

People Who Pay for Sexual Services

While little is known about people who pay for sexual services – defined as any person who has paid, on at least one occasion during their lifetime, money (as opposed to other goods and services) for direct contact sexual services – we are learning more thanks to a number of recent studies conducted in North America and Europe beginning in the mid-1990s. Although some of the information coming out of these studies has been contradictory, the research being conducted in Canada is providing a picture of who is purchasing sex in this country.

Who is purchasing sex in Canada?

- The overwhelming majority of people who pay for sexual services are believed to be men. Though this claim may be imprecise as no systematic efforts have been undertaken to investigate female, transgender, transsexual, or couples consumption of sexual services or to interrogate the gendered differences in the meaning of sexual consumption^{4,49,89};
- The sexual preferences of males who purchase sexual services appear to mirror that of males in the general population which is to say that most self-identify as heterosexual;
- Most samples of people who have paid for sex identify as Caucasian⁴⁹;
- The average person purchasing sex is in his late 30s or early 40s^{4,49};
- Just under half of men report being either married, living common-law, divorced or widowed^{4,49}. This is supported by a UK study which found that single men were the least likely to buy sex while the most likely group were widowed, divorced or separated men⁶⁷;
- The majority of people paying for sex are employed full-time and earn an average personal income of more than \$60,000 per year⁴. See <http://www.johnsvoice.ca/> for more information;
- Sanders⁶⁷ indicates that “paying for sex “increase[s] with socio-economic status and age”. However these observations may be a product of the sample as most samples of people who pay for sex are gathered from off-street populations not street-based;
- People purchase sex for a range of reasons including: adventure, loneliness, sexual insecurity, companionship, and sex/gender exploration⁵⁹.

Why do people purchase sex in Canada?

Similar to the way sex workers move in and out of the sex industry as the circumstances of their lives change, purchasing sex is not a permanent or consistent feature of most men’s lives. What’s more, they too are stigmatized by their association with the sex industry and often labeled as either immoral, sexually perverted, or as women-haters⁶⁷. The reality is that many men who purchase sex are likely none of these things. Rather, there are complex sociological, cultural, and psychological “push” and “pull” factors that lead men to purchase sex.

Push Factors

Factors that “push” some men to purchase sex according to Sanders⁶⁷:

- Not having their emotional needs met:

- Men report being lonely and in need of intimacy, either because they are unable to find an intimate partner, are widowed, or find that intimacy is no longer present in their long-term relationship;
- Age:
 - Some younger men are finding it increasingly difficult to find girlfriends and wives in today's society because there are fewer social opportunities to meet women due to an increasing emphasis on on-line social interaction;
 - Some older men find that conventional relationships are unable to satisfy all their sexual and emotional needs and that it is a "myth" that "marriage is a means of personal fulfillment"⁶⁷;
- Unsatisfactory sexual relationships:
 - Sex industry allows men to choose sexual partners with certain physical characteristics and who will perform specific sexual acts;
- Unease with conventional dating etiquette
 - Some men find traditional "courting rituals" – where men ask a woman out on a date, take her out for dinner or spend money on her in some other way, and hope the date will end in sex – exhausting when sometimes what they are looking for is sex that is uncommitted, convenient, and at times, anonymous;
 - Purchasing sex is therefore more straightforward, and some have argued, a more "honest" way to find someone to have casual sex with. This might be an especially attractive option for those who are socially awkward and/or too shy to approach women for casual sex.

Sex workers report similar reasons for why some men purchase sex. Some indoor sex workers report that one of the most difficult aspects of their work is managing the emotions of the people purchasing sex from them. Oftentimes men who purchase sex want someone who will listen to their problems. In many ways they are looking for someone who can fulfill a confidant, or counseling role in their lives^{23,80}.

Other sex workers report that people purchasing sex are searching for romantic as well as sexual relationships. This could mean that they are looking for someone to be their actual girlfriend or spouse or at the very least, offer a "girlfriend experience". The later is a term used by sex workers to refer to those who want the intimacy associated with a girlfriend. This includes everything from mouth-to-mouth kissing and unprotected oral sex to behaving in a loving and caring manner. These kinds of requests are often the most difficult for workers to fulfill because these behaviors are often reserved for their intimate relationships. Trying to maintain the division between a professional and personal intimate life can be emotionally taxing and stressful for some workers²³. Yet others see this as a rewarding aspect of their work, not only financially, but because it highlights how sex work might be seen as a "helping profession".

Pull Factors

Again according to Sanders⁶⁷ the factors "pulling" most men into purchasing sex are as follows:

- Marketing: “the sex industry is increasingly being marketed to the general population as a form of entertainment, a means of escape and even luxury, that is very appealing to some men”⁶⁷;
- Illicitness: some men find the taboo nature of the sex industry thrilling and is a core motivation for purchasing sex;
- Opportunity: to purchase sex acts that are not available to men in their “real” lives either because they do not have a regular sexual partner, or because their partners are unwilling to engage in the kinds of sex acts that appeal to them.

Despite the widespread belief that men who purchase sex are immoral, many men who have been interviewed about their involvement in the sex industry believe that their decisions about who to purchase sex from are morally-informed⁶⁷. For example, some men report that they would not pay women involved in the street-based industry, or would not do so a second time, because they believe these women are more vulnerable. These men do not want to feel as though they are coercing potentially sexually exploited youth, trafficked and/or drug-addicted people into having sex. It is important for many men that the sex they are paying for is, at least superficially, “consensual”.

Despite the intimate knowledge of the sex industry that many people who pay for sex have, many hold the same stigmatizing views toward sex workers as the general public. In particular, people who pay for sexual services speak about street-level sex workers as an undifferentiated “high-risk” group that are believed to be: under age, drug and alcohol dependent, likely to have STI’s, inclined to rob or steal, and working for dangerous “pimps” or having some other link to criminal activity⁶⁷.

It should be noted that while the majority of people purchasing sex appear to be heterosexual men, there are still gaps in our knowledge. Little is known, for example, about the women or transgendered/transsexual people who purchase sex, and their reasons for doing so. Similarly we need to learn more about those people who do not identify as heterosexual who purchase sex. Our current research attempts to fill these gaps by focusing on how gender, sex, and sexuality interact to influence the buying and selling of sex in Canada.