

November 9, 2022
Under Embargo Until November 15, 2022 2PM EST

Sex Workers are Gig Workers

Most Canadian sex workers are only active for relatively brief periods of time according to a recent study of adult online classified advertising. Over 3.6 million ads were reviewed as part of the research. The ads were published in 2015 and 2016 across six prominent Canadian classifieds sites. Lynn Kennedy, lead author of the study, is part of the Sex Work Population Project (<https://populationproject.ca>), a Canadian collective of researchers and allies with an interest in using archival sources to shed light on the adult industry in Canada. The study will be published in PLOS ONE on November 15, 2022.

Kennedy stated “Advertisers were active for 73 days on average. During the two year period there was evidence for substantial turnover.” In any given week 13575 workers were estimated to be active on average although the range over the study period was 10955 to 22408 workers. Around half of the advertisers represented individual people and 88% represented two people or less.

The study found that, while the majority of advertisers identified as cis female, cis males (~5%) and transgender females (~2%) were also well represented. For cis females, the average weekly estimate was 0.2% of the Canadian 20-49 year old female population in 2016 - in line with other research in industrialized democracies. Most advertisers were found to have stopped advertising during the two year period. After controlling for changing name and contact information, currently active sex workers were found to be part of a much larger inactive population.

Kennedy added “People may not realize how much has changed in the last 20 years as the internet has become the dominant advertising medium for sex workers. The large number of short-term advertisers identified in this study are people likely to have been missed in other Canadian research. Studying these short term workers is particularly relevant now as Canadian sex work legislation is being challenged in the courts.”

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Citation: Kennedy, L. 2022. The silent majority: the typical Canadian sex worker may not be who we think. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0277550>

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