



nswp Global Network of Sex Work Projects
Promoting Health and Human Rights

COVID-19 Impact Survey – North America and the Caribbean

Introduction

In April 2020, NSWP [launched a global survey](#) to understand the impact of COVID-19 on sex workers. The survey received 156 responses in total from 55 different countries out of which 53 responses were from 6 countries – Canada, Guyana, Mexico, Suriname, Trinidad, United States – in the North America and the Caribbean region.¹

Overview of the legal landscape²

Canada

In Canada selling sex is legal but it is illegal to solicit in a public place that is in view of or next to a school, playground or day-care centre and merely being in prohibited places, as a sex worker, is criminalised. Buying sex and communicating for the purposes of buying sex is criminalised. Sex work is not recognized as work.

Guyana

In Guyana, loitering and importuning for ‘purposes of prostitution’ is criminalised however buying sex or activities associated with it are not criminalised. Related activities such as ‘pimping’ in public places, living on the earnings of a sex worker, procuring and brothel-keeping are criminalised. There is a law against allowing ‘prostitutes’ to meet together in indoor premises. Immigration law gives the State the right to refuse entry if there’s a reasonable belief that the person is coming to the country for the ‘purposes of prostitution’.

Mexico

In Mexico, sex work laws vary at a local level. In some states sex work is regulated and in other states it is illegal. An example of regulation is provided by the city of Tijuana where sex work is regulated and sex workers must register and undergo mandatory health checks to receive a health card and work legally. If you have a health card you can work outdoors in designated zones or in licensed establishments. If you work in any other way, it is considered illegal. Buying sex is not criminalised. Mexico’s anti-trafficking law conflates human trafficking with sex work. It is dangerously broad and includes ‘living off the earnings of prostitution’.

¹ Note: We received complete data only from the 5 countries – Canada, Guyana, Mexico, Trinidad, United States.

² [“Global Mapping of Sex Work Laws,”](#) NSWP.



Suriname

Selling sex is legal and buying sex is not criminalised. Brothel-keeping, 'pimping' and procuring are technically illegal although brothels are frequently tolerated by the authorities.

Trinidad

Soliciting in any place for 'immoral purposes' is criminalised. Living on the earnings of a sex worker, procuring and brothel-keeping criminalised. Buying sex is not criminalised. Immigration law gives the State the right to refuse entry if there's a reasonable belief that the person is coming to the country for the 'purposes of prostitution'.

United States

Sex work is regulated at a state and a national level, and sex work laws vary across the USA. Buying sex is criminalised in many US states. In terms of immigration, entry can be denied to people who have sold sex or "sought to engage in prostitution or procure prostitutes within the last 10 years".

Impact of COVID-19 on sex workers in North America and the Caribbean

The COVID-19 pandemic, as with other health crises, exposes existing inequalities and disproportionately affects people already criminalised, marginalised and living in financially precarious situations, often outside social protection mechanisms. Sex worker-led organisations from all regions are reporting a lack of access to national social protection schemes and exclusion from emergency social protection measures being put in place for other workers, particularly where sex work is criminalised. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, sex workers all over the world are experiencing hardship, a total loss of income and increased discrimination and harassment.³

Please describe how the sex worker community in your location has been impacted by COVID-19.

"Absolutely devastated. People are going hungry. People are scared to work, or not to work." – Sex worker organisation, Canada

"The sex worker community in Washington state has been severely impacted by the Coronavirus and discrimination by state and federal government policies which forbid providing sex workers the same assistance as other citizens, causing many of us to continue working to pay our bills." – Sex worker organisation, United States

As sex workers and their clients self-isolate, sex workers are left unprotected, increasingly vulnerable and unable to provide for themselves and their families. Many sex workers now find themselves in riskier situations and at greater risk of violence.⁴

"Clubs are shut down so I have no place to dance. Customers have begun contacting me in an arrogant and abusive way, expecting me to be desperate and take any offering they come up

³ [COVID-19](#)," NSWP.

⁴ [COVID-19](#)," NSWP.



with. *CHEAPER THAN USUAL! Physically aggressive and obnoxious. Despite the fact of no hazard pay. Many customers feel entitled for me to still come out and service them at private get togethers in dangerous neighborhoods /set ups and conditions.*” – Sex worker, United States

What measures are governments taking in response to COVID-19?

When asked to respond on their government’s measures in the response to COVID-19, the responses were as follows.

- 33/33 responses reported social or physical distancing measures.⁵
- 28/33 responses reported self-isolation for the vulnerable.⁶
- 22/33 responses reported quarantining certain areas or people.⁷

When asked to list other measures that governments have undertaken, 16 of the respondents gave answers, touching more upon lockdown restrictions and the impact this has on sex workers.⁸

“Hotel rooms only for those tested positive. Only testing very specific populations. Health guidelines have dictated that all in-person body work must be stopped and is punishable by fines. Increased money to police. Undocumented workers are not eligible for emergency benefits, only folks who have done taxes are eligible for emergency benefits.” – Sex worker organisation, Canada

“Shut down the economy in Washington state. The Federal relief bill passed to aid Americans during this emergency have been restricted from being given to anyone working in the sex industry, even if they are legal jobs such as strippers or sex toy manufacturers.” – Sex worker, United States

“Closing of hotels, bars, restaurants, suspension of non-essential government services.” – Sex worker organisation, Mexico

Have governments or law enforcement taken any repressive measures in response to COVID-19 aimed directly at sex workers?

Based on a list of measures, the responses were as follows:

- 19/33 reported the closure of brothels, bars, massage parlors, etc.⁹
- 12/33 reported crackdowns in areas known for street-based sex work.¹⁰
- 8/33 reported increased monitoring of independent sex work.¹¹
- 6/33 reported increased raids, arrests and prosecutions.¹²
- 1/33 reported compulsory testing for COVID-19.¹³
- 1/33 reported prosecution for testing positive for COVID-19.¹⁴

⁵ Canada, Guyana, Mexico, Trinidad, United States.

⁶ Canada, Guyana, Mexico, Trinidad, United States.

⁷ Canada, Guyana, Trinidad, United States.

⁸ Canada, Mexico, United States.

⁹ Canada, Mexico, Trinidad, United States.

¹⁰ Canada, Guyana, Trinidad, United States.

¹¹ Canada, Trinidad, United States.

¹² Canada, Guyana, Trinidad, United States.

¹³ United States.

¹⁴ United States.

When given the opportunity to add other measures, 10/33 respondents provided answers¹⁵, touching on the increased monitoring of sex work and the measures governments are implementing that negatively impact sex workers who are already in precarious situations.

“Requiring hotel staff to inform police if they suspect sex workers are working out of their hotels, or face not having their business license renewed.” – Sex worker, United States

“In Ontario, we must show ID when asked, but we don't all have ID, and this isn't safe for everyone, especially undocumented workers.” – Sex worker, Canada

“Government doesn't give checks to people who owe child support which means the government don't care if you die or not.” – Sex worker organisation, United States

How have these measures impacted sex workers?

This open-ended question was answered by 26/33 respondents¹⁶, each giving an insight in to the levels of extreme inequality sex workers are facing during this pandemic.

“Financially, physically, emotionally and as a parent.” – Sex worker, Guyana

“We're unable to meet all of our government guidelines and laws because we have no other source of income or support other than close contact work, exactly what we're supposed to be avoiding.” – Sex worker, Canada

“There has not been an increase spike in arrest even though police/security force presence increased in many areas where sex workers work, but support organisations going out to help sex workers are receiving increased attention from the police/security force making it difficult to support sex workers.” – Sex worker organisation, United States

Has COVID-19 reduced access to essential health services and commodities?

In addition to a global economic crisis, access to healthcare has also been severely affected by the ongoing crisis and sex workers are facing the impact in the following ways :

- 19/33 responses reported reduced access to condoms and lubricants.¹⁷
- 20/33 responses reported reduced access to harm reduction services.¹⁸
- 9/33 responses reported reduced access to HIV treatment.¹⁹
- 21/33 responses reported reduced access to STI testing and treatment.²⁰

Has there been any positive government or local authority measures to help protect sex workers?

Given a list of measures, the responses from the 33 complete surveys are as follows:

¹⁵ Canada, Mexico, United States.

¹⁶ Canada, Guyana, Mexico, United States.

¹⁷ Canada, Guyana, Mexico, Trinidad, United States.

¹⁸ Canada, Guyana, Mexico, United States.

¹⁹ Canada, Guyana, Mexico, Trinidad, United States.

²⁰ Canada, Guyana, Mexico, Trinidad, United States.

- 2/33 reported a temporary ban on raids, arrests and/or prosecutions for sex work-related offences.²¹
- 3/33 reported their government were ensuring documented and undocumented migrant sex workers can access health services.²²

When given the opportunity to add other positive government or local authority measures, 8 respondents provided answers.²³ Many of the responses reflected positive actions that were still out of reach for sex workers.

“Only some food supplies and economic support, but only to the ones that presented the official papers, lots of them, especially women, don’t trust the confidentiality of the use of this data so lots of them were left out.” – Sex worker organisation, Mexico

“Washington state is unusually kind to undocumented aliens and allow them to access state healthcare and other programs, but will deny them if they learn the person is a sex worker.” – Sex worker, United States

Are sex workers included in social protection/economic support schemes?

Respondents were given a list of social protection and economic support schemes and were asked to indicate which schemes are available for the general population and if these schemes are also available for sex workers.

Scheme: Income support schemes for both employed and self-employed - where some income or unemployment benefit paid for by the state.

- 27/33 reported this scheme is available for the general population.²⁴
- 9/33 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.²⁵

Scheme: Emergency funds for those facing hardship.

- 21/33 reported this scheme is available for the general population.²⁶
- 5/33 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.²⁷

Scheme: Emergency food packs / essential supplies.

- 17/33 reported this scheme is available for the general population.²⁸
- 11/33 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.²⁹

Scheme: Rent /mortgage relief schemes.

- 13/33 reported this scheme is available for the general population.³⁰

²¹ United States.

²² United States.

²³ Canada, Mexico, United States.

²⁴ Canada, Mexico, United States.

²⁵ Canada, United States.

²⁶ Canada, Mexico, United States.

²⁷ Canada, Mexico, United States.

²⁸ Canada, Mexico, United States.

²⁹ Canada, Mexico, United States.

³⁰ Canada, United States.

- 2/33 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.³¹

Scheme: Ban on evictions for rent or mortgage arrears.

- 24/33 reported this scheme is available for the general population.³²
- 11/33 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.³³

Scheme: Emergency housing options for homeless people.

- 29/33 reported this scheme is available for the general population.³⁴
- 8/33 reported this scheme is available for sex workers.³⁵

Additionally, three respondents mentioned the treatment of homeless populations and people who use drugs in the United States.

“They have actually rounded up homeless people and put them all together in a government-designated wetland, and cases of hep A are spreading like wildfire.” – Sex worker, United States

“Most of the US has left homeless folks in the streets, in fact in Nevada they put homeless folks in an empty outside parking lot as if they were dogs, without tents. Some cities have put homeless folks in hotels, but here in RI they haven’t provided shelter for the homeless, most of our homeless shelters are always full. Our local shelters already have infected folks because staff members are allowed to come and go, thus spreading the infection, our jails and nursing homes have the same issue..” – Sex worker organisation, United States

“I know SF is trying to get the homeless into empty hotel rooms. Haven’t heard people getting excluded for sex work but have heard of folks getting excluded for being on Saboxone an opioid replacement drug. I can’t imagine that SW are disclosing that they are SW if applying for aid.” – Sex worker, United States

If sex workers are not eligible for these schemes, why do respondents think they are excluded?

Twenty-five respondents answered this question, addressing issues relating to discrimination, stigma, and a legal landscape that criminalises sex work.

As a sex worker in Canada points out, *“Rent still needs to be paid, and because of the criminalisation of our work, we can’t accurately report our taxes if at all, so many Canadian sex workers are left without help from CERB or EI.”*

“They are not seen as a group of high vulnerability, measures have been generated from their invisibility.” – Sex worker organisation, Mexico

“Lots of reason. All summed up into stigma. But specifically it’s more likely that Black sex workers, sex workers of color, undocumented sex workers, trans sex workers, and disabled sex workers

³¹ Canada, United States.

³² Canada, United States.

³³ Canada, United States.

³⁴ Canada, Mexico, United States.

³⁵ Canada, Mexico, United States.



will not be eligible before cis white able bodied sex workers are not eligible.” – Sex worker, United States

How is the sex worker community responding to this crisis?

Emergency funds

20/33 responses recorded that the local sex worker community had established emergency funds or were in the process of trying to find funding.³⁶

These responses illustrate how quick the sex worker community were to respond to the crisis, but also that the community needs external investment in order to be able to effectively support everyone in need.

“Yes. PACE in Vancouver set up a community fund people can access; I think they’ve distributed \$20-30K in 5 weeks.” – Sex worker, Canada

“We have been raising funds and giving out cash grants to sex workers who apply. So far we have provided over \$21k to the sex worker community but need more like \$210k.” – Sex worker, United States

Emergency food supplies

10/33 responses that the local sex worker community had set up emergency food supplies.³⁷

“Pantries were delivered through SIBISO, in the same way some sex work NGOs have organised to gather groceries and set up small pantries to support our peers.” – Sex worker organisation, Mexico

“Taking amazon donations of bulk food and supplies and distributing to unhoused sex worker group.” – Sex worker, United States

Emergency housing

8/33 responses mentioned emergency housing support from the sex worker community, but these were limited to informal housing offers from peers, supplying camping equipment and lobbying local government.³⁸

“Many sex workers in the community have opened their homes to their peers in need.” – Sex worker, United States

“Provided camping equipment to the homeless workers.” – Sex worker, United States

“Our org is pushing for the city to open hotel rooms preventatively.” – Sex worker organisation, Canada

Virtual support

³⁶ Canada, Guyana, Mexico, United States.

³⁷ Canada, Mexico, United States.

³⁸ Canada, Mexico, United States.



The sex worker community has been relying on digital spaces for providing support, emergency services and for training each other on moving their work online. When asked specifically about virtual support, 14/33 responses provided further details on other ways in which sex workers were using the virtual environment to cope in the current crisis.³⁹ Many responses mentioned informal support networks on social media, but some also detailed how organisations are using the virtual space to ensure that sex workers qualify for government support.

“We are offering assistance doing taxes so folks can qualify for a stimulus check. Also, helping folks navigate rent abatements and other services.” – Sex worker organisation, United States

Sex worker community response vs government advice

The survey asked for respondents to detail how the sex worker community response to COVID-19 has been different from that of their government’s advice. 29/33 responses answered this question and provided further information on the differences.⁴⁰

“Definitely. We are understanding of the fact that some folks can’t self-isolate, and we are supporting, not criminalizing those who have been forced to continue working despite health guidelines.” – Sex worker organisation, Canada

“Yes, because the government only covered one sector and this is why it is important that the Sex Work-led Organisations have provided services and emotional support to our peers.” – Sex worker organisation, Mexico

“We have anticipated the response from the government for sex workers. WE claim this is our response as civil society organisations but we don’t pretend to cover the responsibility of the state.” – Sex worker organisation, Mexico

“Yes. Many people still feel the need to go out and work in person, but some people have managed to begin earning money from virtual work. Unfortunately, the less privileged one is, the fewer such options exist.” – Sex worker organisation, United States

Other

When asked about other ways in which the sex worker community were supporting one another during the COVID-19 pandemic, two of the six responses gave more information on the provision of different essential items and care packages to sex workers.

“Care packages being distributed with personal care items.” – Sex worker, Canada

“SWOP Tampa Bay is still doing street based outreach with supplies (condoms, lube, snacks, hygiene products, etc.), and many clients have helped to fund this.” – Sex worker, United States

What else is needed to help protect sex workers during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Twenty-one answers were provided to this final open-ended question. These responses ranged from the urgent need for decriminalisation, to better social protection mechanisms, and calls for sex worker organisations to work in unity.

³⁹ Canada, United States.

⁴⁰ Canada, Guyana, Mexico, United States.



“We need a basic universal income. We knew it before, but it’s more imperative than ever before to keep not only sex workers, but everybody, safe and above water.” – Sex worker, Canada

“It is necessary to work in unity between the different sex work organisations, without leading roles – practically we were expelled from a regional organisation for working the campaign “Making Street” with another organisation that belongs to another regional organisation in this COVID crisis. It is necessary to set up shelters for sex workers and public canteens by the government. Generate financial and / or food support for sex workers” – Sex worker organisation, Mexico

“Decriminalisation is the only thing that will end the discrimination. Or at least begin the journey to mutual respect and dignity. We won’t stop until we achieve it.” – Sex worker, United States



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