



Curtin University

# SEXUAL HEALTH OUTCOMES AND WELLBEING OF SEX WORKERS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

THE LASH 2.0 STUDY

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# LASH 2.0 STUDY OVERVIEW

**Aim:** To investigate the impact of the law on WA sex workers; their health and safety; and the intersections between WA sex workers, service providers and police.

**Objectives:**

- Describe the size and types of sex worker services in WA including parlours, escort services, private workers, workers from non-English speaking backgrounds, male and transgender workers.
- Assess the health of sex workers including sexual health, mental health, injuries and violence.
- Assess the access of sex workers working in a range of settings to health promotion and health and safety resources.
- Enumerate and describe police and court charges for sex workers, their managers and their support services
- Describe the interactions and experiences of WA sex workers with service providers and the police.
- Compare the situation in 2016 to what was described in the 2007 LASH Study.

# RESEARCH TEAM & FUNDING

- **Associate Professor Linda Selvey:** School of Public Health, Curtin University (now UQ)
- **Dr Roanna Lobo:** School of Public Health, Curtin University
- **Dr Jonathan Hallett:** School of Public Health, Curtin University
- **Ms Kahlia McCausland:** School of Public Health, Curtin University
- **Professor Basil Donovan:** Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales
- **Ms Julie Bates:** Principal of Urban Realists
  
- **Funded by:** Sexual Health Blood-Borne Virus Program, Department of Health WA

# METHODS

## **Environmental scan**

- Perth, Bunbury & Kalgoorlie
- Challenges

## **Sex worker survey** – 354 participants, 52 men

- Peer researchers
- Survey translation

## **In-depth interviews**

- Key advisors
- Sex workers – 17 participants

## **STI/BBV prevalence study**

- Retrospective data
- Prospective data

## **Venue audit**

- Occupational Health & Safety

## **Police charges and court outcomes**

- Data from the Department of the Attorney General

## ROLE OF PEERS

- Peer member of the research team
- Eight peer researchers employed
  - One male
  - Four Asian women (2 Thai, 1 Korean, 1 Chinese)
- Peers' roles:
  - Study recruitment
  - Identification of and visits to parlours/brothels
  - Visits to areas where street-based sex workers work.
- Growth opportunity

# KEY FINDINGS – WELL BEING

## Confidence

*“...and I don’t know when it started I started appreciating my body a lot more, which was really interesting” (ID03, female)*

## Connection

*“I really enjoy the connection I have with people, and being able to take them on adventures” (ID05, female)*

## Financial

*“...like being, for the first time ever being the breadwinner of the house” (ID06 female)*

## Freedom

*“I like being my own boss” (ID17 female)*

Well being	N (%)
Enhance	99 (40)
Hinder	51 (21)
Both enhance/hinder	49 (20)
Neither enhance/hinder	46 (19)

Table: Reported impact of sex work on well being

33% Asian workers reported that sex work hindered their well being compared to 16% of non-Asian workers (p=0.005)

## KEY FINDINGS – CHANGES IN THE INDUSTRY

### Increase in private work vs brothel/parlour

- Use of internet to promote services
- Potential increase in vulnerability for new workers
- More difficult for outreach and support

### Increase in workers from Asian countries

- Language challenges
- Racism

### Decrease in demand for services due to economic downturn

- Increased stress for workers
- Potential increase in risk taking (condomless sex, choice of clients)

## KEY FINDINGS – STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

- 27% experienced stigma, discrimination or negative treatment from Police officers at least once
- 18% experienced stigma from General Practitioners at least once
- Stigma and discrimination major impact on sex workers lives
  - Disclosure
  - Relationships
  - Isolation, particularly Chinese workers



## KEY FINDINGS – HEALTH AND SAFETY

### Condoms

- High proportion sex workers reported requests for condomless sex
  - 42% respondents reported all or most clients requested condomless oral
  - Fewer for condomless vaginal (21%) or anal (13%)
- 67% reported condomless oral sex at least sometimes
  - 47% some or no clients use condoms, higher in men (63% vs 18% females)
- 13% reported condomless anal sex, 4% vaginal sex with some or most clients
- Some described pragmatism in consenting to condomless oral sex, others would not provide that service regardless

## KEY FINDINGS – CONDOMLESS SEX

- *“Like before they'd sort of have to shop around if they wanted to find someone [to provide natural services], but now they sort of don't.” (ID14, female)*
- *“It's got to the point now where they expect that they can pay extra for it.... They never even used to ask about that.” (ID10, female)*
- *“And now I do natural oral for shit now because now I just like give up. There's no f\*\*\*ing way to beat the system on that one.” (ID6, female)*
- *“But probably the sad thing that I found myself in this year as I've gotten older and I've had to like drop my price and I've been way more desperate for money, is that there has been a few times that I have done it and I just like went and got all tests and I'm OK, but I will never do that again. But in this last year I have done it a few times with people that I had the instinct that they were safe and I didn't have any condoms..... But yeah it is something that has happened and something I have always avoided apart from just this year.” (ID02, male)*

## KEY FINDINGS – HEALTH AND SAFETY

### Drugs and alcohol

Current drug use	N (%)
Smoking	155 (44)
Binge drinking daily/weekly	110 (34)
Marijuana	40 (11)
Methamphetamines	30 (9)

Current use of marijuana and ecstasy more common in males than females

### Threats and assaults

From clients at least once in the last 12 months	N (%)
Threat	173 (35)
Assault	71 (22)
Pressure to do something they didn't want to do	153 (47)

49% reported being uncomfortable about going to the police if robbed, assaulted or threatened

## KEY FINDINGS – IMPACT OF THE LAW

### Overall negative impact

- Outreach difficult – particularly small private brothels
- Some clients perception of illegal gave a license to treat SW badly
- Street-based sex work more underground and less opportunities for safety
- Distrust of police even when work is legal

### Less policing in WA

- May reflect increase in private sex work
- Police generally 'disinterested' in policing sex work
- BUT, many have had bad experiences with the police

## CONCLUSIONS

- Sex work can be beneficial for some workers
- Current legal framework is harmful
- ‘Swedish model’ would reduce demand with harmful effects
- Changes in industry has challenges for health and outreach services
- Stigma and discrimination and the current legal framework are major barriers to access support, police, health care