

VANCOUVER EASTSIDE MISSING WOMEN

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Research report into violence against sex trade workers in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

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Complete report available at PACE Society

FORWARD

PACE Society, since its inception, has driven the movement toward systemic change in social attitudes, treatment, and the condition with which women and children who are trapped in cycles of sexual exchange are forced to live. The ability to involve our client-base has led to success in governance, service provision, research and social empowerment.

The former sex workers that founded PACE Society were committing to eliminating the conditions of rape, mutilation, assault, and death. All those who have taken up this challenge are also faced with political unpopularity, frustration, ridicule, and the realities that the general lack of resources and community support afford them.

We hope that abolitionists will draw from the findings in this report and realize that the war on sex buyers has only added to the disempowerment of sex workers through victimization. Enforcement methodology is extinct, and has not solved the problem. In actuality, 'shame the johns' campaigns have been harmful to our population by shifting the focus away from violence and issues of economic security for women.

We hope that this research will give a clearer picture of the rates of violence faced by the sellers of sex, and highlight the lack of coordinated efforts to reduce these numbers.

We hope that the voices of sex workers will not be silenced but included in the agendas of women's equality groups that are directed towards egalitarianism.

We hope for the inclusion of all genders in this plight; we do not believe we must exclude men to include women and the transgendered.

On behalf of PACE Society we would like to honor the over 200 sex workers that were able to give input into this research. Additionally we would like to thank Paige Latin, our founder, for her vision and personal sacrifice, Leonard Cler-Cunningham for his efforts in bringing this project to fruition, and the staff, Board of Directors and volunteers at PACE Society who dedicate their time to the fulfillment of our mandate that calls for "harm reduction and the abolition of conditions that lead to prostitution". We would also like to thank Status of Women for their contribution and support of this project.

Raven R. Bowen
Projects Coordinator

A child with her innocence stolen arrives on the streets of Vancouver alone, frightened and feeling worthless. Having very few options open for survival, she begins selling her body.

Her body is something desired by perverted older men and brought in enough money to have a warm, semi-clean motel room. She earns enough money to eat and clothe herself. Within days, the pain and humiliation of selling her flesh is too much to bear. Getting high helps mask some of the feelings of despair.

So much pain from past association with adults; that the idea of adults helping is a joke to be laughed at. Adults were the ones that had created the gaping holes in her esteem and heart. Having died many times already, there are feelings that physical death will be the only way to stop the hurt, the hurt that is part of every waking moment of life.

A deviant and criminal in the eyes of society because you are a female, teenaged runaway, Authorities take this to mean that you cannot be trusted or be reliable. Many members of society were the criminals in early life, crimes committed for which no one was ever charged, the damage done to these women by sick adults perpetuates the damage they continue to do to themselves. A sick individual takes a life and causes so many people to be devastated with the loss of another beautiful young woman.

A woman stated that the physical pain that she endured at the hand of men was not so bad: "that pain heals". I was not able to help this woman but maybe in some way, I will be able to help save another young woman.

These women deserve the same worth afforded to all other people. No woman should be defined as worthy or worthless because of substance use and/or prostitution. Women do not wake up one morning and decide to be a drug-addicted prostitute. They do wake up mornings wanting to have people look at them with empathy, compassion and respect. The same way they look at others.

-Christine Christensen -April 7, 2001

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The reality for a woman offering sex for sale on the streets of Vancouver is that she can be murdered and there's little chance that anyone will be prosecuted. She can be raped knowing that the police will likely not protect her. She can be chased from neighborhood to neighborhood as the purveyor of disease, destroyer of families, or a brainwashed victim to be rescued from the ravages of patriarchy. Endless reports have found that the non-profit agencies that should be helping her are often too busy squabbling amongst themselves rather than coordinating their efforts.

Residents feeling under siege, a rate of rape and assault that would shame third world nations, an expanding list of murdered and missing women, and an international embarrassment of infectious disease transmission rates are the consequences of misguided laws and ill thought out social policies.

Four years ago the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver was declared a medical health disaster with the highest reported HIV/HEPC infection rates in the Western world and the subsequent \$3 million spent on HIV prevention services is accepted as having had little or no impact.

Over 4700 injection drug users (IDUs) are estimated to live in the area and, until a recent drop, overdose deaths outstripped all other North American cities. Research in Vancouver indicates that 80% of female IDUs report being active in the sex trade, and this population accounts for one the highest percentage increases of new HIV infections in Canada.

A report released last month by British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDs established that Vancouver is the only city in the developed world where the HIV infection rate among female injection drug users far outstrips that of men - a consequence ascribed to our street level sex trade conditions.

The law in Canada was created in 1984, and it's important to remember that while prostitution is legal in Canada, the bawdy house portion makes it against the law to buy or sell sex in off-street settings and the communicating section does the same for the buying or selling of sex in public.

It is our opinion that this system of quasi-criminalization bears a direct responsibility for the violent conditions suffered by women in Vancouver's street level sex trade.

A Vancouver newspaper has identified that since 1989 at least 35 sex workers have been slain. If one included information from Vice Unit files and RCMP (Canadian police agencies) data the number increases to 60 murdered sex workers since January 1982 - the majority of their murders remain unsolved (Lowman and Fraser).

In 1994 Paige Latin brought together former sex workers and their allies committed to doing something about the lack of relevant services and founded Prostitution Alternatives Counselling and Education (PACE) Society. With a mandatory minimum representation of 1/3 former or current sex workers on their board of directors, PACE presciently recognized the limitations of agencies relying on top-down programs developed by 'experts' opting to embrace innovative bottom-up peer-based programs.

Within 7 years, and no support from the City, PACE began to garner recognition. An independent evaluation of the Ministry of Children and Families' Vancouver Action Plan on Sexually Exploited Youth called for immediate expansion of their outreach and advocacy program targeting youth in the survival sex trade.

In a national report on the sex trade their innovative method for working with resident groups and neighborhood police was recognized as model for dealing with the impact of sex workers on residential neighborhoods. The Mount Pleasant community, a residential neighborhood in which they are based, appreciated their contribution enough to give them the service agency of the year award (1998).

In Vancouver violence against street-level sex trade workers has long been accepted as pervasive. We wanted to gain a better understanding of the conditions under which this violence occurs. Who is it committing these violent acts? What is being done about the violence? Why is this level of violence allowed to continue? How was this allowed to happen?

We were looking for a new model of doing research that could respond to the issue of violence – one that was propelled by the needs of the women and not the researchers desire to collect data.

We chose to investigate rates of eight different violent acts, based upon Canadian Criminal Code definitions, and three (for the purposes of this paper) non-violent categories – harassment, robbery, and refusal to wear a condom. In an attempt to gauge the gulf between acts of violence suffered and acts of violence reported we also explored police response from the point of view of the women.

Our sample size was 183 and data collection took place over two years making the information collected fairly reflective of conditions.

Our youngest contributor was 15 and the oldest was 51. In an industry where youth is a commodity it's not surprising that over half were 24 and under. The average age was 25.9 years old.

Almost a third of our sample has been working in the sex trade for less than 2 years. 13.8% started in the sex trade before they were even teenagers and a full 70% of our sample began before they were old enough to drink legally. The average age of entry into the sex trade was 16.98. There is an immense overrepresentation of Aboriginal women in the street level sex trade (31.1%). According to the 1996 Census data from Statistics Canada, Aboriginals (North American Indian, Metis, Inuit) constitute only 1.7% of Greater Vancouver's population.

Almost three quarters of the women had left their parent's or guardian's home permanently at age 16 or younger. 62.4% don't have a high school diploma and 10.2% had only a public school education. We found that 58.1% identified themselves as working to supply a drug habit. When asked if they had to give money to somebody to be able to work either on or off-street, the majority of women, over 80% of women on the street and over 70% of the women off-street, replied 'no'. 89% reported that someone has refused to wear a condom within the past year.

[Sample Data on Violence-June 2001](#)

Click on the above link for a sample of data on violence.

Ultimately the goal was not to simply study the violence, but to use the information to hasten its end. Throughout this project former and current sex workers used the information to identify, develop and implement a variety of pro-active

initiatives:

↳ On Monday April 26th 1999, over 35 youth from Vancouver who were, or had been, involved in the survival sex trade came together at the Mount Pleasant Neighborhood House. The focus group identified missing necessary services and called for immediate and easy to implement changes in the policy and practices of welfare, the police, and the Ministry of Children and Families' Adolescent Services Unit.

← *Towards A Common Ground*, is an opinion survey that was completed by over 500 Vancouver residents and business owners that attempted to discover what they agreed should be done in response to the sex trade: who should be allowed, where can it happen, what is acceptable, and what cannot be allowed to happen.

← The PACE Health Network (PHN) is a two year peer driven demonstration project for women whose involvement in the sex trade is primarily to finance their injection drug habit (SWIDU). The PHN is an attempt to:

1. Identify and develop messages and strategies for HIV/AIDS/HEPC/STD prevention,
2. Staff and operate a SWIDU based needle distribution,
3. Develop and deliver prevention education/resource materials,
4. Have weekly board meetings & monthly general membership meetings,
5. Increase condom usage by SWIDUs, their partners and clients and
6. Assist with the development and implementation of improved reporting/tracking of HIV/AIDS/STDs in order to improve the potential effectiveness of treatments.

← A Sex Trade Liaison Officer policy proposal presented to the Mayor and the Vancouver Police Board that might help lower the rape and assault rate of street level sex workers by having an officer dedicated to this job.

This research looks at the saddeningly tragic complicity in creating an environment that has unwittingly encouraged this situation. A city that has continually demonstrated its refusal to discuss any substantive response to this issue, the pernicious influence of a small but vocal feminist minority that has suffused the entire debate on the sex trade and a law that even the Department of Justice has deemed "ineffective in terms of the reduction of street prostitution and the aggravation experienced by members of the community".

Leonard Cler-Cunningham, April 30/2001

To contact Leonard Cler-Cunningham email: haileyusa@netscape.net or call: 879-5517 or 872-7651.

The research is available for purchase from PACE Society for \$25.00. They can be contacted at 604-872-7651 or through email at: pacekids@vcn.bc.ca or through snailmail at: PACE Society, 1014 Robson St. PO Box 73537, V6E 1A7.

We encourage people to contact the Police Board and newspapers to maintain pressure on the Vancouver Police Department to bring an end to this violence.

Police Board contact:

Beth Nielsen
Executive Assistant, Vancouver Police Board

c/o 312 Main Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6A 2T2
Tel (604) 717-3170 Fax (604) 257-3878 or
Email: beth_nielsen@city.vancouver.bc.ca

[PACE Society in the news](#)

[Police deny officers tried to rape prostitutes-June 14, 2001](#)

[Vancouver Police kept quiet on possible serial killer-June 21, 2001](#)

Email: wleing@missingpeople.net

Missing Women Tip Line: 1-877-687-3377

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