

Study finds male sex workers felt safer advertising online than in the streets

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VANCOUVER – A study on male sex workers in Vancouver has found that although the move to selling sex online rather than on the streets improved safety, a recent law prohibiting the advertisement of sex online may be driving the industry further underground.

The study by the B.C. Centre of Excellence in HIV/AIDS and the outreach program Hustle surveyed 39 men and trans men sex workers as well as eight others who buy their services.

It found that with new technology, sex work over the last decade has largely moved off the streets and onto the web.

“The shut down of this outdoor sex work area has really led to the loss of social support and cohesion,” said research associate Andrea Krusi.

While many male sex workers lost the support of the community on the street, the study discovered the Internet offered more tools to screen buyers and negotiate the terms of transactions ahead of time, preventing violence and disputes.

“Often, violence transpires in sex work transactions around the negotiation piece,” Krusi said.

But the benefits of negotiating sex work online have been scaled back.

A law introduced by the previous Conservative government in 2014 criminalized the purchase of sexual services and the advertisement of sexual services online, which Krusi said has forced sex workers to limit their digital communications.

This worries public health officials who see male sex workers driven further “under the radar,” said Matthew Taylor, program manager for Hustle.

“They’re working and living in isolation, they’re disconnected from society in a lot of ways and they’re definitely disconnected from any support.”

The law also makes it harder for outreach organizations like Hustle to distribute information among sex workers online since many platforms ban the term “sex work,” Taylor said.

“We have to take sex work out of our language completely. Basically now we still say we’re the Hustle program and the Health Initiative for Men but we keep it to, ‘We’re just here to provide health information.’”

Whether outreach initiatives have completely lost touch with some sex workers is unclear, and Taylor said the impact of the prostitution law will likely factor into future research.

With the current study, Krusi said she hopes the findings can reopen the conversation around the legislation and ultimately help make a case for decriminalizing sex work.

If the laws are revisited, Taylor wants male sex workers to be part of the conversation.

The study was published in the American Journal of Men’s Health.

Matthews says he 'regrets' actions after facing disorderly