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EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE AMONG TRANS AND NON-BINARY SEX WORKERS IN CANADA:

An Intersectional Perspective



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The Study

Over a 10-week period in 2019, the Trans PULSE Canada research team collected survey data from 2,873 trans and non-binary people age 14 years or older and living in Canada. Participants were able to complete the survey or a 10-minute short form online, on paper, via telephone (with or without a language interpreter), or on a tablet with a Peer Research Associate (only in major cities). The survey was available in English or French. This report focuses on data from 2,012 participants aged 16+ who completed the full survey. The Trans PULSE Canada survey included questions from the Ontario's Trans PULSE project, questions from Statistics Canada surveys to allow for comparisons to the general population, and questions developed by trans and non-binary people based on community priorities. This report was created by the team's Sex Worker Priority Population Team, including current and former sex workers.

The Research Question

In 2014, Canada adopted a new sex work law (the "Protection of Communities and Exploited Persons Act", or PCEPA) that claims to protect sex workers by only criminalizing clients.¹ Sex workers and allies have challenged so-called "end-demand" legislation, arguing that it continues to place sex workers - particularly marginalized workers - at risk of violence and to limit access to emergency response services.² Although trans and non-binary sex workers may be particularly impacted by criminalization and violence, data on the specific experiences of trans and non-binary sex workers have been lacking. To fill this gap, we used data from the Trans PULSE Canada survey to describe participants' experiences of violence in the previous five years. Our approach was guided by intersectionality, a framework for understanding and addressing multiple, co-occurring forms of oppression such as transphobia, sexism, racism, sex

work stigma, and classism. Therefore, we compared experiences by sex work history as well as type of work, ethnoracial group, and sex assigned at birth.

The data in this report come from a larger paper on experiences of violence and access to justice among trans and non-binary sex workers, available freely online in English at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-023-00795-2>. A companion community report on police experiences is available in English and French at transpulsecanada.ca/results/community-report-police-experiences-among-trans-and-non-binary-sex-workers-in-canada.

How to Interpret

Although Trans PULSE Canada used multiple approaches to make the survey accessible, it was not possible to conduct a random sample of the trans and non-binary population. Therefore, results cannot be assumed to represent true population demographics. For instance, that 16% of participants included in this analysis had done sex work does not mean exactly 16% of all trans and non-binary people in Canada have done sex work. It is also important to note that this report only contains data from participants who completed the full version of the survey, and current sex workers were more likely to complete the short version.

In this report, we use figures to describe the study findings. Not all differences between groups that appear in the figures are statistically significant. Differences that are statistically significant are less likely to be due to chance alone. All of the differences that we mention in the text of this report are statistically significant. Differences that are not statistically significant should be cautiously interpreted; they may mean that no true difference exists or that the number of participants in each group was too small to detect a difference.

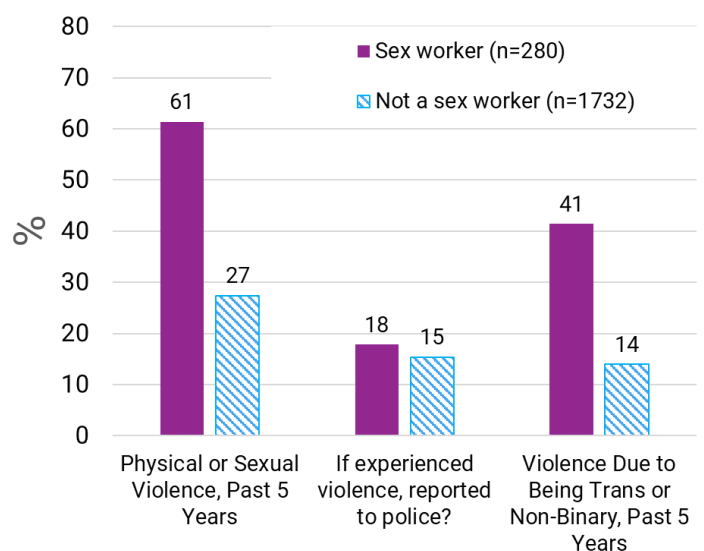
The Findings

Among 2,012 participants, 280 (16%) had ever done sex work. Of sex workers, 64% were assigned female at birth, 54% were non-binary, 15% were Indigenous, and 13% were non-Indigenous racialized people. Non-Indigenous racialized participants identified as Black African (20% of racialized sex workers and 5% of racialized non-sex-workers), Black Caribbean (9% and 6%), Black Canadian or American (11% and 5%), East Asian (14% and 33%), Indo-Caribbean (11% and 3%), Latin American (11% and 12%), Middle Eastern (17% and 10%), South Asian (20% and 17%), and/or Southeast Asian (11% and 12%).

As shown in **Figure 1**, trans and non-binary participants overall had experienced high levels of violence in the previous five years but sex workers were significantly more likely to experience any physical or sexual violence (61% versus 27% among other participants) and violence related to being trans or non-binary (41% versus 14%).

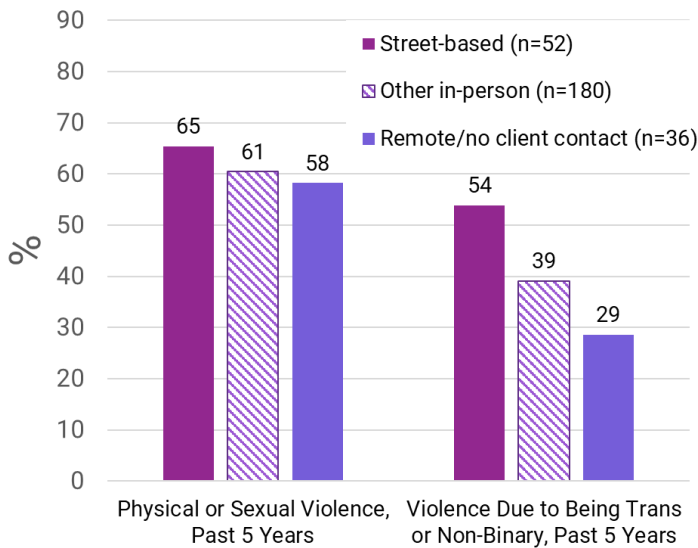
Among participants who had experienced violence in the past 5 years, only 16% had reported at least one incident to the police, and this did not vary significantly across any of the groups we compared.

Figure 1: Violence by Sex Work History



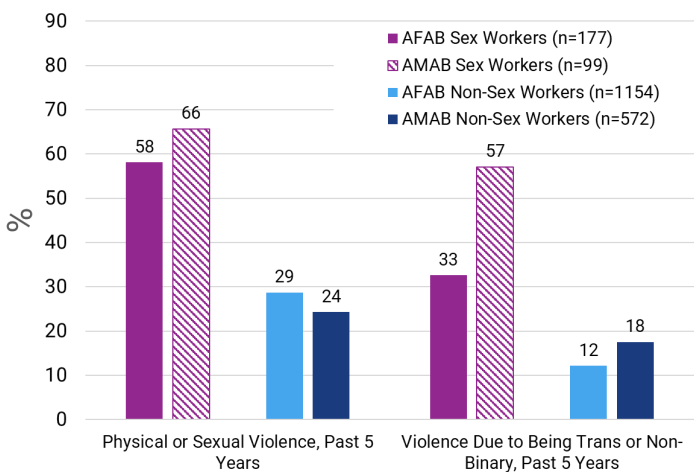
When comparing sex workers by type of work (Figure 2), we found that participants who did street-based work were significantly more likely to have experienced violence because they are trans or non-binary (54% vs. 39% of other in-person workers and 29% of remote workers).

Figure 2: Violence by Type of Sex Work



Next, we looked at differences by both sex assigned at birth and sex work (Figure 3). There were no statistically significant differences between AFAB and AMAB participants in experiences of violence for any reason. However, AMAB participants were more likely to have experienced violence due to being trans or non-binary in the previous five years, particularly among sex workers (57% of AMAB sex workers versus 33% of AFAB sex workers).

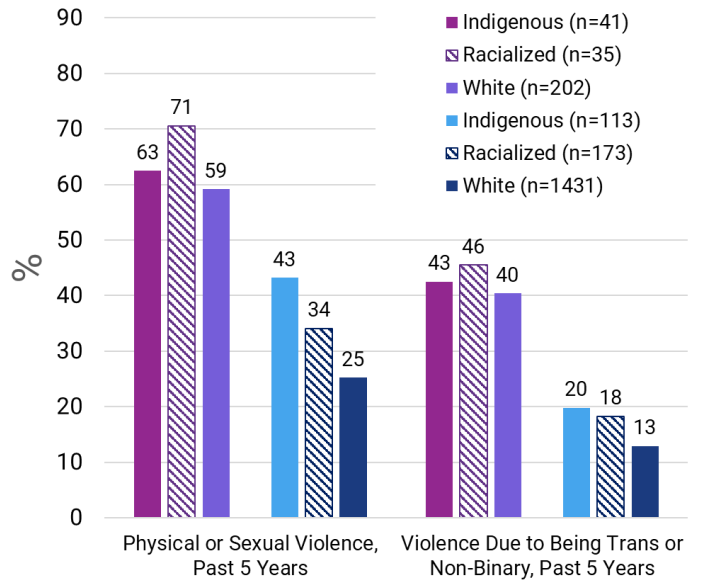
Figure 3: Violence By Sex Assigned at



*Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB); Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB)

Figure 4 breaks down the results by ethnoracial group and sex work history. Among sex workers, there were no statistically significant differences in experiences of violence based on ethnoracial group. In contrast, Indigenous (43%) and racialized (34%) non-sex-workers experienced higher levels of physical or sexual violence for any reason than their white peers (25%).

Figure 4: Violence by Ethnoracial Group



The Implications

Trans PULSE Canada participants experienced high levels of violence overall, but levels were far higher among sex workers. Indicating the importance of an intersectional approach, we found differences among sex workers, specifically that transfeminine and other AMAB sex workers, as well as street-based workers, were more likely to have experienced transphobic violence in the previous five years. These findings highlight the combined impacts of sex work stigma and transmisogyny, as well as the disproportionate impacts of criminalization on street-based workers.

There are a number of actions that organizations and governments can take to prevent violence against

trans and non-binary sex workers and to support them when violence does occur. One approach is the development and ongoing funding of sex worker-friendly violence prevention and response services that do not involve police (see the companion community report, **Police Experiences Among Trans and Non-Binary Sex Workers in Canada: An Intersectional Perspective** available at transpulsecanada.ca/results/community-report-police-experiences-among-trans-and-non-binary-sex-workers-in-canada). These include bad date reporting systems, which collect and distribute reports of violence to the community and connect survivors with support resources without police involvement. Bad date reporting has been implemented by sex work organizations across Canada such as Stella (Montreal), Maggie's (Toronto), SWAP Hamilton, WISH (Vancouver), and Peers (Victoria).

To prevent violence experienced by street-based sex workers in particular, housing and shelter policies should eliminate curfews, let residents bring clients to their rooms, implement enforceable and clear non-discrimination policies, and potentially create housing programs focused on sex workers and/or trans and non-binary people, such as the WISH shelter in Vancouver. Bystander intervention training for people who may witness violence against sex workers could also help prevent violence against street-based workers.

We also recommend development and funding of peer-based counseling and support services by and for trans and non-binary sex workers, which can serve to combat isolation, provide a space to share safety tactics, assist with community organizing, and provide a safe space removed from the intersection of anti-sex work stigma and anti-trans stigma that can limit access to general sex work and general trans supports.³

Finally, it is critical to repeal provisions of PCEPA that place sex workers at risk of violence. Criminalizing the purchase of sex makes clients want to remain anonymous, making it harder for workers to screen them. Prohibitions on working near daycares or schools, stopping traffic, or hiring third parties (e.g., drivers, security) can force sex workers to work in greater isolation and in more dangerous circumstances.³ In addition, restrictions on advertising sexual services prevent sex workers from working together to improve safety.⁴ These provisions are currently being challenged in an Ontario court case. For more information on the campaign to reform sex work laws in Canada, visit sexworklawreform.com.

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