



Living in  
Community

**Living in Community Submission to  
TogetherBC: BC's Poverty Reduction Strategy, Five Year Review**

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On behalf of Living in Community, we are writing to offer recommendations to update TogetherBC: B.C.'s Poverty Reduction Strategy.

## ***Background***

Living in Community (LIC) is a provincial non-profit organization based in Vancouver. Centering sex workers' rights, Living in Community convenes diverse stakeholders in order to: understand a range of experiences and perspectives; inform sex work-related policies and practices of governments, service providers, and community organizations; and provide education and training to support these goals. We focus on root causes of issues including colonization, capitalism, criminalization, racism, and discrimination that create systemic vulnerability for sex workers, and we seek to build understanding and common ground with other community members.

LIC also facilitates the BC Sex Work Support Service Network, a group of twenty-five organizations that provide frontline services, supports, and advocacy with and for sex workers in their communities. Network members are located in every region across British Columbia as well as in the Yukon. The Network meets regularly to share best practices, learn from each other, and strengthen our unified voice for sex workers' rights across BC.

## *Sex work and poverty*

For the vast majority of sex workers, the number one reason for selling or trading sexual services is the simple need to earn a living to meet one's daily needs. However, poverty – especially generational poverty – is a strong push factor that can cause some people to turn to selling or trading sex, even if it's the last thing they want to be doing.<sup>1</sup> Survival sex work is defined as a consistent inability to refuse sex work in dangerous circumstances due to financial desperation, and this can contribute to increased violence against sex workers as they end up seeing riskier clients in order to make ends meet.

Living in Community envisions a world where everyone is free to make choices about how best to support themselves financially. We believe that sex workers, even those currently living in poverty or in difficult situations, are making the best choices for themselves given their circumstances, and we support everyone's autonomy to do so. However, poverty severely limits peoples' access to options, making sex work an uncomfortable last choice for some. Working in sex work should be a choice that consenting adults are free to make, not a last resort due to poverty, criminalization, and other systemic factors.

Aside from survival sex work, some sex workers choose to supplement their employment income or disability or income assistance payments by doing sex work. Especially with the recent historic levels of inflation, both paid employment and government assistance levels are often too low to make ends meet with one income stream or assistance program alone. Sex workers in this situation are often left with pervasive anxiety about whether to report their sex

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<sup>1</sup> McCarthy, B., Benoit, C., & Jansson, M. (2014). Sex work: A comparative study. *Archives of sexual behavior*, 43, 1379-1390.

work income to governments as they have justifiable concerns about onerous clawbacks, in addition to concerns about privacy, stigma, and criminalization. Increasing the earning exemptions for people on assistance would help alleviate these concerns and ensure a fairer system for sex workers and others patching together a living through multiple income streams.

However, at the moment, income and disability rates remain below the poverty line and do not allow people to live in dignity. As a result, many sex workers rely on support from community organizations and spend time away from work to line up for meals or services. Being poor can sometimes be a full-time job.

### *Recent developments in the cost of living*

Inflation, particularly for groceries, means that individuals must stretch an already meagre income or disability assistance payment even further. Thus, poverty frequently leads to food insecurity for sex workers. A 2019 study from the Gender and Sexual Health Initiative found that of 761 cisgender and transgender women sex workers surveyed in Metro Vancouver, 72.4% were food insecure over the study period. Over a third identified as Indigenous and a quarter were of a gender or sexual minority.<sup>2</sup> In response, sex work support organizations have stepped in to help fill the food gap by offering meal programs, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when these needs intensified and many other community organizations were closed.

The pandemic also caused extreme financial hardship for many sex workers. Their source of income was cut off, and they were not able to rely on income supports such as CERB, EI, or the BC Emergency Benefit because they did not qualify. Many also struggled to access community services because frontline organizations had to reduce their services and hours. In addition, sex workers cannot access coverage under the employment protections that other workers have access to, such as employment standards regulations, occupational health and safety standards, or the ability to unionize or work collectively. This all contributes to the poverty that many sex workers experience.

Poverty is an ever-present pressure in the lives of some sex workers, and financial desperation can lead to sex workers engaging with riskier clients and riskier behaviours simply to get by. Thus, poverty, financial desperation, and violence are inextricably linked in the lives of many BC sex workers.

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<sup>2</sup> Barreto, D., Shoveller, J., Braschel, M., Duff, P., & Shannon, K. (2019). The effect of violence and intersecting structural inequities on high rates of food insecurity among marginalized sex workers in a Canadian setting. *Journal of urban health*, 96, 605-615.

## ***Recommendations***

We echo the following recommendations made by the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition, of which we are also a member:

### **1. Raise social and disability income assistance rates to the poverty line.**

Social and disability income assistance rates are insufficient for people to live on in dignity. This leaves many people on income assistance with few options except to turn to grey economy activities, such as sex work, to help make ends meet. No one should be living below the poverty line and be forced to do any type of work they may not want to in order to survive.

We further recommend increasing the earning exemptions for people on assistance such that sex workers are not penalized for making ends meet with additional work when assistance rates are too low.

### **2. Address discrimination and stigma by adding social condition to the BC Human Rights Code.**

All sex workers are stigmatized, often either as criminals or as victims. Street-based sex workers, who remain the most visible, are most heavily stigmatized both for their participation in sex work and for being poor. This leads to discrimination based on social condition by police and the criminal justice system, in addition to other institutions. Many BIPOC and LGBTQ2S sex workers face intersecting oppressions as well.

Everyone, no matter their social condition, deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. Adding social condition to the BC Human Rights Code will create a mechanism to address this discrimination and will empower poor people.

### **3. Accelerate a massive expansion of affordable non-market housing.**

Many street-based sex workers are homeless, underhoused, or are living in substandard housing that is unsanitary, infested with vermin, and unsafe, particularly for women. For sex workers, being able to bring a client into their own space is far safer than doing sex work on the street, and yet many sex workers live in housing where there are guest bans; this means they are forced to work on the streets where there is more danger. Some individuals may be trading sex simply to have a place to sleep overnight in circumstances where they can exercise little choice. Other sex workers may be couch-surfing or staying in shelters where rates of sexual assault is very high.

The housing crisis in BC is immense and will require real commitment to ensuring that everyone has safe and dignified housing, but it can be done.

#### **4. Make public transit fare-free and create a publicly owned inter-city or inter-regional bus service.**

We hear from the BC Sex Work Support Services Network frequently about women trading sex for a ride, especially in northern BC. Given the many disappearances of women, particularly Indigenous women, along Highway 16, this is very concerning to us. Bus service in rural areas is insufficient to the need and can sometimes be cost prohibitive for people living in poverty.

A free bus system between cities and communities would allow people to travel safely without trading sex as the only option for some to obtain transportation.

#### ***Conclusion***

While many individuals freely and enthusiastically work in sex work, poverty acts as a push factor that leads some people to engage in sex work as a last resort. Ideally, all individuals should be free to choose to engage in sex work out of a range of employment options to which they have access. Being forced by circumstances beyond one's control to engage in sex work leaves these individuals more vulnerable to violence and exploitation.

We echo the above recommendations of the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition as these actions would best support lifting sex workers out of poverty. We draw particular attention to the recommendation to raise the income and disability rates to at least the poverty rate to immediately improve the lives of sex workers living in poverty.

Sex work is heavily criminalized in Canada by federal laws, and sex workers must contend with this heavy burden as well. While the provincial government cannot change the federal laws, it has significant opportunity to increase the safety and dignity of those working in the sex industry through ensuring that provincial laws and policies provide for an adequate minimum standard of living for all, such that everyone is able to freely choose the work they engage in.