

Sex Work Stigma Research Collaboration



UNSW
SYDNEY



Why stigma?

The Centre for Social Research in Health (CSRH) is funded to undertake research that is aligned with the goals of the National Strategies in HIV, sexually transmissible infections, hepatitis B and hepatitis C.

A key part of these national strategies is the recognition of the role that stigma has on undermining quality of life and access to services among priority groups, such as sex workers.

CSRH has worked in this area for more than two decades and is committed to the direct involvement of community and community organisations in its research.

A measure of stigma

Since 2015, CSRH has received funding to undertake a program of work on stigma. As part of this work, CSRH has developed a “stigma indicator”. This is a measure completed on a survey to report the extent to which people in the priority groups have *experienced* stigma in the previous 12 months. CSRH has also surveyed health workers and the general public about the extent to which they *express* stigma towards priority groups.

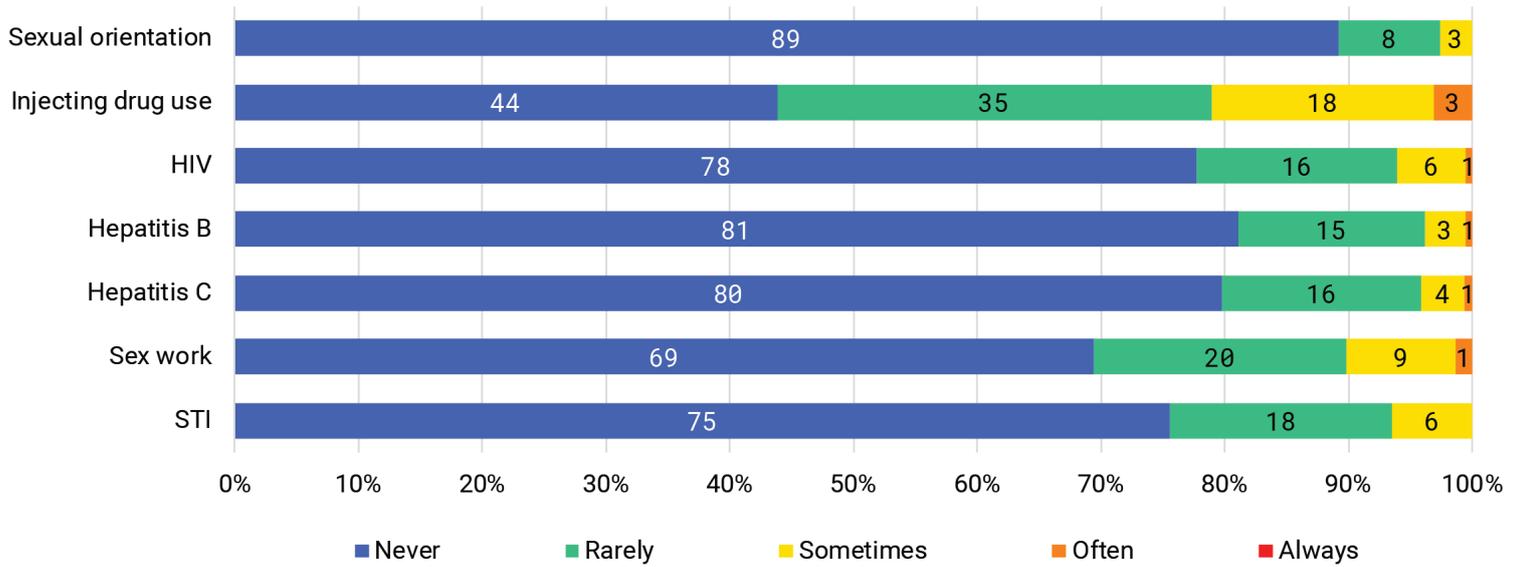
This “stigma indicator” can be used to measure progress against the goal of the National Strategies to reduce stigma.

Stigma towards sex workers reported by general public and health workers

We have done previous research about expressed stigma towards sex workers. We asked two groups (the general public and health workers) about their attitudes towards sex workers as well as the other priority groups.

Among health workers, 31% reported that they would behave negatively toward other people because of their sex work:

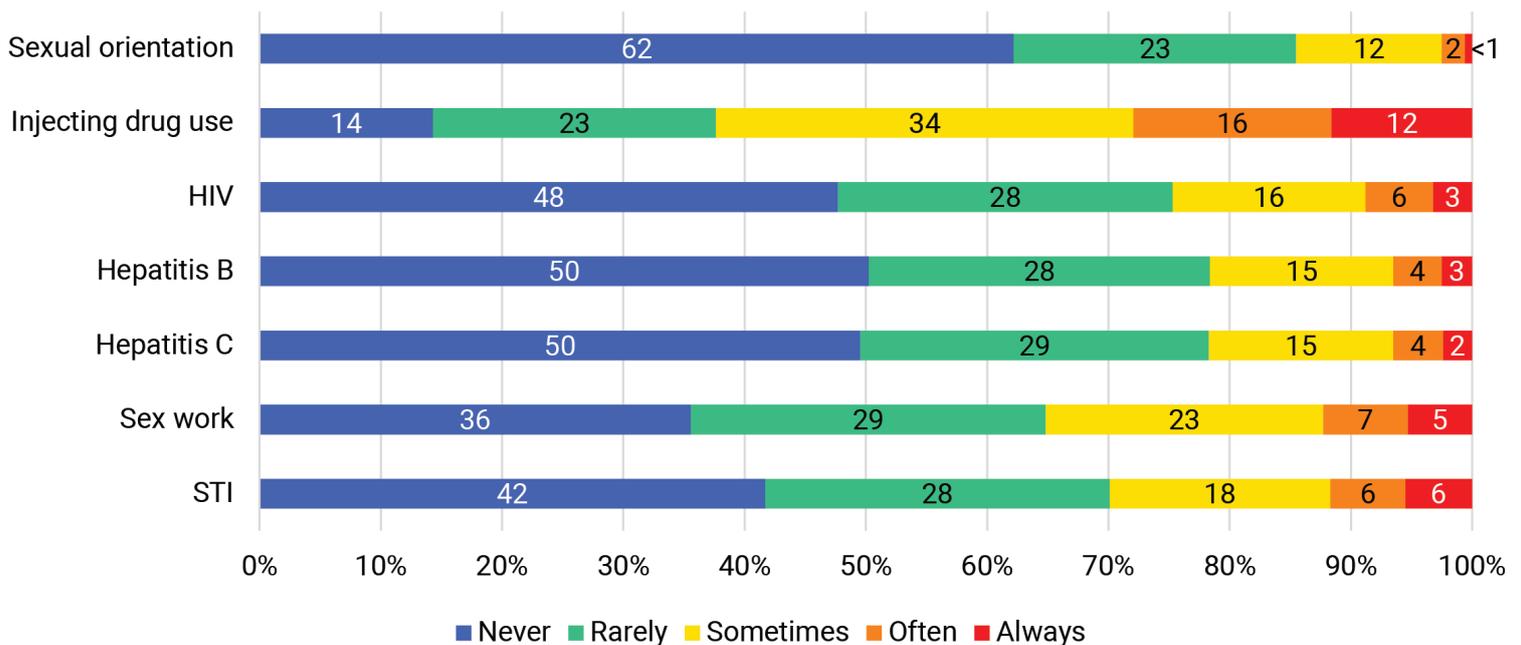
Would you behave negatively towards other people because of their:



Note: Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Among the general public, 64% reported that they would behave negatively toward other people because of their sex work:

Would you behave negatively towards other people because of their:



Understanding sex work stigma

Before commencing a project to measure experiences of sex work stigma, CSRH engaged in consultation with sex workers as a “priority population” in the National Strategies. In discussion with Scarlet Alliance, it was decided that some early work was required before sending out a survey for sex workers to complete.

Together, CSRH and Scarlet Alliance designed a qualitative pilot study to invite sex workers from across Australia to participate in focus groups to discuss their experiences of stigma. The areas for discussion in the focus group were developed via a consultative process conducted by Scarlet Alliance with sex workers. These groups were run together by a staff member of Scarlet Alliance and a CSRH researcher. The intention was to obtain contemporary data on experiences of sex work stigma to inform the development of a quantitative survey that we could roll out annually.

Sex workers in the groups were asked to discuss issues like: disclosure or concealment of sex work, employment, education, access to healthcare and social services, engaging with institutions (e.g. banking and insurance), engagement with policing and access to legal services and justice, portrayals of sex work in the media, families and parenting as well as issues related to general health, drug use and sexual health of sex workers.

Findings from focus group study

In the focus groups, we found that stigma manifests in multiple environments and is steeped throughout society and its institutions.

Sex workers experience stigma in accessing goods and services, including: access to financial infrastructure and participation in digital economies (such as having accounts shut down or facing disproportionate fees); access to service provision, including poor treatment from counsellors and social workers (some of whom saw sex work as the pathological, universal cause of all the sex worker’s issues irrespective of why they were seeking services); access to health care (including being treated as vectors of disease by health professionals who took upon a punitive law enforcement role); access to criminal legal mechanisms (not being taken seriously, being subject to police corruption and extortion, or being treated as criminals and/or disposable victims); and in engagement with media.

Sex workers reported being used as a punchline and exploited by media, who relied on stock stereotypes and reproduced narratives of sex workers as either victims of violence, a neighbourhood nuisance, or a fantasy of empowerment.

Sex workers reported that stigma manifests in multiple ways, including as internalised, anticipated and perceived stigma. Stigma can present in suboptimal working conditions, abusive relationships, and isolation from family and friends. It can present in the form of emotional and educative labour and the tasks of risk management, self-protection and hypervigilance about privacy.

The focus groups also showed that sex worker access to peer support and sex worker organisations is a vital stigma reduction intervention and that community connectedness minimises and ameliorates the effects of stigma.

We are currently in the process of preparing a sex worker community report documenting the findings from our qualitative focus groups and interviews. In addition, we have prepared a journal article on mental health and sex work stigma for publication in academic literature which can be accessed via this link: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113468>. We are in the process of writing more journal articles, with the next one focusing on sex work, stigma and the criminal legal system.

Next steps – a survey about sex work stigma

After this qualitative work, Scarlet Alliance and CSRH used the findings from the focus groups to develop a set of questions to explore sex work stigma as part of an annual survey.

We are now ready to share this survey with sex workers in Australia.

This survey will be used to present national data about the experience of stigma among sex workers and to develop evidence-based stigma-reduction interventions.

If you want to add your voice to reporting on the experience of sex workers, please follow this link to find out more about participating:

bit.ly/stigmalsexwork



If the results presented here have upset you in any way, we encourage you to seek support from Lifeline (13 11 44) or your local sex worker organisation (redbook.scarletalliance.org.au/home/sex-worker-orgs/)

This project was supported by a grant from the Australian Government Department of Health.

We would like to thank everyone who participated in the focus groups and who completed the survey.

For more information on this project, please see:

bit.ly/stigma-indicators