

# Vancouver sex workers could benefit from heading indoors, study finds

## Indoor sex workers face less violence, exposure to HIV, says new study

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Indoor sex workers face potentially life-saving benefits, including less violence, reduced exposure to HIV and improved relationships with police, says a new Vancouver study.

**Photograph by:** Simon Hayter for National Post, .

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VANCOUVER — Indoor sex workers face potentially life-saving benefits, including less violence, reduced exposure to HIV and improved relationships with police, according to a new Vancouver study.

The study, published Wednesday in the *American Journal of Public Health*, was conducted by the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) and the University of British Columbia.

The study interviewed 39 women who previously worked on the street and now are living in two Downtown Eastside buildings operated by Atira Women's Resource Society and RainCity Housing and Support Society.

The buildings are women-only, including residents and staff, and have for 10 years offered supportive guest policies that allow women to conduct sex work in their rooms. Policies in place also require clients to sign-in at the front desk and the buildings have 24-hour staff available to call police if there is violence, as well as on-site security cameras.

The study, based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with the women conducted between July 2009 and March 2010, shows that indoor sex work is much safer for women than working on the street and negotiating through car windows.

“This is a really innovative model where sex workers are being able to operate in the confines of their own rooms and have supportive policies allowing them to do that,” Kate Shannon, the senior author of the study and assistant professor of medicine at UBC, said Wednesday.

The study is timely since the Missing Women inquiry is currently probing the issue of violence against vulnerable street sex workers and the conditions that allowed so many of them to become prey for serial killer Robert Pickton, said Shannon. She earlier testified at the inquiry to share findings from previous research that showed lack of safe indoor options for street sex workers is directly associated with elevated rates of violence, HIV risk and displacement.

The newest study found the supportive housing programs increased women’s control over negotiating sex-work transactions, including refusing to perform unwanted services, negotiating condom use and avoiding violent predators.

That contrasts dramatically with the safety afforded to women who negotiate sex work in clients’ cars, dark alleys and industrial areas, Shannon said.

“The evidence is clear: We need to scale up access to safer sex-work spaces and remove legal barriers to their formal implementation and evaluation.”

Shannon pointed out the women in the study had previously worked the streets while living in single-room occupancy hotels dominated by men at the front desk, who charged them to bring in clients or refused to allow guests.

“Now the sex workers are working in their own spaces,” Shannon said, adding managers and support staff in the Atira and RainCity buildings don’t see money changing hands and so cannot be charged with living off the avails of prostitution.

Last March, Vancouver police issued new sex-worker enforcement guidelines encouraging officers to treat sex-trade workers with dignity and enforce the law prohibiting soliciting as a last resort.

Since bringing in the supportive policies for women 10 years ago, there hasn’t been a serious incident of violence, said Janice Abbott of Atira Women’s Resource Society.

The policies were put in place “to allow women to have control over their lives,” she said, and were adopted after one street sex worker was attacked with a bicycle chain by a man who refused to pay.

She required 300 stitches, Abbott said.

[nhall@vancouver.sun.com](mailto:nhall@vancouver.sun.com)

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