker(s)	3	1.5
Health Care Worker(s)	3	1.5
Child(ren)	2	1.0
Outreach Worker(s)	2	1.0
Other Sex Worker(s)	2	1.0
John(s)	1	.5
Police	0	0
Total	196	100.0
Missing	3	
No Answer	2	
Total	201	

**Table 11: Whom Do You Turn to First in a Crisis Situation?**

	Frequency	Percent
Friend(s)	48	25.7
Lover/Partner	25	13.4
Therapist/Counselor	21	11.2
Relative	17	9.1
Mother/Guardian	13	7.0
PEERS	13	7.0
Father/Guardian	12	6.4
Outreach Worker(s)	9	4.8
Other	9	4.8
Health Care Workers	5	2.7
Child(ren)	3	1.6
Other Sex Worker(s)	3	1.6
John(s)	2	1.1
Social Workers	2	1.1
Police Officer(s)	2	1.1
Pimp(s)	2	1.1
Unidentified Other	1	.5
Total	187	100.0
Missing	12	
No Answer	2	
Total	201	

**Table 12: Whom Do You Turn to Second in a Crisis Situation?**

In addition to their negative treatment by some members of the police force, respondents noted that they were frequently subject to harassment by members of the general public. Even in these situations, the police are not always supportive:

I've had a lot of hard times, yes. Even when I was in school I got picked on and abused by a guy, beat up by guys. Oh yeah. They didn't like what I was doing; they'd throw things at me, and be real nasty. I've had a busted nose, a busted jaw, black eyes and stuff like that. I never stayed around long enough for them to do it again. I would go to the police and they would ask me a stupid question like, "are you sure that you want to charge the guy?" After he beat me up and stuff like that! "We'll give you six months to think about it." I said, "I don't want to think about it, I want something done now," and they would. I wasn't the type to say that it's normal and it happens all the time. I wouldn't let them get away with it.

It was largely because of these negative factors associated with the sex trade, including the difficulties in feeling safe and secure, that many respondents have tried to exit and begin a new life. However, as the next section shows, exiting is a difficult process to accomplish when you have minimal formal education, your job opportunities are few, your resume is an empty slate, and you have a police record.

*Brooke, who has been working in the trade since she was fifteen, looks older than her 21 years. She says that she has been through a "hell of a lot." She does not look back favourably on her childhood years in a small town on Vancouver Island and gets upset when asked about her early family life. Her father, a mill worker by trade, was frequently unemployed and more often drunk than not. Brooke says he was physically abusive towards her, her brother, sister and mom - anyone within his reach. Her mom finally through him out for good when Brooke was nine years of age. Brooke says things were no better after he left. As she put it, there was no stability in her home; "I basically raised myself." Brooke's mother, also an alcoholic, would stay out late drinking and partying. Sometimes she did not come home at all. Brooke finally left home for good at age 14, after one of her mom's many boyfriends raped her. Brooke got a ride to Victoria and sought out older friends of one of her cousins. They were kind enough to give her a bed and to teach her the ropes of living in the CRD when you had few resources at hand. The downside was that Brooke's new roommates also introduced her to a smorgasbord of drugs. By age 16 she was addicted to heroin and forced to support her habit in whatever ways she could, including involvement in the sex trade. As Brooke put it, "I was getting into heroin and that's why I ended up getting into the sex trade." Although she's worked mainly in street prostitution, she says that when she could get herself "cleaned up," she would seek employment in an escort agency. Before long, however, her drug addiction would take over and she would find herself back on the street. Brooke has mixed feelings about the sex trade itself, saying that it is "not too bad" but that sometimes it makes her really tired. Brooke also worries about her health: "well, I have Hep C. I'm pretty concerned about that." She says that right now she's in the process of trying to quit drugs for good. She is getting a lot of help from Victoria's Methadone clinic and also from the staff of Sandy Merriman House, which takes in single women like her who don't have stable housing. She thinks that if she can get off heroin then she can also get out of the trade because "the two are one and the same for me." While Brooke remains hopeful about making a clean break one day soon, she also notes "my options are very slim. I don't have much of an education."*

## PART VI: EXITING THE SEX TRADE

*Interviewer:* What would be your ideal job?

*Iris:* My ideal job would be a career with enough money to keep me happy. What's preventing me from doing that is the opportunity is not there. In Victoria the opportunity is not there. I have the credentials for a good job and I'm trying, but I just haven't come across the opportunity in Victoria.

*Interviewer:* What would be your ideal job?

*Jack:* I wouldn't know how to get started in my ideal job. Basic training. Maybe a little bit of upgrading like in my Math and English. I need to get into college and an apprenticeship program. Or just get my foot in the door with construction companies and see how it goes from there.

### 6.1 Frequency of Exiting

*Exited respondents (recall our definition of having exited for more than two years) had attempted to leave on average 5.8 times before making the permanent break.*

For most of our currently working respondents, trading sex for a living was not their ideal career and many desired to get out of it in the near future. In fact, 70.6% of respondents had exited the sex trade at least once over their careers and more than half had exited three or more times. Exited respondents (recall our definition of having exited for more than two years) had attempted to leave on average 5.8 times before making the permanent break. When the interviewers asked research participants the reasons they had decided to leave the trade, their answers were quite

varied. As indicated in Table 13, a large number of respondents talked about reaching a point at which they had become completely burnt out by the work. For others, the decision to leave was associated with overcoming an alcohol or drug dependency. Others simply desired a job change. In other instances, they had met someone special who gave them the motivation to move on. As one respondent explains:

The people that supported me in leaving me were basically my boyfriend/lover who was really one hundred percent important. I don't think without him that I'd be here today to talk about all of this. He didn't pressure me to leave; we never really talked about it. It was just this feeling of being seen, supported, loved and cared for that allowed me to make that very private decision to leave it.

	Frequency	Percent
Burnt out, stress, tired of the work	30	21.3
External pressure from family, partners, pregnancy, kids	26	18.4
Quit drugs/alcohol	23	16.3
Needed a change	21	14.9
Square job/return to school	16	11.4
Feelings of shame, low self worth, unclean	14	9.9
Sickness, poor health, serious injury at work	11	7.8
<b>SUB-TOTAL</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>100.0</b>
Missing (no previous attempts to exit)	60	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>201</b>	

**Table 13: Respondents' Primary Reason for Exiting the Sex Trade**

*An overwhelming majority of respondents mentioned economic necessity as their main motivating factor for returning to the sex trade.*

*With a limited education and little job experience, for many, the sex trade offers financial benefits that are simply unattainable outside the trade*

## 6.2 Returning to the Trade

In discussing why they returned to the sex trade after an attempt to exit, respondents talked about the difficulty associated with leaving the lifestyle and the lures or "pulls" that continually drew them back to the sex industry. An overwhelming majority of respondents mentioned economic necessity as their main motivating factor for returning. For instance, when asked why she once again resumed trading sex after quitting, one respondent answered, "I needed money. It always had to do with the money." With a limited education and little job experience, for many, the sex trade offers financial benefits that are simply unattainable outside the trade. One respondent's comments illustrate:

I first worked a couple months as a house cleaner, scrubbing floors and toilets to survive and make money and afford an apartment. From that amount, I couldn't survive [so] I started work in an escort agency.

For those faced with trying to support a family, the financial payoffs of sex work are particularly tempting. Even for those who had permanently exited the sex trade, the lure of "easy money," was also something they continued to struggle with and many talked about the temptation of going back. Financial problems faced by exited workers continually brought back the urge to go back to the trade and turn "just one more trick."

However, it is not only that they might earn more money in the sex trade that tempts a return. The fact that

*The fact that they receive their earnings immediately and are able to satisfy a current lack of money rather than waiting until a future pay cheque is also relevant.*

*For those respondents still facing a drug and/or alcohol problem, the need to support their habit was a significant barrier preventing them from permanently exiting.*

they receive their earnings immediately and are able to satisfy a current lack of money rather than waiting until a future pay cheque is also relevant. One respondent who had been out of the trade for some time noted that "I still always think about it though if I'm broke and I need the money - how easy it would be to go and make a few hundred dollars or more." Another exited respondent said, "I would not go back but I still think about it and it's still tempting because where else are you going to make that kind of money that quick and not have to pay any taxes?"

For those respondents still facing a drug and/or alcohol problem, the need to support their habit was a significant barrier preventing them from permanently exiting. Not surprisingly then, a number of respondents mentioned a continuing drug dependency and the need for money to support it as the main factor behind returning to the trade. As one respondents put it, returning was caused by an "escalation of addiction and need for fast money." Different circumstances were instrumental in motivating the return of a smaller number of respondents. For instance, some discussed a lack of support or the negative influences of others inhibiting them from making a clean break. One said, "I didn't have the social support so I didn't have other people I could go to and say, 'how do I get a job? I want out of this. I'm having a rough day, or whatever.' I felt entirely alone." A few recalled how certain people in their lives had attempted to dissuade them from leaving: "My pimp just wouldn't let me

*Respondents also mentioned the presence of a criminal record, which severely limits one's employment opportunities once out of the trade, as a significant barrier to exiting the trade permanently.*

go. He would just not let me go...I don't think that he was very happy and he was going to make my life miserable."

Respondents also mentioned the presence of a criminal record, which severely limits one's employment opportunities once out of the trade, as a significant barrier to exiting the trade permanently:

I've gone...went and handed like seventy-five resumes out and got two calls. When I went for the interviews they asked me if I had a criminal record. Right there I was finished! I got depressed, I got sad then I went home and I picked up the phone. I phoned one of my regulars and did what I know how to do.

Other attractive features of sex work prompted a remaining few to return to their former occupation. When outside the trade, some respondents noted that they missed the "independence" or "returned for the reasons I like it (the power) and the money," while others, similar to many other service jobs, talked of missing the intrinsic feeling of belonging or of making the "client" happy: "[I missed the] company and comfort," one respondent commented.

In brief, while desired in principle by the majority of respondents, a permanent exit from the sex trade is not an easily attainable goal. In general, the exited respondents talked of four main difficulties they faced after their break from the sex trade: leaving the role and lifestyle associated with sex work behind; confronting and working through their experiences as a sex worker; dealing with new relationships and intimates; and, adapting to a new life and way of living

outside the trade (see Millar, forthcoming, for a thorough discussion of the circumstances of those who have managed to exit).

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CARLA

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*Carla has very little memory of her real mother. Born to a Cree woman, Carla was soon taken from her Aboriginal mother and placed in foster care where she joined three other half brothers and sisters. When she was three, a white family, who were able to provide her with a stable, loving childhood, adopted her. Nonetheless, Carla says that she always felt "disconnected" and desperately missed her Aboriginal family. Early on she had trouble with school and with concentrating - something she attributes to her F.A.S. as a result of her mom drinking heavily during her pregnancy. By the time she was 13, she had been kicked out of school, caught shoplifting and her adoptive parents could no longer handle her. Running away to Vancouver, Carla was able to rejoin her older sister who was living with their two aunts, who were both involved in the street trade. Soon after her fifteenth birthday, Carla turned her first trick and although she briefly returned home to her adoptive parents, only to run away again, Carla has been in and out of the sex trade ever since. Just like her own family background, Carla too had two kids at an early age, both of whom were taken from her by social services. Today, Carla lives in Saanich and works out of the hotels and rooming houses in the surrounding district. She still has contact with her adoptive parents and has begun to "reconnect" with her Aboriginal heritage. She says that her main health concerns now are her mental and emotional health, noting "I've been through a lot of stuff- it all takes its toll." She speaks of wanting to get out of the trade for good and wants to regain custody of her children but says, "it's really hard, you know? It's all that I know how to do."*

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## PART VII: HEALTH ISSUES OF RESPONDENTS

*Interviewer:* Has the sex trade affected your overall health?

*James:* My overall health, I would say physically, no, it hasn't. Sometimes mentally I feel a lower self-esteem... My main health concerns obviously are getting a better outlook on life and getting some balance. For sure it would be to maintain disease free. To overcome the bouts of depression that occurs every so often. I really can't afford to be sick too often. I do have a child to look after also. Lots of times I just grin and bare it. I'll fight through it. If I'm just sick in the head sometimes, I'll just reach out and talk to people.

Any examination of the health status of a particular group of workers requires more than a measure of the presence or absence of disease. It also involves consideration of "those physical, mental and social attributes that permit the individual to cope successfully with challenges to health and functioning" (Statistics Canada, 2000: 47). This section first presents data on our respondents overall health status and then examines some of the risk behaviours that influence their health and well-being.

*Along key dimensions of physical, mental and social health it is apparent that the general health of many of our respondents is not good.*

### 7.1 General State of Health

Along key dimensions of physical, mental and social health it is apparent that the general health of many of our respondents is not good. In regard to physical health, for

*In regard to physical health, 67.2% of respondents said that at some time or other they had received treatment for physical injury and 36.3% said that they had been hospitalized specifically because of injuries they had incurred in the sex trade.*

*As high as half of those interviewed reported either past or current depression.*

example, 67.2% of respondents said that at some time or other they had received treatment for physical injury and 36.3% said that they had been hospitalized specifically because of injuries they had incurred in the sex trade. There were no significant differences between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal respondents in regard to reported physical injury. In regard to gender, male respondents reported a higher frequency (19.4%) than did females (13.1%). When asked if they had ever been hospitalized for injuries incurred in the sex trade, Aboriginal respondents answered yes 40% of the time, which was slightly higher than non-Aboriginal counterparts (35.7%). Male respondents were less likely (27.8%) to be hospitalized for injuries incurred in the sex trade than females (38.1%). Other research also points to widespread physical injury among sex workers (Gordon and Lowman, 1993).

In regard to mental health, our respondents appear to stand out from the general population to a great degree. As high as half of those interviewed reported either past or current depression. The degree of reported depression was the same for males and females (50%), but Aboriginal respondents were less likely to report depression (30.7%) than non-Aboriginals (54.4%). By way of comparison with the general population, Statistics Canada data indicate that 6% of the females and 3% of males reported having a depressive episode in 1996-97 (Statistics Canada, 2000). In regard to reported mental illness and attempted suicide, males (30.6%

***44.8% of all respondents reported in the past or currently experiencing anxiety/panic attack, 42.8% emotional trauma, 36.3% sleep disorders, 31.8% flashbacks, 27.4% migraines.***

***Many respondents associated their psychological state of health with the working conditions they experienced in the sex industry.***

and 13.9%, respectively) reported a higher frequency, compared to females (13.1% and 9.4%). Aboriginal respondents reported lower instances of mental illness (6.7%) than non-Aboriginal counterparts (18.7%); both groups were virtually matched in regard to attempted suicides (10% versus 10.5%). Along a number of other health indicators, there were very few notable differences between females and males, but somewhat lower occurrences for Aboriginal respondents: 44.8% of all respondents reported in the past or currently experiencing anxiety/panic attack, 42.8% emotional trauma, 36.3% sleep disorders, 31.8% flashbacks, 27.4% migraines. Two additional health problems showed some variation among respondents. While 12.9% had/were experiencing chronic fatigue syndrome and 12.4% an eating disorder, in both cases the instance rate for female respondents was higher. Canadian data from the National Eating Disorders Information Centre estimated in the mid-1990s that eating disorders occurred in approximately 1 to 2% of young women, and bulimia in approximately 2 to 3% of young women. Of people who suffer from anorexia nervosa or bulimia, 95% were also female (reported in Macionis, Jansson and Benoit, 2002: 359).

Many respondents associated their psychological state of health with the working conditions they experienced in the sex industry. One respondent, an exotic dancer, had this to say: "I was isolated. I was living independently and heavily into an eating disorder." A respondent working in an escort agency related her stress more directly to the sex activities she

*The illegalities of the sex trade and its dishonourable public reputation tended to negatively affect how workers feel about themselves and what they did for a living.*

performed: "After being with the guys, I would be so sick that I wouldn't eat. I lost so much weight from being in the sex trade." One strategy employed by those interviewed to deal with the stress accompanying sex work was to separate their work from their private lives. As one respondent said: "I consider myself two people. When I'm at work I'm one person, and when I'm at home I'm another." Another respondent further commented on the need to maintain emotional distance from the client: "Its pretty private stuff that people (clients) divulge. I have to mentally become someone else." Respondents agreed that it takes a certain kind of person to successfully accomplish this task, someone who can "keep an open mind and be strong. If you are strong you can get out there and turn it on and turn it off, like that's your job." However, maintaining such a separation was a formidable task for many respondents and shutting down can take its toll in the long-run. As noted above, over half of those interviewed indicated that they had at some point received treatment for a mental health problem. As one respondent stated: "My main health concerns are finding mental stability. I guess you could say getting rid of depression and everything else like that."

Respondents noted that a large part of their relatively poor mental health had to do with the negative manner in which the sex trade is depicted in our society. The illegalities of the sex trade and its dishonourable public reputation tended to negatively affect how workers feel about themselves and what they did for a living. One respondent said: "I feel

*Leaving the trade seemed to do little to improve respondents' mental health and well-being.*

*Psychological health problems do not necessarily disappear once one leaves the sex trade, nor does the stigma of having worked in the sex trade.*

unworthy, degraded." Another noted, "you feel dirty and ashamed." Unhappy with themselves, it's not surprising that depression and feelings of low self-worth were reported by respondents. As shown in Table 14, leaving the trade seemed to do little to improve respondents' mental health and well-being. In fact, exited respondents were only slightly less likely to experience depression, and more likely to experience anxiety attacks and emotional trauma when compared to their counterparts who were still working at the time of interview. Clearly, then, psychological health problems do not necessarily disappear once one leaves the sex trade, nor does the stigma of having worked in the sex trade. One respondent's comments illustrate:

It's always going to be there and you're always going to be looked at a little different. People may say that they respect you and they care for you and it's okay, but deep down there's going to be that little voice going "oh man, that's what you used to do"- I don't care who it is. It's always going to be there in the back of their mind... and I think that one of the things that people really need to realize is the long term after effects, emotionally speaking.

	Working Respondents	Exited Respondents
Depression	51.7%	48.1%
Anxiety/Panic Attacks	42.2%	51.9%
Emotional Trauma	39.0%	53.7%
Eating Disorder	10.2%	18.5%
Sleeping Disorder	32.7%	46.3%

**Table 14: Self-Reported Mental Health Conditions Present**

Not all respondents who have exited the sex trade reported having mental health concerns, however. Some talked about how they have been able to successfully leave the sex trade life behind them, and now talk openly about it to their new partner and family members. Unfortunately, this was the not the case for most of the exited respondents.

In short, it has been well documented that a person's occupation has an impact (either positively or negatively) on their health and well-being (Messiner, 1997; Sullivan, 2000; Lowe, 2000). This is also the case for our respondents who have worked or are currently working in the sex industry.

*The vast majority of our respondents regularly use condoms when working; however, use was largely dependent upon the type of sex trade activity.*

## 7.2 Sexual Health

Another significant aspect of health and well-being concerns sexual health. Recent studies of the risk practices of sex workers have consistently found high rates of regular condom use with clients (Ward and Day, 1997; McKeganey and Barnard, 1996). This was the case as well for our respondents, the vast majority of whom regularly use condoms when

working. As Table 15 shows, however, condom use with clients was largely dependent upon the type of sex trade activity. While almost all respondents currently working in the trade reported always using protection for high-risk sexual activities such as vaginal and anal sex, for other sexual activities condom use was less common. For these other sexual activities, such as hand-jobs and sometimes blow jobs, respondents said that: "I don't think you can catch anything from hand-jobs," "It's just oral sex, I just don't feel its necessary," and "I have no nicks or cuts on my fingers. I am cautious."

	Hand- Job	Blow- Job	Vaginal Sex	Anal Sex
<b>Currently Working Respondents</b>	43.3%	83.0%	90.9%	94.7%

**Table 15: Percentage of Respondents Always Using Condoms When Engaging in Select Commercial Sex Activities**

For those currently working in the sex trade, the regularity of reported condom use with clients was in contrast to their reported non-use within the context of their private relations with lovers/spouses. Of those involved in an intimate relationship at the time of interview, only 28.4% reported using condoms during sexual intercourse. Once out of the trade, respondents were even less likely to use protection: only three exited respondents reported using condoms in their sexual relations with private partners. Similar to those

*Our respondents differ little from other Canadian men and women who also tend not to use condoms in their private sexual relations.*

*Seven respondents (3.5%) reported that they were HIV positive. Only one currently working respondent said she might have become infected as a result of her sex trade activities. Of the six remaining, all were or had been injection drug-users while working in the sex trade.*

currently working in the trade, being in a long-term monogamous relationship was the main reason given for unprotected sex. Both current and exited respondents also mentioned that they and their intimate partners were healthy and had been tested for sexually transmitted diseases. In this sense, then, our respondents differ little from other Canadian men and women who also tend not to use condoms in their private sexual relations (Statistics Canada, 2000).

Seven respondents (3.5%) reported that they were HIV positive. Of these seven respondents, five were currently working in the sex trade and two had exited. Differing from the general population where far fewer women than men are diagnosed with AIDS, five of the HIV positive respondents were female while two were male. It must be noted that only one currently working respondent said she might have become infected as a result of her sex trade activities. Of the six remaining, all were or had been injection drug-users while working in the sex trade. One currently working respondent who was also an injection drug user believed she had become infected through sex with a private partner. Thus, consistent with other research findings (Alexander, 1987a; Campbell, 1991; Jackson and Highcrest, 1996), sex workers most at risk of HIV infection are those who either use or have a history of injection drug use, or who were sexually involved with high-risk nonpaying partners (i.e., partners who are themselves illicit drug users).

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) were common

*Of the more than half of our respondents who reported acquiring an STI at some point in their sex trade careers, the majority (57.8%) had a history of multiple infections.*

among our respondents. Just over half (54.2%) reported ever having an STI while working in the sex trade. Table 16 gives a breakdown of reported instances of STIs for respondents while active in the sex trade. The reported prevalence of sexually transmitted infection for current and former sex workers is significantly higher than that found within the general population. The overall rate in 1998 per 100 000 population (both genders) for Gonococcal, Chlamydia and Syphilis infections was 16.4, 128.8, and 0.5 respectively (Health Canada, 2000). Also significant is the fact that of the more than half of our respondents who reported acquiring an STI at some point in their sex trade careers, the majority (57.8%) had a history of multiple infections.

	Percent of Reports
Gonorrhoea	33.8%
Chlamydia	36.3%
Syphilis	22.9%

**Table 16: Respondents' Self-Reported Current or Past Occurrence of Select STIs**

### **7.3 Alcohol Consumption**

Previous research suggests that a significant proportion of sex workers over-consume alcohol, and that for female sex workers it is more prevalent than illicit drug use (Boritch, 1997). When asked at the time of interview how frequently they had used alcohol over the previous six months, 11.6% of respondents said that they drank at least once every

*11.6% of respondents said that they drank alcohol at least once every day whereas 27.3% said they did not drink alcohol at all during the 6-month period.*

day, whereas 27.3% said they did not drink alcohol at all during the 6-month period. The remaining respondents reported drinking either once or twice a week (21.7%) or once or twice a month (39.4%). According to 1993 General Social Survey data, 74.4% of Canadians aged 15 and older reported drinking over the last 12 months, averaging 4.4 drinks per week (Single *et al.* 1994). These findings suggest that our respondents are not very different from the general population in regard to *frequency* of alcohol consumption. However, given that we did not ask how much alcohol was consumed on any one occasion, i.e., the actual *amount* they consumed, we are unable to determine whether there is excessive alcohol use/binge drinking among our respondents. A breakdown by gender and Aboriginal status is also revealing: of those interviewed, males were much more likely (28.7%) to consume alcohol once or more a day than female respondents (7.6%); and non-Aboriginals were almost twice as likely (12.5%) to consume alcohol once or more a day than Aboriginal respondents (6.7%).

#### **7.4 Illicit Drug Use**

Illicit substance use is frequently mentioned in the research literature as one of the many problems associated with the sex trade. Table 17 presents data on frequency of use of three addictive illicit drugs - crack/cocaine, heroin, and crystal meth/speed - as reported by our currently working and exited respondents. These data indicate that overall, a

*Currently working respondents are more than twice as likely as exited respondents to have used crack/cocaine or heroin in the last 6 months. For a number of the exited respondents, leaving the sex trade came part in parcel with a decision to overcome a drug and/or alcohol dependency.*

substantial minority of our respondents are regular users of one or another of these drugs, with crack/cocaine and heroin far more common than crystal meth/speed. There are also significant differences in illicit drug use between currently working and exited respondents. In fact, those currently working are more than twice as likely to have used crack/cocaine or heroin in the last 6 months. For a number of the exited respondents, leaving the sex trade came part in parcel with a decision to overcome a drug and/or alcohol dependency. This being said, a sizable number of exited respondents were still using illicit drugs at the time of interview.

	<b>Crack/ Cocaine</b>	<b>Heroin</b>	<b>Crystal Meth./ Speed</b>
<b>Currently Working Respondents</b>	48.2%	36.6%	9.0%
<b>Exited Respondents</b>	20.8%	17.0%	1.9%
<b>Total Overall</b>	40.9%	31.3%	7.1%

**Table 17: Self-reported Kind of Drugs (Last 6 Months)**

Also important to note regarding drug use behaviour is that a small number of our respondents indicated that they were polydrug users, mostly using cocaine/crack or heroin in combination with some other drug (e.g., methadone, marijuana, speed, or crystal meth). There was also some variation in usage along gender lines: female respondents were more likely to have used cocaine in the last six months, while males were

slightly more likely to have used heroin and especially crystal meth/speed.

We noted earlier in the report that a minority of respondents (17.5%) reported that their decision to enter the sex trade in the first instance was related to support their alcohol or drug habit. One respondent said, "what I was mostly in it for was so I could go out and get high... I was doing this to feed my drug habit." For another respondent, "working in the sex trade has somewhat exasperated my addictions." Another stated, "the sex trade and the drug use, I kind of put them together. The drug use was the reason I went into the sex trade pretty much. It was kind of why I stayed in it I guess."

*Although those who considered themselves to be addicted were slightly more likely to be working on the street, a substantial number of respondents located in indoor venues also reported problems with drug and/or alcohol addictions.*

Previous research has found that illicit drug use is more common among street sex workers than their counterparts in off-street locations (McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; De Graaf *et al.* 1995). It is argued in the literature that escort agency and strip club owners tend to reinforce rules against illicit drug use on premise. Such rules do not apply to street workers. Although those who considered themselves to be addicted were slightly more likely to be working on the street, a substantial number of respondents located in indoor venues also reported problems with drug and/or alcohol addictions. One reason for the high level of substance addictions among those working out of their own homes may be that, similar to those working on-street, they are not controlled by the more structured environment of agencies, bars and clubs. However, little is known about the operations of agencies and other

indoor work venues in terms of their support for a no-drug policy during working hours. Our respondents said that some agencies and bars are more concerned with profit-making than in the regulation of work practices and the health of workers. Many respondents working in agencies were able to conceal drug use from management and in some cases the managers or owners seemed unconcerned with curbing drug use on the premises. One respondent put it this way: "there are some agencies where the girls just look haggard. You can tell that they're doing drugs and they're not supposed to." Another commented about herself, "I sort of got involved with [agency name] and she said she would only have people that don't do drugs and are doing something for the future, but that was bullshit."

But why did respondents take to using addictive substances in the first place? Drug and/or alcohol use can provide an outlet for sex workers coping with difficult work situations. For instance, sex workers from a Netherlands study emphasized the functional effects of drug and alcohol use: it allowed them a temporary escape from the negative aspects of their work and at the same time facilitated client interaction by allowing sex workers a means by which to overcome their physical aversions to some clients (De Graaf *et al.* 1995). Currently working sex workers interviewed for this study mentioned similar reasons for their drug dependency.

One respondent explained that many sex workers relied on drugs to stay functional during a long shift: "I know

*For some, substance use was a way to escape reality and forget about work. However, other respondents trace their substance addiction to events that predate their entrance into the sex trade.*

some of the girls ended up snorting up coke because they had to work until 6 o'clock in the morning and shit like that." For others, substance use was a way to escape reality and forget about work. However, other respondents trace their substance addiction to events that predate their entrance into the sex trade. As one of them explains:

The problem is something back here and I'm trying to deal with it and the person's dead right now. [My mother] is up there or down there, wherever, but [she is] not alive and controlling me now. I can still feel her controlling me. That's why I did drugs, that's why I did it... I would do it to hide, I would do it if something came up that I could not control. I didn't have any control over it. I wanted to do something but [she] would say "no you can't do that" so I would be upset and I would go and do a job. Any time that something would come up that I wouldn't have any control over.

Although a significant number of respondents were dealing with substance addiction problems at the time of interview, this was by no means the experience of all. As indicated in Table 17, the majority of respondents were not using any of the three illicit drugs listed in the last 6 months. Many respondents were deeply offended by the stereotype that all sex workers were "druggies". One respondent commented: "We're not all scummy, we're not all drug addicts." Another put it like this: "Everybody thinks of [sex work] in a negative way. Everyone thinks that you're criminals, that you're drug addicts or alcoholics. It's just a bad stigma." Some respondents held an obvious disdain for drug-using

counterparts and made sure to clearly differentiate themselves from users: "We're not 'hos'. There's a difference. There are junkies and then there are sex trade workers. It's just different."

### **7.5 Drug Use and Blood-Borne Infections**

Research has shown that injection drug use represents a substantial risk for a range of physical health problems, including, but not limited to HIV infection and other blood-borne sexually transmitted diseases such as Hepatitis B and C (Campbell, 1991; de Graaf *et al.* 1995; Pyett *et al.* 1996). In terms of contracting blood-borne infections, beyond HIV infection, a substantial minority of respondents reported the presence of a Hepatitis infection, which is shown in Table 18. While the reported instance of Hepatitis A and B infection rates were low, a large number of respondents had tested positive for Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) infection, which many outreach workers now consider as the "new epidemic" (Kingsley and Mark, 2000). Although no respondents specifically talked of needle and/or syringe sharing, HCV is primarily transmitted through injection drug use (Health Canada, 1999). Because risk of HCV infection through therapeutic blood exposure or sexual contact is very low (Health Canada, 1999), it can be assumed that respondents came in contact with the infection through their drug habits.

*A substantial minority of respondents reported the presence of a Hepatitis infection.*

	Currently Working	Exited
Hepatitis A	0.7%	1.9%
Hepatitis B	7.5%	9.3%
Hepatitis C	32.7%	35.2%

**Table 18: Currently Working and Exited Respondents With Hepatitis Condition Present**

*In contrast to the negative impact described by many, 41.8% of respondents answered that their health had not been affected and a small number of respondents even felt that working in the sex trade had actually improved their health.*

Although most newly acquired HCV infections are difficult to detect in their early stages, the majority (85%) will become chronic causing long-term liver complications such as cirrhosis, liver cancer, and liver failure, eventually resulting in death (Health Canada, 1999). Not surprisingly, then, currently working respondents with HCV expressed concern about its long-term impact on their health. When asked whether working in the sex trade had affected her overall health, one sex worker responded: "Oh yeah, it has affected me because along with working in the trade, I used dope and I contracted Hep C. [I wonder] if I'm going to die because of my Hep C"; a second respondent said, "Well, I have Hep C- I'm pretty concerned about that"; while another said, "my main concern right now is my Hep C." As Table 18 shows, the exited respondents' health status in regard to Hep A, B and C mirrored those described by active sex workers. A similar number of the exited respondents were dealing with Hepatitis infections.

In contrast to the negative impact described by many, 41.8% of respondents answered that their health had not been affected and a small number of respondents even felt that

working in the sex trade had actually improved their health. In terms of physical health, one currently working sex worker said working in the sex trade had improved her personal health practices, noting, "it's actually made me healthier because I'm more careful now and more aware. So I actually get sick less now than I used to." Another respondent put it like this: "Actually, I think that it's [the sex trade] made me better to tell you the truth...healthier than I was." Additionally, a few said that sex work had in fact had a positive impact on their mental well-being. As one respondent noted, "Emotionally I feel that I've grown stronger from it."

#### **PART VIII: SEEKING SERVICES: WHAT'S AVAILABLE, WHAT'S MISSING**

Due to the nature of the work they do, sex workers have distinctive service needs that differ from that of the average Canadian worker. As previous research suggests (Carr, 1995; Weiner, 1996), less than adequate living situations for many sex workers, combined with low income, dangerous working conditions and high-risk behaviours, contribute to the need for a variety of medical and related services. It is not surprising, then, that when asked about their frequency of contact with healthcare service providers in the previous year, our respondents had made a median of 10 visits to physicians/health care workers. In fact, many had trouble recalling the exact number of times they had visited a health professional in the last year.

*Our respondents had made a median of 10 visits to physicians/health care workers.*

*The vast majority of respondents had access to free condoms, barriers and contraceptives while they were working and were aware of a number of locations within the CRD where they had access to free condoms and contraceptives.*

*A variety of other local social services were accessed by respondents including: PEERS, street nurses and outreach workers, Sandy Merriman Emergency Shelter, drop-in clinics/ their doctor, AIDS Vancouver Island, as well as at their current work location.*

## **8.1 Access Issues**

Medical needs of sex workers range widely beyond those of sexual health. Access to preventive health services including the free provision of condoms and contraceptives, as well as needle/syringe exchange and vaccination are crucial.

The vast majority of respondents had access to free condoms, barriers and contraceptives while they were working and were aware of a number of locations within the CRD where they had access to free condoms and contraceptives. A large majority of respondents relied on the services of the Needle Exchange and Street Outreach Services (S.O.S.). One respondent said:

[At] the needle exchange, there's condoms and everything you get free of charge and you can get your shots and talk to counselors. There's pamphlets with information available to direct you towards necessary resources and so on.

A variety of other local social services were accessed by respondents including: PEERS, street nurses and outreach workers, Sandy Merriman Emergency Shelter, drop-in clinics/ their doctor, AIDS Vancouver Island, as well as at their current work location. However, despite the wide availability of free preventive services, 16.4% of respondents indicated that while working in the sex trade they did not have access to free condoms. As one respondent put it: "I don't really know what's available to workers." Moreover, respondents' access to these vital supplies varied depending upon their work location in the sex trade. While close to half (42.4%) of those

***Of those respondents who injected heroin in the last six months (n=62), the majority said that they access to free needles through the Needle Exchange in downtown Victoria. A minority (14.5%) reported that they purchased their needles from the pharmacy, while 6.4% said that they got them from friends and/or bleached their own needles.***

working in indoor venues (strip bars/clubs, peep shows, hotels/motels and massage parlours) responded that they did not have access to free condoms, only 10.3% of respondents working on the street, 12.1% of home workers and 12.3% of those working in escort agencies reported that they did not have access to free condoms.

Due to the risk of transmission of a number of potentially serious diseases associated with illicit drug use, preventive health services that include the provision of free needles and needle exchange and vaccinations are also vital. It is important that all intravenous drug users, including sex workers, have access to clean and sterile drug use equipment. According to most of our respondents, these services are readily available to sex workers in Victoria. Of those respondents who injected heroin in the last six months (n=62), the majority said that they access to free needles through the Needle Exchange in downtown Victoria. A minority (14.5%) reported that they purchased their needles from the pharmacy, while 6.4% said that they got them from friends and/or bleached their own needles.

## 8.2 Quality of Health Care

*Interviewer:* What would the ideal health care worker be like from your viewpoint?

*Tina:* Well that would be somebody who wouldn't judge me or "oh you work on the street you're a prostitute I don't want to deal with you, you might have this and you might have that" and be really rude and harsh about it.

There shouldn't have to be a special nurse walking on the street at night because the one at the hospital doesn't give a shit about you.

*~ Karen, street worker*

***It is clear from the data gathered for this report that our respondents face many difficulties accessing quality health care through the normal health service delivery system relied upon by most Canadians.***

It is clear from the data gathered for this report that our respondents face many difficulties accessing quality health care through the normal health service delivery system relied upon by most Canadians. For instance, while 57.8% of respondents in this study said that there was a health clinic they went to, and 62.1% had a healthcare worker they liked to see, many identified non-medical health care providers as more caring than that of regular family doctors or other physicians. According to one respondent: "I didn't feel comfortable building a relationship with my doctor and I felt the street nurses had the most compassion for people in our kind of work trade. They're completely non-judgmental."

However, one consequence of not having a regular physician and of accessing health care services from a number

***Our respondents identified two central barriers in accessing the quality health care services they required: a) lack of a non-judgmental and caring health care environment in which they felt comfortable; b) difficulty finding health care providers that are knowledgeable about the specific and unique health care needs of sex workers.***

***Many current and exited respondents said that they did not feel comfortable revealing their current/past sex work to their doctor. However, without this vital information, it is difficult for physicians to provide the level of support and care that our respondents need.***

of different providers is that there is little continuity of care, diagnosis, or treatment geared specifically towards their health needs. Our respondents identified two central barriers in accessing the quality health care services they required: a) lack of a non-judgmental and caring health care environment in which they felt comfortable; b) difficulty finding health care providers that are knowledgeable about the specific and unique health care needs of sex workers. For instance, respondents said, "I would try to tell doctors that I was an escort, but they just give you a send off. I don't think that it's right. I think that there should be maybe doctors that advertise that they take sex workers." Another respondent recalled being treated poorly by her doctor because she was a sex worker who was using drugs: "In the past it's like a lot of them didn't want to deal with me because I had... you know I'd been working and I had been using and I had abscesses and stuff like that and they just... they treated me like I was a piece of shit." Another respondent put it like this: "I believe that we, as people in this trade, don't get the health care or the attention from doctors or the treatment from doctors then we would get in a different trade. If they know you're a prostitute they don't treat you good."

It is not surprising then that many current and exited respondents said that they did not feel comfortable revealing their current/past sex work to their doctor. However, without this vital information, it is difficult for physicians to provide the level of support and care that our respondents need.

Among other things, due to the nature of their work, having cervical pap smears and regular gynecological exams is vitally important for both early detection and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases. If health care professionals are unaware of a patient's vulnerability to sexually-transmitted infections and other pertinent sexual health issues, such tests are unlikely to be requested. For our sample of female respondents, 63.7% said that they had a pap test in the previous year, which is below that of the general Canadian population (71.8% in 1996-97) (Statistics Canada, 2000).

The importance of a non-judgmental and knowledgeable health provider is further evidenced in the comments of the minority of our respondents who were satisfied with the quality of health care they received. Commenting positively on her doctor, one respondent noted, "the doctor I have...I'm pretty open about stuff and he doesn't judge me." Another respondent recalled how her current doctor was attuned to the mental health needs of sex workers:

I'm happy with my health service provider...  
Because she takes into account that sex trade  
workers suffer from post-traumatic stress  
syndrome and she is very understanding to my  
needs.

Nevertheless, it is telling that the vast majority of our respondents do not seek professional services when they are in a crisis situation. Instead, as Tables 11 and 12 show, they are more likely to turn first or second to a lover/partner, friend, mother, therapist/counselor or PEERS. Health care

*Health care provider is further down the list of those our respondents might seek out for help.*

*It is clear is that some of our respondents are not receiving the personal/social services they need. This situation does not necessarily end when they exit the sex trade.*

*Many of the exited respondents talked about the importance of having a strong social network in place when attempting to exit, and the need to have someone to turn to.*

provider is further down the list of those our respondents might seek out for help. However, seeking help is one thing; receiving it, another. When asked if they agreed with the statement "if something went wrong, no one would help me," 17.4% of our respondents said that they agreed, and the same percentage agreed with a second statement, "there is no one I feel comfortable talking about problems with." Male respondents were more likely to agree than females to both questions, meaning that the former have more difficulty finding help and comfort when needed. It is clear is that some of our respondents are not receiving the personal/social services they need. This situation does not necessarily end when they exit the sex trade.

### **8.3 Exiting the Sex Trade and Seeking Services**

While the barriers preventing many of our respondents from successfully exiting the sex trade were numerous, those that had left for two or more years discussed forms of support and services that were helpful to their exit, as well as what they felt was needed for a sex worker to make a permanent change. Many of the exited respondents talked about the importance of having a strong social network in place when attempting to exit, and the need to have someone to turn to. As one respondent described, "I think the most important thing was to have somebody basically understand and not shame me about what I had done and where I had been." Additionally, the support and

*Respondents also talked positively about the support they received from street nurses and outreach services.*

*Accessible outreach services and programs for marginalized people provided by individuals who are experiential and knowledgeable about the varied needs of exiting sex workers, was said to be extremely important.*

understanding of family members played a large role in many of the exited respondents' breakaway from the sex trade. For instance, one respondent noted, "my mom was really supportive and my sister....they gave me whatever I needed. I was still on my own but they helped me out a lot." Having a significant other in their life, someone who was non-judgmental and supportive, seemed to be what many exited respondents needed to make a permanent change in their life.

In addition to the support of close friends and family members, some of the exited respondents also discussed the services they accessed upon leaving the trade, which ones were helpful and which were not. One respondent's comments echo the sentiments of many of the exited sex workers: "I think the biggest thing is support from people that have been in the sex trade and left the sex trade to be able to help them out." Respondents also talked positively about the support they received from street nurses and outreach services. For instance, one said, "the outreach workers supported what I was doing...They're the ones that gave me the final kick in the ass to go." For various reasons, those working in the sex trade are often suspicious of those representing the mainstream health care system. As such, accessible outreach services and programs for marginalized people provided by individuals who are experiential and knowledgeable about the varied needs of exiting sex workers, was said to be extremely important.

While some respondents found the support and understanding of others available to them when they tried to

*For a number of respondents, their involvement in the sex trade was not something they disclosed to anyone; their activity in the sex trade was kept completely hidden from family and even close friends.*

exit the sex trade, others made the transition out of the trade solely on their own. In fact, for a number of respondents, their involvement in the sex trade was not something they disclosed to anyone; their activity in the sex trade was kept completely hidden from family and even close friends. As well, many had been used to looking after themselves and being on their own and had never relied on anyone else for support. It is not surprising that, upon leaving the trade, these respondents talked of feeling socially isolated, as one exited sex worker comments regarding his experience:

When I was in that world, there was only me. I didn't want anybody else that I knew knowing what I was doing. They couldn't do anything because nobody knew anything about it.

Other exited respondents had similar comments: "I didn't access any services," and "There's really no one that actually helped me...I just did it, there wasn't really anyone who knew about that part of my life."

Given the mental health problems reported by many of exited respondents in the previous section and that fact that 20% of exited respondents at the time of interview said that they had no one would help them if something went wrong, it may well be that better service outreach to sex workers while they are in transition as well as after they have permanently exited the trade would aid them in more successfully adapting to their new life. This and other recommendations emerging from the report are taken up in the section below.

## **PART IX: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

For the majority of respondents in our study, selling sex services is their primary source of income and their options to do otherwise are severely limited. This report has sought to capture sex workers' own views on their work, health and access to services with the aim of understanding the challenges they face and offering policy suggestions to help improve their situation, inside as well as outside the sex trade.

The sex worker's situation is typically seen as one of continuous marginalization that started early in life. However, our findings suggest that this characterization is overly simplistic. While it is true that the majority of our respondents were marginalized in regard to formal education, vocational training and basic social skills before entering the sex trade, it would appear that a substantial number of them have adjusted to their circumstances and have achieved what many other in our society have not: a stable living situation, a steady intimate relationship, and a job where they say that they have substantial control over when, where and with whom they work. Having said that, our respondents do share one important characteristic with other workers who are marginalized in our society: economic insecurity.

Across certain dimensions, such as freedom from injury while working and harassment, our findings show that those working on the street are comparatively worse off. On the other hand, in regard to control over the money made while trading sex, pace of work and activities performed during

interactions with clients, those working in indoor venues where third parties control the conditions of labour are less well off when compared to street workers. The absence of even minimum work standards and protections leaves escorts and other indoor workers subject to the whim of individual managers/madams/bosses and workers are left vulnerable and without easy access to the services and organization enjoyed by most Canadian workers that protect them against exploitative conditions of work.

Overall, our findings suggest that sex workers operating independently out of their own homes, out of public view and at the same time not bound to the terms of employment set by another, are in the best relative position regarding safety at work and control over their earnings, pace of work, and activities performed for the client.

In addition to highly variable working conditions, sex workers continually must deal with how the sex industry is viewed and treated in Canada. Compared to other service workers, sex workers are burdened with a stigma merely because they are involved in the commercial sex trade. The impact of this stigma is amplified by the tendency of Canadians to view the sex trade as a social problem that needs to be solved through criminal sanctions. Although prostitution per se is not illegal in Canada, most of the activities associated with it are illegal. The law often leaves the sex worker with little choice but to do their work in hidden locations where they have little control over their personal safety. Further,

they often must provide the service in a different location every time, thereby limiting their ability to establish a safe place to provide services. These unique aspects of the sex trade leave workers vulnerable to abuse by those more powerful than themselves and at the same time in danger of breaking the law while trying to make a living. Changes to these factors would help improve sex workers safety and well-being and reduce their marginalization.

#### **PART X: FURTHER RESEARCH**

The current study found a relationship between adult respondents' background characteristics, working conditions and health. However, the cross-sectional nature of the research (we interviewed respondents only one point in time) makes it difficult to arrive at firm statements about whether the problems associated with the sex trade that were reported by a sizable portion of our participants are unique to sex workers or are also shared by workers in other "square jobs" not subject to particular criminal sanctions. Yet the sex trade, as shown in the current study, is stigmatized and criminalized. What impact do these overarching conditions have on the work and health of sex workers?

The preliminary evidence from this study suggests that the current way that prostitution is viewed in Canada is linked to the significant danger found in the occupation and the ill mental health of a large number of workers making a living

from selling sex services. On the other hand, it may well be that the sex trade attracts a different type of worker, influencing job satisfaction, health and well-being. For example, while childhood victimization is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause for entering the sex trade, the exact relationship between the two is unknown. Similarly, the direction of the causal link between sex trade work and adult health status (including work-related injuries, STDS and Hep-C, addiction to hard drugs, and a variety of mental health problems) remains unclear. Research that attempts to answer these questions would help to better inform health policy by distinguishing the health concerns unique to sex workers and the root causes of these health concerns.

## **PART XI: RECOMMENDATIONS**

PEERS staff, the Research Advisory Committee, and the authors have developed the following recommendations that would improve the health and safety of current and former adult sex workers in the CRD. As demonstrated in this report, all respondents experienced marginalization in the sense that they are unable to access many of the rights and protections other Canadian citizens enjoy. Because of this situation, we suggest the following general recommendations:

- Educate the public about the reality of sex workers' lives;
- Campaign for changes in policy and legislation to make sex work safer;
- Make available better education and training for police and other criminal justice personnel to encourage them to be more sensitive and understanding of the dynamics of sex trade work across all work venues;
- Provide ready access to safe, stable, and affordable housing;
- Provide ready access to knowledgeable, appropriate and sensitive health and social service providers (including nurses, doctors, mental health counsellors, and social workers);
- Make available a continuum of services (including birth control, detox, addiction treatment, etc.) so that sex workers receive the care they need when they need it;
- Provide economic and political support for experientially-based advocacy organizations, such as PEERS, PACE<sup>10</sup>, SHOP<sup>11</sup>, and jane<sup>12</sup> that are focused in different ways on improving the situation of current as well as former sex workers.

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<sup>10</sup> PACE, which stands for Prostitution Alternatives Counselling Education, is a Vancouver-based organization that was started by ex-sex workers in 1994. PACE is dedicated to reducing harm and abolishing conditions that lead to prostitution.

<sup>11</sup> SHOP is an acronym for Social and Health Opportunities for Prostitutes. The organization is based in Kamloops, BC.

<sup>12</sup> jane refers to "jane doe," an anonymous woman. The organization has just got off the ground and is based in Nanaimo, BC.

At the same time, our findings show that the situations of sex workers vary widely and policy recommendations should also consider the more individualized needs of sub-groups of the sex worker population in the CRD.

### **11.1 Policy Recommendations for Those Currently Working in the Sex Trade**

The sex trade provides a viable means of earning a living for a substantial minority of our respondents. They report that, while perhaps they are not as healthy as they would like, their overall health has nevertheless not been affected by their sex trade involvement, that they are doing okay financially, and that currently they have no plans to leave the sex trade. Policy recommendations for this group should address ways to eliminate the societal stigma surrounding the sex trade, reduce harassment, and lessen their risk of exploitation by clients, pimps and managers/bosses. In addition to the policy recommendations listed above, we suggest the following for this population:

- Educate sex workers about what is legal and illegal about the sex trade;
- Institute formal job contracts for sex workers when employed by others (such as in strip bars or clubs);
- Institute formal work agreements for sex workers when working with third-parties (such as in escort agencies or massage parlours);
- Provide services that are specific to the needs and schedules of sex workers, including child care for dependent children and outreach services around-the-clock, seven days a week.

## 11.2 Policy Relevant to Survivors Wanting to Leave the Sex Trade and Those Who Have Exited

For many others that we interviewed, the sex trade has not been a career choice but rather their only viable means of survival. This sub-group of survivors would benefit by having the means and options whereby they could permanently leave the trade and make a fresh start elsewhere. Further consideration must also be directed towards the variable needs of those who have already exited. In addition to the general policy recommendations listed above, we recommend the following:

- Make available more outreach workers offering assistance to sex workers wanting to exit the trade;
- Provide ready access to second-stage supportive housing;
- Provide access to appropriate mental health services for exited sex workers dealing with low self-esteem and other psychological problems stemming from the stigma attached to their former work life;
- Provide access to academic education, including the means to complete high school;
- Provide access to vocational training that is affordable and meaningful;
- Provide access to employment opportunities that match their skills and interests;
- Provide access to exiting programs specifically targeting adults.

## **APPENDIX 1: BENEFITS, LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Some Benefits for Participants and Research Assistants**

Apart from the much-appreciated honorarium (\$40), the research project offered participants a safe and non-judgmental place to "tell their story," as well as an opportunity to be validated for their work and life experiences. For most of them, this was the first time in their lives that anyone showed a genuine interest in their experiences as a sex worker, something that in other circumstances caused them to feel marginalized and stigmatized. Some of the participants were so appreciative of PEERS for conducting the research that they decided to donate their honorarium to the organization to help further its outreach and educational activities. In addition, many of the participants believed that the final report might have a positive impact on the working conditions of their colleagues. Here is how one of the research assistants put it:

I think that the people being interviewed know that even though it's not about changing their lives by tomorrow, that even though it's going to be a long time before the information's out there, [they] know that the recommendations are happening...[I]t's the start of something big and I think that's the bottom line.

A range of opportunities has also emerged for our research assistants. First of all, they have had an opportunity to work in a collaborative team made up of people from a variety of walks of life, and thus to be exposed to different ways of knowing. As one research assistant put it: "I really feel blessed that I was one of the chosen to do the research. I'm amazed that I'm that good to be part of the team." Another stated, "I don't want to leave. Yeah, I enjoyed coming down to work."

A second positive outcome is that they now can list representatives from the PEERS' staff, the non-profit sector (Lightwater) and the university (Benoit) as potential referees. One researcher stated that:

I remember I was trying to write a resume when I was doing upgrading, I was like putting my friends' names down because who else would I put? I hadn't worked in a straight job in a long time and in the straight jobs that I did have, I was transient and I had nothing and no references.

The research assistants also acquired important numerical and writing skills, in addition to work habits that are essential to many square jobs. As one of them put it, the research project taught "me a work ethic because all those years before, I kind of did my own thing whenever I wanted to." Furthermore, the research assistants now have non-sex trade work experience to enter on their resume, which has linked some of them to work opportunities that were previously unavailable to them. For some of them this has involved employment as members of PEERS itself. Another has secured employment at a local agency. Two others have returned to school and another is employed in a second community-academic project in which the researcher leader (Benoit) is one of the investigators. Research assistants have also had the opportunity to speak out about their research involvement at local as well as national meetings and workshops. According to one of our research assistants, "It was really neat after the speech that [the three of us] did. The feeling afterwards: wow, look at what we did and it was okay."

In addition to the above, the research assistants have mastered a number of technical skills that were not accessible to them before the project. As one of them stated: "Working with new kinds of software and learning about data entry on an intimate level and creating a template and a database. [T]hat really

turned me on, I really liked it, it just blew me." Another who worked with transcribing the tape-recorded interviews had this to say about the skills that she acquired:

I've actually improved my typing quite a bit and I've found that my attention span has picked up quite a bit. [F]or a while, before when I wasn't employed... I had the attention span of an ant...[The project is] giving me more to focus on and a little bit more to manage my time around than sitting around in front of my computer and watching my roommate's 38 inch screen TV!

Finally, and not least of all, the research assistants, many of whom at the time were either on social assistance or barely making ends meet, had an opportunity to make a decent wage for the time and effort they put into the project. As one of them put it: "I can tell you another thing that's been very empowering is just to be paid a good wage... So often people go in the sex trade and go back because of the money. You don't have any other skills or an education that you can fall back on. You know, \$7/hour if you're lucky. So it's good to be earning good money." Another researcher put it even more bluntly: "Holy shit, I'm making money. I know it's only 10 hours a week but I'm making money!"

### **Some Limitations and Challenges**

As a community-academic collaboration focused on gathering information from a non-random sample of participants, our project is limited in terms of making generalizations about the entire group of sex workers (Creswell, 1994; Maxwell, 1996; Berg, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). We therefore cannot state with certainty that our findings are representative of sex workers in the rest of Canada, other parts of BC or even Vancouver Island. On the other hand, however, a sample size of 201 of a largely hidden group of workers is significant in that it sheds light on people who may otherwise not be given an opportunity to voice

their views. And, equally important, the greater the number of participants' voices heard, the stronger will be our policy recommendations.

Other challenges include the major amount of up-front time by the research team just to get the project off the ground. Research assistants recruited for the project had a major advantage over the research leader (Benoit) and her graduate student (Millar) since neither had personal experience as sex workers. On the other hand, the research assistants lacked formal training in research methods. As such, a great deal of time and effort was required in order to train them in interview techniques, data input and transcribing. The community coordinator also spent considerable time training the research assistants how to keep track of receipts, fill in time sheets and so forth, all aspects of a square job that most of them had not had for some time.

Complicating matters further was the possibility that the interview process might "trigger" aspects of the research assistants' past. They were encouraged to "take time out" (with pay) to help a colleague who was triggered by something that came up during an interview, when the data were being inputted into the SPSS file or during an interview transcription. One of them involved in transcription stated that "the atmosphere of the stories [were sometimes] just really depressing. [I]t brought me back to there." Thus the importance of having each other for companionship during these stressful periods: "I think that working in a team is very effective if something's upsetting to you or it triggers up a memory because you have someone to bounce [it] off [and] you can talk about it."

While, as noted above, numerous benefits can result from collaborative community-academic teamwork, one downside is that there is not a single researcher gathering and coding the data and carrying out the other aspects of

the project. It took a great deal of effort on the part of the research leader and community coordinator to make sure that similar procedures were carried out by all team members, that the coding was accurate and consistent, and that the open-ended portions of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Since the authors of the report did not actually carry out the interviews, they had to devote time considerable time familiarizing themselves with the coded data and transcriptions. In addition, they had to learn to deal with ethical dilemmas as they strove to keep the research "interference free." As a case in point, one of the authors during a "cold call" to a local escort agency in an effort to recruit potential respondents to the project, found herself faced with a distraught escort who was very upset because her client had just pulled off his condom during intercourse. A quick decision was made to put the recruitment drive aside and connect the escort to a PEERS' staff member. Medical help and counseling were arranged for the escort and she later agreed to be interviewed.

Despite these concerns and dilemmas, the team felt that the gains of collaborative research far outweighed the downsides. In any event, it is highly unlikely that researchers without sex trade experience would have gained access to the world of sex workers in the first instance nor, even if they had, would respondents open up to them to the extent that took place in the current project. As one of the research assistants reflected: "I think that one of the best parts of [the project] was that people were interviewed by their peers, so to speak. I think that's really important and I think that helped to bring the people out more, too."

Some final challenges are worth mentioning. One involved the fact that inputting data and transcribing interviews verbatim is repetitive and often tiresome work. Also, not all of the recorded interviews were of superior quality, which made transcribing sometimes frustrating. A further difficulty for the

research assistants concerned making "cold calls." As already noted, one of the strategies utilized to recruit respondents to the project was to call the classified pages of the local CRD papers, *Monday Magazine*, where sex services are advertised. Much to the surprise of the inexperienced research leader and community coordinator, the research assistants found the cold calls assignment the most difficult part of their job. One of them recalled why cold calls were so distressing for her:

I guess because I've been in the business and I know what it's like when people call. [L]ike, if I was working right now and I called another agency and said um, whatever, how are you doing, they would be offended, they would be suspicious: maybe I'm trying to find out what their rates are or compete with them in some way?

The solution to this problem was for the research leader and community coordinator to take the task in hand. As one of the research assistants put it: " I feel that you [Benoit and Lightwater] don't have those feelings and knowledge about [cold calls] because you weren't there. So it makes it easier for you to do that."

A final difficulty concerned the enormous time and effort needed to make a solid bridge between the community and the university. Such relationship's building involves filling in knowledge gaps about the other, overcoming suspicions, and confronting status differences. In this respect, the community coordinator played a key role, balancing the needs of PEERS in regard to the usefulness of the research, with those of the research leader aiming to conduct research that was valid and reliable to the extent that community research projects on relatively hidden groups can be. The end result, we believe,

was a good balance between the two. Here's how one of the research assistants saw the community-academic relationship:

Excellent, totally excellent. It just shows that everybody's not stuffy and everybody doesn't just fall under society's rules. A few years ago, I just never would have thought, you know, it just never would have occurred to me [that] actually somebody from the university, like a professor, you know, [could work with us]. Cuz you just think of those people, that's their end of town, you know, they just don't come over here to our end of town. But yeah, I think it's totally cool.

In summary, despite its challenges and limitations, this community-academic research collaboration has proven to be an extremely worthwhile endeavor.

## APPENDIX 2: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Aboriginal:** For the purposes of this report, Aboriginal includes all of Canada's indigenous first peoples-- status and non-status Indians, Métis and Inuit people.

**Escort agency:** An occupational location within the sex trade in which a person, functioning as a manager/madam/boss charges a fee for arranging an introduction between an escort and client seeking companionship and/or sex services.

**Escort (worker):** A person who charges a fee for acting as a "date" for a specified period of time to a client desiring companionship and/or sex services.

**Exited Sex Worker:** Exited sex worker for the purposes of this report is defined as someone who has "retired" from the sex trade for a minimum of two years at the time of interview. It is believed that those who had been out of the trade for two years would have been able to leave behind most aspects of the identity of and activities involved in being a sex worker.

**Ho:** A short form of "whore" and usually applied in a derogatory sense. Some sex workers have reclaimed the term to signify their empowerment.

**John:** A "john" also referred to as a "client," "date," "trick" or "customer," is an individual who purchases sex services from another person.

**Pimp:** A "pimp" is a person who lives off the earnings of an individual sex worker. The pimp often controls the sex worker's commercial activities and the income that these generate.

***Prostitution:*** Prostitution is commonly used as a substitute term for the “sex trade” or “sex industry” and involves the exchange of money or in kind for sex services. (See Appendix 5 for more precise wording of the legislation relating to prostitution in Canada).

***Sex workers:*** In place of the more commonly used terms “prostitute” and “whore,” this report use the less stigmatizing term “sex worker” to draw the reader’s attention to the actual work involved in selling any of a variety of sex services for a living. The services involved may include one or more of the following sex activities, among others: stripping/exotic dancing, sexual massage, phone sex, oral sex, vaginal sex, domination/submission, pornography, Greek/anal sex, or escort.

***Square job:*** An occupational situation that is recognized as a legitimate and acceptable means of earning an income by mainstream society.

***Street worker:*** Sometimes also referred to as a “prostitute,” street workers are those sex workers who practice the trade by working mainly on street corners and other visible areas in view of potential clients. Street workers may work for pimps or work independently (i.e., on their own).

### APPENDIX 3: FEDERAL LEGISLATION RELATING TO PROSTITUTION

The most common prostitution-related offences under the *Criminal Code of Canada* are:

#### Pimping and procuring offences—section 212

There are several offences known as “procuring” (obtaining a person for the purpose of prostitution)—procuring a person to have illicit sexual intercourse with another person, procuring a person to become a prostitute, procuring a person to enter or leave Canada for the purpose of prostitution. Some apply to customers (johns) and some apply to pimps.

It is a criminal offence to “procure” or “attempt to procure” anyone for prostitution. Section 212(1) prohibits anyone from:

- Procuring or attempting to procure a person to become a prostitute, whether in or out of Canada
- Procuring a person to enter or leave Canada, for the purpose of prostitution
- Procuring or attempting to procure a person to become an inmate of a common bawdy house
- Exercise control, direction or influence over a person for the purpose of aiding or compelling them to engage in or carry on prostitution, and
- Living wholly or in part on the avails of prostitution.

### The communicating offence—section 213

It is a criminal offence to communicate or attempt to communicate with any person in any place open to public view (including motor vehicles), for the purpose of:

- Engaging in prostitution, or
- Obtaining the sexual services of a prostitute.

### The common bawdy house offences—section 210

It is a criminal offence to “keep” or be an inmate of a common bawdy house (a place that is kept or occupied or resorted to by one or more persons for the purposes of prostitution).

Note: Excerpt from *Being Aware, Taking Care*. Ministry of Attorney General, September, 1999.

#### **APPENDIX 4: RESEARCH INSTRUMENT**

A pdf file of the questionnaire can be downloaded on the following websites:

<http://web.uvic.ca/~cbenoit/>

<http://www.peers.bc.ca/>

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