

Chapter 12: The Sex Industry and COVID-19

Key Findings

- ❖ The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the financial circumstances of many sex workers whether that be due to not being able to do in-person work, not being able to file for unemployment, not being able to pay bills, etc.
- ❖ 30% of respondents felt that the stigmatization of sex work has been exacerbated due to the pandemic.
- ❖ 60% of the respondents reported that they are not still taking clients in person, only 2% reported that they are taking in-person clients because they believe the coronavirus is a conspiracy theory, 10% reported taking in-person clients because they are not high risk, and 29% reported taking in-person clients because they have no other options.

Introduction

In Spring of 2020, the world saw one of the biggest global crises in the history of humankind, that crisis is known as the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, COYOTE RI was in the process of producing this book. Given how the coronavirus has disproportionately affected marginalized groups and communities, we thought it important to survey sex workers during this global crisis and include this vital information in the research presented in this book.

Prior to (and during) the COVID-19 pandemic, sex workers were stigmatized and criminalized in the United States, making them more vulnerable to a global crisis. The pandemic has further exacerbated this stigmatization of sex work and put sex workers in precarious economic situations. Unlike others who have lost their jobs or been unable to work during the pandemic that are able to file for unemployment and receive benefits under the CARE Act, sex workers are unable to file their work since sex work is not considered real work federally.

In order to effectively care for all groups of people during a global pandemic, the government needs to listen to the voices and needs of those groups that are most marginalized. That is why we have reached out to sex workers to get their feedback, better understand their individual situations during this crisis, and listen to any recommendations they may have for policies that could better address the needs of those in precarious situations due to the pandemic.

Demographics

As this was a separate survey from the rest of the surveys conducted for this book, it is important to understand the demographics of the data we will be discussing in this section. The geographic

distribution of participants was primarily along the East and West coast, with significantly fewer participants from the midwest and other regions. A majority of participants were from Rhode Island (17%) and California (17%), with the next largest group of participants being located in Florida (7%), Washington (7%), and Massachusetts (6%).

Additionally, an overwhelming majority of participants were white (79%), 11% were multiracial, 2% were Black, and 2% were Asian. 71% of participants were ciswomen, 10% were nonbinary, 7% agender, 5% cismen, 5% trans women, and 1% trans men. In terms of sexual orientation, 33% were heterosexual, 24% were bisexual, 17% queer, 13% pansexual, 7% homosexual, 3% demisexual, and 1% asexual.

Given the nature of the survey, we were also interested in participants underlying health conditions and knowledge of public health procedures and advice. 20% of the respondents reported that yes they have underlying health conditions that do increase their risk of contracting COVID-19, while 19% reported yes, but it does not increase their likelihood of contracting COVID-19. 53% of respondents reported no they have no underlying health conditions or disabilities and 7% reported no, but that they are at risk due to their age or another factor. When asked if they have been able to follow social distancing and public health guidelines outside of work, 52% reported that they always were able to do so, 37% reported that they were usually able to do so, 8% reported sometimes, 1% reported rarely, and 2% reported they were never able to do so. The participants were then asked whether or not they have reviewed any harm reduction material regarding the transmission of COVID-19 through sex or intimacy. 56% reported that yes they had received information from the sex work community, while 26% had received it from the sex-positive community, 21% from the government, and 13% from the queer community. Only 27% reported that no, they had received no information regarding the transmission of COVID-19 through sex or intimacy. When asked whether or not the respondents had successfully been able to access COVID-19 testing, 76% reported that they had not attempted to get tested, 14% tried and did get tested, while 8% tried and could not get tested.

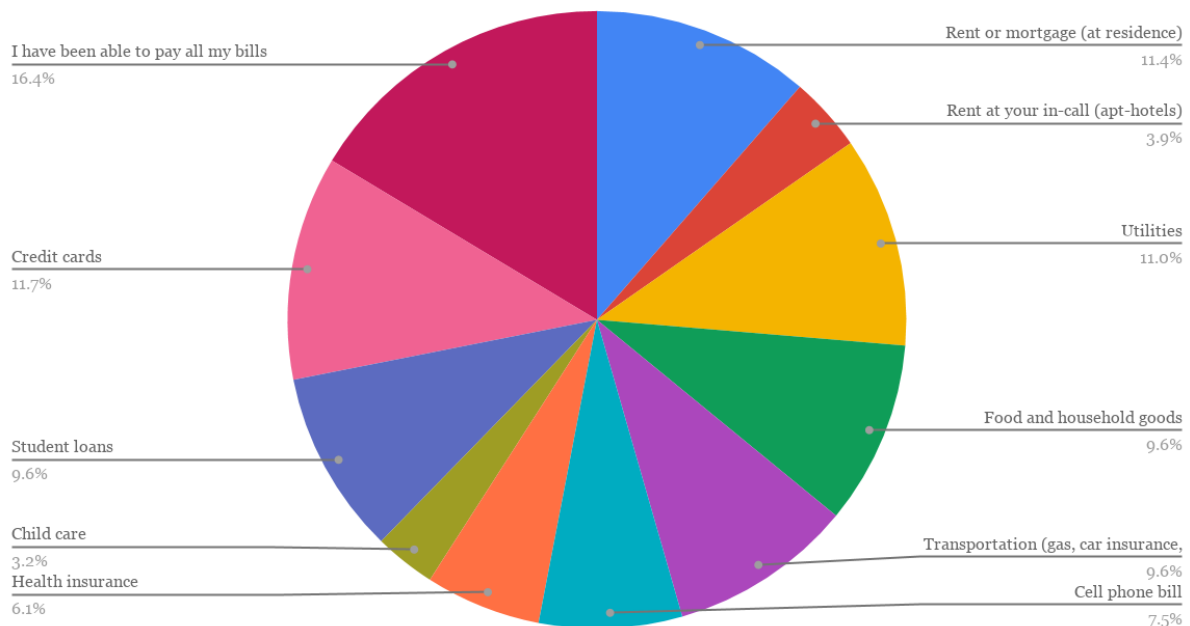
Financial Inquiries

Next we inquired about the participants financial circumstances prior and during the COVID-19 pandemic to get a better sense of if and how the pandemic has caused a financial burden for sex workers. Prior to COVID-19, 66% reported that they did not have trouble making ends meet financially, while 34% did. After the outbreak of COVID-19 the number of participants that reported having difficulty making ends meet financially jumped to 78%. We then gave participants the opportunity to elaborate on how their financial burdens have been affected by COVID-19. Many noted that they were unable to work anymore, that they were relying on unemployment checks, that they are still seeing clients but are having to charge much less, that they have had to turn to work in the streets, that they are having trouble finding clients,

that there is practically no work available and thus zero income, and that they have had to rely on charity or outside assistance to make ends meet.

We then inquired about whether or not the participants have health insurance and found that 73% did have health insurance while the remaining 27% did not. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, 77% of respondents were the sole providers of their families while only 22% were not. During the pandemic that number dropped to 71% of the respondents being the sole providers of their families and 28% not. About half of the respondents only support a household of 1, with 28% reporting 2, 15% reporting 3, and very few responding that they support a household of more than 3. In addition, below is a graph of bill respondents reported they were unable to pay due to COVID-19:

Bills Participants Have Been Unable to Pay Due to COVID-19



During the pandemic, many states instituted temporary bans on evictions, so we inquired about whether or not respondents reside in states that have instituted such policies. 61% responded that yes their state had suspended evictions, 17% responded no, and 22% were unsure. As seen from the graph above, the ability of people to pay bills, including housing bills, during the pandemic has been extremely strained, so instating such measures as this helps to ensure that people are able to make ends meet during the accentuating circumstances caused by the pandemic.

When asked about the COVID-19 stimulus checks from the federal government, 55% reported they had already received some of the stimulus checks, while 23% reported that they expected to. We then inquired about unemployment benefits: 68% of the respondents noted that they were aware of the

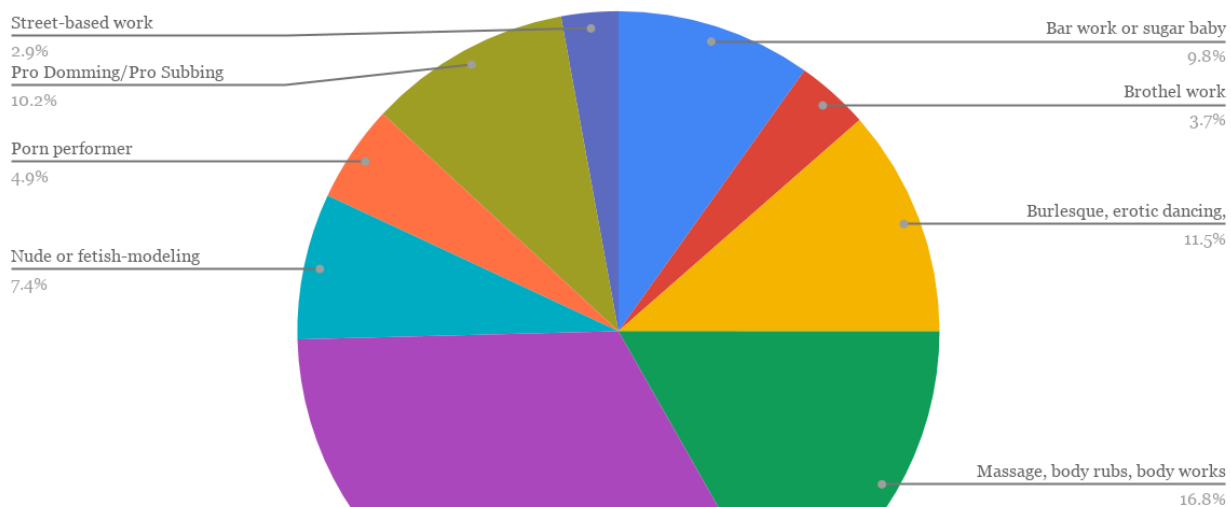
unemployment benefits under the CARE Act, with 40% of the respondents reporting that they had applied for unemployment, 9% had not done so yet but planned to, 44% reported that no they had not with no plans to do so, while the remaining 7% reported no and then were given the capacity to elaborate. Some reasons they provided include having another job and not technically being unemployed or not being able to prove past work, such as sex work. Of those that reported having applied for unemployment, only 29% were approved, with some reporting that they did not know yet or planned to appeal the denial.

Although measures such as bans on evictions have been helpful to those struggling with finances during the pandemic, oftentimes federal policies fail to adequately provide for those in need or allow some marginalized groups to fall through the cracks. Mutual aid networks have been a major source of support in place of more formal aid from the federal or state governments for people during the pandemic, so we also inquired about whether or not any of the respondents had utilized mutual aid for financial support after the outbreak of COVID-19. 66% responded that they had not, 18% noted yes they received aid from a sex worker mutual aid fund, 9% received help from an informal community based mutual aid network, 7% received aid from a non-sex worker specific mutual aid fund, while 10% reported other.

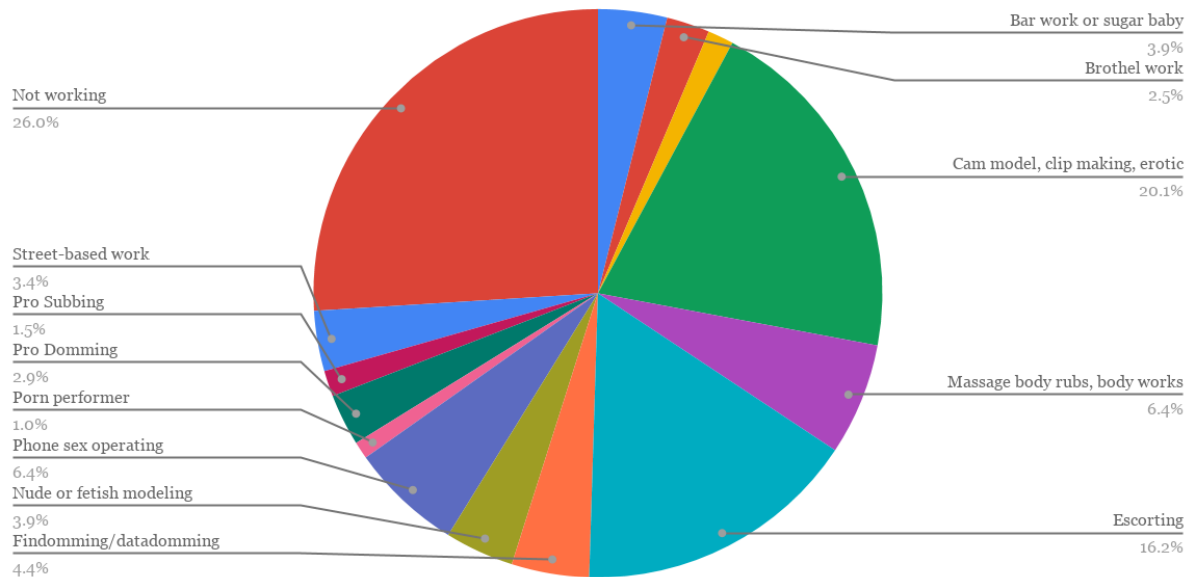
Next, we wanted to know more about the respondent's individual financial situations during the pandemic as they relate specifically to sex work. 68% of the respondents reported that their only means of income prior to COVID-19 was sex work, putting them in a precarious situation given the fact that it is more difficult or impossible to receive unemployment if you do not have adequate proof of work. Additionally, 62% reported that sex work is still their only means of income even during the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that sex workers are having to resort to risking their own health and the health of their loved ones to remain financially stable due to the pandemic as opposed to being able to file for unemployment if sex work was considered a legitimate profession by the federal government.

We inquired about whether or not they had been receiving financial support from regular clients without seeing them in person. Although 43% responded no, 32% reported yes they received money as a gift, 17% reported their regular clients have been paying them for phone, text, or video services/content, and 8% reported that their regular clients have prepaid for future sessions.

Type of Work Respondent's Were Doing Prior to COVID-19



Type of Sex Work Respondent's are Engaging in During COVID-19



The two graphs depicted above show the change in types of sex work that respondents were participating in prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is apparent that although many individuals continued to do in-person work, more people attempted to transition to more online-based work, such as phone sex operating, findomming/datadomming, or cam-modeling.

We wanted to get a sense of what the clientele pool looked like during the pandemic so we asked what kind of client inquiries the respondents were still receiving. A majority (62%) reported that they were taking new clients that were trying to book with no regard for health risks, 44% said regular clients trying to book with no regard for health risks, 43% said regular clients trying to book who inquire or provide some information about the respondents or their health risks, 32% said clients who are lying or being coercive to try to get respondents to provide unsafe services, 23% were new clients who tried to book and provided or asked for some information about the respondents or their own virus risk, and only 19% responded that they had received no inquiries. This feedback is alarming as a wide breadth of the respondents reported they were receiving inquiries from clients who showed little or no regard for the health risks at hand. Sex workers are being put in tough situations where they have to either risk their own health and safety or pass on much-needed clients during a time with little to no work.

Mental Health During COVID-19

COVID-19 has exacerbated mental health issues around the globe, so we decided to inquire about respondents' level of distress during the pandemic. We had them rate their distress on a scale of 1-10, with 10 being the most distressed and 1 being the least. Most respondents' answers fell above 5, with 7 being the highest with 25% and 3 being the lowest with 2%. From this it is apparent that most of the respondent's mental health has been compromised due to the pandemic, whether that be due to financial stress, fear of contracting the disease, distress from isolation, or other related mental health issues.

Domestic, Mental, and Physical Abuse During COVID-19

Given the nature of social distancing, many people have been forced to remain in harmful situations at home where they receive physical or mental domestic abuse. 89% of respondents reported that they did not experience domestic violence, however, 3% have experienced the same domestic violence as before, 4% reported the domestic violence situation has been exacerbated by the pandemic, and 4% reported they experienced domestic violence in their relationship for the first time during the pandemic.

As for harm and violence received at the hand of clients, 28% reported they experienced new harm or violence after the onset of COVID-19. Some respondents elaborated on the harm they have been receiving from clients:

Some of the clients want unsafe sex and if I say no they just fuck me anyway and dont pay me also I have to do ass work which is something I never did before.

Harassing by text and phone.

'Now that you need money, will you finally do those things you said NO to before?'

They make me work for less money and a lot of them fuck me in the ass and is I refused they hit me real hard I got bruises to prove it, they know that I need the money and that I can't go to the police. Some don't pay me at all and I am afraid all the time of getting kill because a lot of the clients I don't know anything about.

I had a client rob me via a PayPal chargeback after the virus lockdown went to effect. It was 1700.

I saw a regular client a few days ago for the first time since COVID-19 he started increasingly drinking until drunk, started screaming in my face, and physically pushed me out his front door.

Even for respondents who have not been taking clients, the client's negligence of sex workers' health is a serious concern, "I haven't seen any clients. But, I find it irritating that they keep contacting me to see when I am going to work again when we are all still at risk to spread Covid-19. And that they aren't really concerned about my safety and welfare."

Stigmatization of Sex Work During COVID-19

Similarly to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, we were wondering if the COVID-19 pandemic had caused any increased stigmatization of sex work in society. 30% of respondents reported “yes” and were given the capacity to elaborate if they chose to do so:

Some know what work I do and tell me to keep away from them because they think that I am sick

People making ‘casual’ comments like ‘I’m sure you’re even more at risk.’

My partner demonizes me for even thinking about working at any point in the future. I can't even mention my work without him getting angry and accusing me of being a disease vector or worse. Millions of people are unemployed and 10 years ago I started escorting because I was in debt and had no way out, and I improved my life so much and I was so stable. Now I am lost and financially decimated, and I can't even talk about it because I'm accused of being disgusting and dangerous. And when I see other sex workers on Facebook shaming people on the street for not wearing masks, I know damn well they won't be receptive to my desperation to start working again.

Only from other SWers. One girl actually called someone a “disease vector” for working during the pandemic.

People are saying we are spreading disease and saying ‘just like we use to spread aids’.

Not only are sex workers receiving increased stigmatization from non-sex workers, but even sex workers themselves are demonizing and stigmatizing those that work during the pandemic, even if that is many people’s only option to make ends meet.

Next, we asked about whether or not respondents are still taking clients, and if so what types of clients and what precautions are they taking to minimize risks of contracting COVID-19. 60% of the respondents reported that they are not still taking clients in person, only 2% reported that they are taking in-person clients because they believe the coronavirus is a conspiracy theory, 10% reported taking in-person clients because they are not high risk, and 29% reported taking in-person clients because they have no other options.

We then inquired about safety precautions respondents that are still having in-person clients are taking:

- ❖ 54% have clients wash their hands when they arrive
- ❖ 40% have clients shower when they arrive
- ❖ 14% have clients wear a face mask
- ❖ 16% wear a facemask themselves

- ❖ 51% have a no kissing rule
- ❖ 46% ask them about their recent travel and social distancing measures they are taking
- ❖ 32% only see a certain number of clients a day
- ❖ 40% disinfect incall between clients
- ❖ 13% outcall only
- ❖ 48% reported other measures or additional measures and were given the capacity to elaborate:

Dom only clients in person due to the convenience. No skin contact. Masks required at all times. Complete sterilization of all surfaces and items also placed in two UV germicidal cabinets in addition to usual cleaning and disinfection.

I also purchased an infrared thermometer to take temps.

I remain clothed, not mutual touch. in addition to the above things.

Limiting the number of my sessions to two per week, to lower the probability.

Only working one shift per week in an incall, limited appointments with masks, and thorough washing/ cleaning.

One person per location (hotel). Get there very early and disinfect room.

Increased recruitment by pimps was another concern during such a financially insecure time, 18% of respondents answered “yes” when asked whether or not they have seen an increase in recruitment by pimps during the pandemic. Of those that responded “yes”, only 9% reported they felt they were more vulnerable to their advances than before and 4% reported they have begun working with a pimp since after the shutdown. 21% of respondents also reported that they have been forced to take riskier clients since the onset of the pandemic. 9% reported that their regular clients are still calling at the same rate, 56% reported yes but not as much as usual, 26% said their phone doesn’t ring at all anymore, and 8% said it was slow for a while but things are picking up again.

Given the mass transition to online work in other professional fields, we asked whether or not individuals had transitioned to online sex work: 7% responded yes and that they have been able to make ends meet, 17% responded yes, but that they have not been able to make ends meet from just doing online work, 16% have done a combination of online and in-person sex work, 45% said no, that they have relied on savings and/or aid, 15% responded no and that they have continued working in-person. Some chose to elaborate on their specific situations giving explanations such as: they do not have the correct technology and equipment to effectively transition to online work, some responded that they have attempted to

switch, but have not been very successful, and one respondent reported, “It takes years to build online work to the income. I’m currently making so little it’s not as much of an option as people think.”

Prior to COVID-19, 80% of respondents screened their clients, however, during the pandemic this number dropped to 63% with 8% reporting yes but not as often. Additionally, 46% reported that clients have been trying to get lower rates and pushing personal boundaries during the pandemic. Some anecdotes from respondents include:

Yes now, all they want is fuck me in the ass with no protection at the beginning of the pandemic I use to say no and for my troubles, I got rape a couple of times now I just take it because I need the money.

One guy offered me 20% of my regular rate.

I have a client who now wants to pay my 1hr rate I had 10yrs ago for a gomin appt. He is still working and has income and I feel he is taking advantage of the situation.

One client has tried to date me, acting like we could be in a relationship, telling me he has all this money to spend but no one to get physical affection from...etc guilt trips. He once started talking suicidal.

The pandemic has placed a lot of sex workers in precarious situations where they are having to risk their own safety by not screening clients and dealing with pushy clients who are not respecting their personal boundaries.

Recommendations from Sex Workers

We wanted to get input from the respondents on what measures they thought could be adopted by the federal government to ensure all sex workers are covered by the relief aid offered in the Care Act. Respondents were given a list of choices and the capacity to check all that apply: 85% of respondents noted they felt universal basic income for all adults would be helpful, 75% felt a rent freeze would be helpful, 65% reported eviction freezes would also be helpful, 67% reported coverage of COVID-19 related medical costs, 66% reported coverage of all medical costs, and 20% gave other suggestions. These other suggestions included Medicaid for all, student and consumer debt discharge, expanded housing assistance, legal assistance, expansion of unemployment benefits to cover non-traditional jobs (such as cleaning houses, childcare, or under-the-table jobs), and the suspension of the criminalization of sex work.

We also asked for their input on other policies they feel would benefit sex workers during the pandemic. It is important for legislators to know how sex workers are being affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and how the federal government can better provide services for sex workers during national

crises, so we felt inquiring directly about this was a vital aspect of amplifying the voices of sex workers during a global pandemic. Some of the suggestions they had include:

- ❖ Decriminalize sex work in general, but especially during such national crises.
- ❖ Treat sex work the same as any other profession and provide them with the same rights.
- ❖ Dismantle FOSTA
- ❖ Universal Basic Income
- ❖ Find ways to aid those with illegal immigration statuses and abolish ICE
- ❖ More community support surrounding mental health, emergency housing, emotional support, money management/planning in the environment of a pandemic, etc.
- ❖ Release of incarcerated individuals on prostitution-related charges
- ❖ Use abandoned hotels and buildings for the vulnerable homeless population
- ❖ End policing of sex work
- ❖ Free, accessible COVID-19 testing for everyone

The decriminalization and decarceration of sex work and those incarcerated due to sex work is something that needs to be addressed beyond the confines of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, during such a national crisis, it is more important than ever that sex workers are able to receive unemployment and be treated as real professionals with jobs covered by federal aid. Universal Basic Income, the abolition of ICE, mutual/community aid, and accessible COVID-19 testing, are measures that would go beyond the scope of sex workers and benefit other marginalized groups as well. The needs of those involved in the sex industry thus overlap and are intertwined with other issues facing our society on the whole and should be addressed now more than ever as the entire globe is suffering through one of the largest global crises in history.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the challenges that vulnerable populations face. Although COVID-19 has affected everyone, there are certain groups that have been impacted more than others. Sex workers fall under the category of vulnerable populations that have been impacted immensely by COVID-19 and that have oftentimes fallen through the cracks in terms of receiving adequate aid from the federal government during such a precarious time. In order to amplify the voices of sex workers and learn directly from those most impacted about what exact measures can and should be taken by the government during these difficult times, we issued out the survey that we have analyzed in this chapter to help better understand how the coronavirus has affected the sex industry.

The criminalization of sex work, stigmatization, and belief that sex work is not real work that prevails in this country has prevented many sex workers from receiving adequate assistance during the pandemic, forcing many sex workers to take on clients and put themselves in harm's way just to make ends meet.

Policy Recommendations