



# Sex Work, Crystal Meth & Health Risks: Drug Use in Relationships

## Background

There is growing concern about crystal methamphetamine (meth) use and sexual risks, but there is a lack of research about meth among women in street-based sex work.

## The Question

What is the role of crystal meth, and the health risks, to women in street-based sex work in Vancouver, BC?

## The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team **drew on a two-year (2006-2008) study of 255 women in street-based sex work, involving questionnaires, interviews and voluntary HIV screenings.** This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access) an ongoing research project on the working conditions, health and safety of the sex industry led by GSHI/BCCfE and UBC, in collaboration with community partners. AESHA has ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team). For this study, researchers took into account other risk factors including: age, HIV status, ethnicity, physical/sexual violence, sharing drug supplies, having an intimate partner who uses drugs, homelessness, working area and police harassment.

## The Results

The women interviewed reported:

- 78 (32%) had used meth in their lifetime;
- 61 (24%) used meth during the 2-year follow-up period.

Those who used meth were more likely to:

- Inject heroin;
- Have a main male sex partner who gets drugs for them;
- Work and live in marginalized public spaces.

No strong link was found between meth use by women in sex work and more sexual risks, such as higher numbers of clients or unprotected sex.

**Meth use was more common when people who did drugs together were also having a sexual relationship.** In male-female couples, drug use has been connected to physical and emotional violence, and other sexual HIV risks.

## The Policy Implications

- The study shows a need for policies and services for women in street-based sex work who use drugs that include safer sex work spaces and mobile outreach, such as vans that give out harm reduction supplies such as condoms and clean drug supplies, and also for drug outreach programs designed for women and those they use drugs and have relationships with.

Shannon K, Strathdee S, Shoveller J, Zhang R, Montaner J, Tyndall M. Crystal methamphetamine use among female street-based sex workers: Moving beyond individual-focused interventions. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 2011 Jan 1;113(1): 76-81.