



# Factors Associated with an Increased Risk of HIV Infection Among Survival Sex Workers

## Background

Women in survival sex work face much harm that directly increases their risk of HIV infection. Research has looked at predictors of sex work and HIV infection among women who use injection drugs, but little research has been done on survival sex workers and factors that increase their risk of HIV.

## The Question

How common is HIV among survival sex workers, and what sex and drug-related harms increase their risk of HIV infection?

## The Study

Researchers from the Maka Project and what is now called the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) looked at **data collected from 198 women in sex work in 2004 through a first interview questionnaire, HIV diagnostic testing, and pre-/post-test counseling.** For this study, researchers took into account age, ethnicity, health status, and sexual and drug risk patterns. GSHI now carries on this research as part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), an ongoing study on working conditions, health and safety in the sex industry led by GSHI/BCCfE and UBC in collaboration with a range of community partners. AESHA has ongoing outreach to indoor and outdoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team).

## The Results

The narratives and information collected from these women showed:

- 26% of the women were HIV+ at the start of the study.

Being HIV+ at the start of the study was associated with:

- Starting sex work at a young age;
- Being Aboriginal;
- Daily cocaine injection;
- Intensive, daily crack smoking; and
- Unprotected sex with an intimate partner.

Starting sex work as youth or teens was associated with a two-fold increase in HIV infection at the first interview.

## The Policy Implications

There is a need for evidence-based strategies that address the sexual and drug-related factors that increase the vulnerability to HIV infection among survival sex workers, specifically, interventions focusing on the reasons that lead youth or teens to start sex work, as found in other studies.

Shannon K, Bright V, Gibson K, Tyndall MW. Sexual and drug-related vulnerabilities to HIV infection among women engaged in survival sex work in Vancouver, Canada. *CJPH*, 2007; 98(6): 465-9.