SEXUAL HEALTH OUTCOMES AND WELLBEING OF SEX WORKERS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

THE LASH 2.0 STUDY

LINDA SELVEY¹, JONATHAN HALLETT², ROANNA LOBO², BASIL DONOVAN³, JULIE BATES⁴

¹SPH UNIVERSITY OF QLD, ²SPH CURTIN UNIVERSITY, ³KIRBY INSTITUTE UNSW, ⁴URBAN REALISTS
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

1. Environmental scan
   - Perth, Bunbury & Kalgoorlie
   - challenges

2. Sex worker survey – 354 participants, 52 men
   - peer researchers
   - survey translation

3. In-depth interviews
   - key advisors
   - sex workers – 17 participants

4. STI/BBV prevalence study
   - retrospective data
   - prospective data

5. Venue audit
   - OH&S

6. Police charges and court outcomes
   - DotAG
ROLE OF PEERS

• Peer member of the research team
• Nine peer researchers employed
  • One male
  • Five Asian women (2 Thai, 1 Korean, 2 Chinese)
• Peers’ roles:
  • Study recruitment
  • Identification of and visits to parlours/brothels
  • Visits to areas where street-based sex workers work.
• Growth opportunity
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic (number responding to this question)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex assigned at birth (354)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>80.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender identity (351)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>80.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age group (349)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-30 years</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-50 years</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>42.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country of birth (353)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia/New Zealand</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China/Hong Kong/Taiwan</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• 46% have worked in the sex industry for 2 years or less

**Work settings**
• 55% do at least some private work
• 34% work in a massage shop (at least some of the time)
• 24 respondents (7%) did at least some street-based work

**Income**
• Sex work was the main source of income for 66% of respondents

**English language skills**
• 52% reported having good English language skills
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)

---

KEY FINDINGS – WELL BEING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enhanced</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enhance</td>
<td>99 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinder</td>
<td>51 (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both enhance/hinder</td>
<td>49 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither enhance/hinder</td>
<td>46 (19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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)
• 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 SW’s lives
  • Disclosure
  • Relationships
  • Isolation, particularly Chinese workers
Overall negative impact

- Outreach difficult – particularly small private brothels
- Some clients’ perception of illegality 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
KEY FINDINGS – HEALTH AND SAFETY

Drugs and alcohol

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Current drug use</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Smoking</td>
<td>155 (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binge drinking daily/weekly</td>
<td>110 (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijuana</td>
<td>40 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methamphetamines</td>
<td>30 (9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Threats and assaults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>From clients at least once in the last 12 months</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threat</td>
<td>173 (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td>71 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure to do something they didn’t want to do</td>
<td>153 (47)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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