

Impacts of COVID-19 on Survivors and Allied Professionals

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Research Results: Impacts of COVID-19 from a Community Feedback Survey

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic at the local, national and global levels will not be fully understood for several years, most of the human rights and social service industry-leaders have issued statements projecting the social and economic implications that business closures and physical-distancing mandates could have on already-vulnerable and marginalized populations. The United Nations published their policy brief titled [The Impact of COVID-19 on Women](#), which outlined the gendered aspect of changes that have happened globally with regards to employment and poverty, healthcare, unpaid care work, and gender-based violence. Ultimately, the brief highlighted the critical nature of centering women's voices in disaster relief efforts and adaptations to education and employment environments.

Gender-Based Violence

With regards to the gender-based violence specifically that is commercial sexual exploitation, additional publications have come out that both predict future outcomes and capture current scenarios from around the world. In Canada, where prostitution is [partially decriminalized](#), a plea to the federal government published in the [Canadian Journal of Public Health](#) outlined the lack of economic relief for individuals in the sex trade, and as a result the extremely high likelihood that prostituted persons would be forced into even higher-risk sex transactions that would result in an increase in numbers of sex workers contracting COVID-19. In England and Wales, where prostitution is legalized, [The BMJ](#) has centered their discussion around the concern for a “return to the treatment of sex workers during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, when women sex workers were scapegoated as vectors of disease.”

Similar concerns have been heard from France, another country with partial decriminalization, in an article in [The Conversation](#). While concerns of victim-blaming were echoed in France, the author of the article centered their conversation and advocacy around an even further-marginalized group of sex workers commonly referred to locally as “shadow workers” – the prostituted persons who were undocumented or not registered as a tax payer in the country (and quite commonly an overwhelmingly trafficked population as a result). Even though the registered sex workers in France were eligible for economic relief assistance as a result of the pandemic, those with the most vulnerabilities continued to be excluded from this vital support.

Here in the United States, organizations like [The Avery Center](#) and [Polaris](#) have both issued press releases, articles and resources about domestic impacts of COVID-19, much of which has collectively resonated with international voices. Additionally, an article by Melissa Farley in [Logos Journal](#) examining the perspectives of sex buyers in Germany, New Zealand and the United States confirmed that buyers have continued to demand access to women's bodies despite the shelter orders and increased public health dangers for all. Ultimately, the article

[Preparedness and Recovery as a Privilege in the Context of COVID-19](#) in the Economic and Social Research Aotearoa summarized both the reality of, and awareness to the negative impacts of the pandemic have had disproportionately on already-marginalized populations: “We do appreciate that this has disrupted lifestyles for all; however, the disruption is not experienced equally.”

As *The Avery Center* began to observe these initial global implications, the organization’s research team sought to answer the question: “Do the experiences of victims and survivors of commercial sexual exploitation differ from those of non-survivor allies during the COVID-19 pandemic?”

Differing Experiences: Survivors and Non-Survivor Allies

In a voluntary, non-compensated community feedback survey administered by The Avery Center in May 2020, 45 female- and gender non-conforming identifying respondents shared how the COVID19 pandemic has economically impacted themselves and their households over the past several months. Overall, respondents were from all age ranges and overwhelmingly (86.5%) identified as white. Of the 45 respondents, 30 (67%) identified as survivors with the remaining 15 (33%) identifying as allies in anti-trafficking work.

The survivor sample concentrated between the ages of 35 and 54, while the ally sample was spread evenly across the age range of 18 to 75 or older. While the total sample was overwhelmingly white, the ally sample was 100% white while the survivor sample included individuals identifying as American Indian/Alaskan Native (3), Latinx (2), and African-American (1). Two survivors disclosed having had COVID19 over the past two months, while none of the allies self-disclosed a positive test result.

Layoffs & Employment

While most survivors (70%) and most allies (60%) were employed full or part time prior to the COVID19 pandemic, a half of survivors (50%) found themselves with reduced hours or laid off while many allies (40%) reported that while they were laid off, they were not planning to actively look for other employment during this time. Of the survivors still employed during the pandemic, most (34%) shared that their work was in a low-risk environment, and six survivors identified as the caregiver in their home responsible for distance-learning of their K12-aged child(ren) with varying levels of paid labor expectations to balance, compared with the two allies who had to help children with distance learning.

Compare these working conditions to allies who had more evenly distributed experiences across working condition options, survivors were more likely to be working in a high-risk job (26% compared to 13%). Almost one-third (30%) of survivors lost their job as a direct result of the pandemic and three said they have had to start looking for employment to make up for a loss of income elsewhere in their household, compared with 26% of allies who lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic and 20% who had to start looking for income replacement employment.

Impacts of COVID-19: Income Levels

When it came to the survivors' 2019 income, a majority (63%) reported at- or below-poverty level income for their household, compared with allies who overwhelmingly (53%) reported their 2019 income at \$100,000 or more. Most survivors (37%) said that they were “just making it” economically, while another 30% said they were “unable to make ends meet,” compared with allies, a majority (73%) said their 2019 income comfort level was “making it” or “comfortable” or “financially stable”.

While half (50%) of survivors said that their estimated 2020 income was less than \$20,000, almost the entire remainder (46%) said that they expected to make at or below poverty level income for the 2020, and 80% said they did not feel that they would have enough income to cover their expenses for the rest of the year. This differs greatly from allies, who overwhelmingly (70%) said they expected their 2020 income to remain the same or similar to 2019, and while they communicated more conservative comfort levels, they were still overwhelmingly (80%) concentrated at the upper end.

While half (50%) of survivors said they worked in the anti-trafficking movement, the non-profit sector generally (3), for profit sector (3), academia (1), healthcare (1) and the sex trade (7) were all represented. This can be compared with six of allies who work directly in the anti-trafficking movement, the faith community (3), healthcare (1), for profit sector (1) and academia (1). Lastly, while all survivors had provided a sex act in exchange for something of value prior to the pandemic, 20% of allies had. And a total of 9 (30%) survivors said that they had been pressured into providing a sex act in exchange for something of value since the beginning of the COVID19 pandemic, compared with no allies who had experienced this pressure.

The Most Significant Changes

When asked about what the pandemic has changed most significantly, **survivors shared themes of isolation, current and future financial worries, and mental health battles as impacts of COVID-19.**

- “I’m completely alone and no one seems to care about me. I have started to get sick, trauma is overwhelming, its so hard for me.”
- “I spend all my time outside of work alone. I live alone, so when I come home from work, it’s just me.”
- “We aren’t sure how we will pay bills, medical needs, prescriptions, and food.”
- “I’ve become more introverted. I’ve stopped watching the news. I’ve become re-hypervigilant about interacting with people.”
- “A woman like me, the hustle runs in my veins. I start thinking to myself – my sobriety, which I have quite a bit of, is all seeming to be threatened by this. I start thinking old thoughts how have I always brought myself out of a bad situation I start thinking I can lay with someone for money, yeah but where does that leave my progress ... yeah I’m still clean, haven’t turned a trick but I can’t say I don’t think of it constantly.”

When allies were asked the same question, themes of working and living physically-distanced from the outside world but more closely connected with family members emerged:

- “Moved back home and did university online ... my dad is the only one going out for work.”
- “Limited interaction in public areas, all children living at home.”
- “We are now taking care of my father 24/7 so it’s been very interesting dealing with dementia and lockdown. It’s really hard to keep someone like him entertained and safe inside.”
- “I’m having to work from home part-time.”

When survivors were asked what has been most helpful during the pandemic, themes emerged around community and engaging in self-care and mental health services, as well as faith:

- “Knowing I am not doing this alone and my other close friends are affected and we support each other.”
- “Meditation, prayer, leaning into my spiritual beliefs and practices and tons of self-care.”
- “Keeping a schedule similar to what I had before the changes.”
- “The fact that my therapist is still meeting with me.”
- “Care packages are definitely a bright spot.”
- “My local food bank has fresh fruit and veggies. [I have] a deep/real understand of having an emergency fund.”

When allies were asked the same question, similar themes emerged with a higher concentration on their faith and ability to enjoy a slower-paced world:

- “Grace for myself and my family. Just appreciating the extra time with my family.”
- “Evaluation of what’s really important, focus on self-improvement.”
- “Staying home, pausing life, time with my son.”
- “My home is my sanctuary. When I’m at home it’s like corona doesn’t exist.”
- “More family time.”

When asked what survivors and their families need most right now, the primary theme was around economic empowerment, as well as human connection and a return to normalcy:

- “I need emotional and mental health resources because that is the area most challenging for me to maintain my health and recovery in.”
- “I need help more – like for people to know I exist especially on the weekends.”
- “For this to be over so I can hug people again.”
- “To be normal again.”
- “Help with food.”
- “Car repair and financial assistance beyond a month of being able to survive due to uncertainty of how long until next gig.”
- “I’m good really – now that I will have some income with [[The Avery Center’s Job Program](#)], I’m good.”

When allies were asked the same question, themes around prayer and personal development emerged:

- “Truly nothing, we are blessed.”
- “Patience with each other.”
- “Prayer.”
- “We are in good shape.”
- “An end date to all of this madness.”

Finally, when asked what changes, if any, have survivors observed in the commercial sex trade, the resounding response was that demand and vulnerabilities have increased:

- “My friends are busy.”
- “I see more things online ... [that] it’s ‘ok’ because no one is touching you, more app/sites that are exploiting people. Waiting for the explosion to come.”
- “Increase of clients, increase of vulnerabilities, increase of familial trafficking, increase in violence, increase in PTSD responses.”
- “I have definitely noticed that access to extreme porn and violent images as well as child pornography is much more socially acceptable now and it seems easier to find it or talk about it without stigma ...”
- “More action online.”
- “I’ve had to erase my FB because people keep trying to get back in touch with me it seems like COVID brought out all the tricks.”

Differing Experiences: Impacts of COVID-19

Despite many allies identifying as working directly in the anti-trafficking field (whether employed or volunteers) and non-profit and healthcare sectors, only one observed any COVID19-related changes to the sex trade: “Women [are] literally wandering the streets in Vegas.” Another ally admitted, “I am lacking details about this. My gut says that internet and child trafficking is up with COVID.”

In closing, victims and survivors of commercial exploitation have had a drastically different experience during the COVID-19 pandemic than then allies have, confirming the racial/ethnic impact of the virus as well as the socioeconomic barriers survivors continue to battle even after exiting exploitation.