

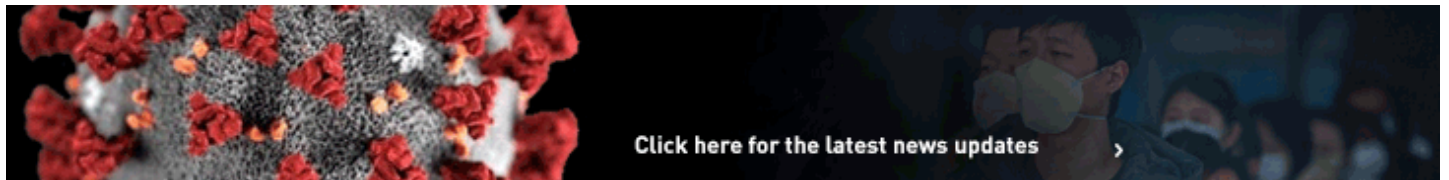
US sex workers continue plying trade despite Covid-19 risks

By [AFP](#) - April 10, 2020 @ 3:43am



A view of a nearly empty Times Square on April 09, 2020 in New York City. - Another 6.6 million US workers file for unemployment benefits for the week ending April 4, 2020, the Labor Department said on April 9, 2020, a slight decrease from the previous week's count of 6.9 million, which was 219,000 more than the original tally, according to the report. Nearly 17 million workers lost their jobs since mid-March, as the coronavirus pandemic continues to affect the economy. (Photo by Angela Weiss / AFP)

LOS ANGELES: "Being a prostitute has always been a good option in times of crisis... until this one," says Bruno, a sex worker who fears catching the deadly Covid-19 coronavirus at a time when those in his trade are more vulnerable than ever.



One of approximately a million sex workers in the United States, Bruno – not his real name – has stopped taking clients in the past month as the once-in-a-century pandemic arrived in America.

Like most legal trades, demand for the 33-year-old's services has plummeted with much of the country staying home under lockdown.

But Bruno, who is based in the Los Angeles area, started in this business about two years ago precisely because he couldn't get a steady job that paid well.

Now his savings are rapidly dwindling – and unlike most unemployed workers, Bruno is not eligible for federally approved relief.

Despite his health concerns over a pandemic that has killed more than 14,000 people in the US, Bruno is considering returning to work.

"I'm going to have to take the risk, it's the only way I can make money," he said.

Demand has already fallen by around 80 per cent, he said – but a handful of clients are still contacting him.

Bruno already considers his job to be high-risk because of potential exposure to sexually transmitted diseases.

"I'm surprised that, with this virus going around, people still want to take the danger," he admitted.

Returning is not a decision he takes lightly.

"How can I be sure the person is taking care of themselves?" he asked.

Small businesses hit by the crisis seeking emergency loans, according to government guidelines, may not sell "products or services... of a prurient sexual nature."

"Our government's unwillingness to recognize sex work as a non-criminal venue of employment means that many workers are quickly being pushed into a state of financial desperation," wrote Molly Simmons, a New York sex worker, on the Huffington Post.

The situation, she warned, may force sex workers to "accept clients they know aren't safe and risk an assault or rape because they need to feed themselves or their children or keep the electricity on."

The Desert AIDS Project, an NGO specializing in HIV-AIDS in California, has published recommendations for sex workers during the pandemic.

"When negotiating services, prices, and laying ground rules, cover off on coronavirus too," it advises, suggesting other measures such as protective gloves.

Other organisations have promoted ways for sex workers to avoid physical meetings altogether during the pandemic.

Advocacy groups COYOTE and BAWWS have called on clients to make donations or pay in advance for post-crisis services.

Some sex workers have emulated pornographic actors by making a living from home via webcam appearances and connecting with clients by phone calls or messaging.

Bruno has friends who already do this and earn up to US\$3,000 a month.

But he is wary of that route, which risks exposing his identity.

"I'm not criticising it, but I'm not getting into it," he said. "I don't want my financial difficulties to cost me my privacy." - AFP