



# Homelessness, Sex Work & Violence: The Need for Safe, Supportive Housing

## Background

While many studies have looked at the factors behind homelessness among injection drug users, we know very little about homelessness among women in street-based sex work.

## The Question

What are the experiences of homelessness of women in street-based sex work in Vancouver, BC?

## The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team **interviewed and gave questionnaires to 252 women in street-based sex work in Vancouver, BC, over an 18-month period, and asked them about their experiences of homelessness**, which meant sleeping on the street for one or more nights in the past 6 months. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), an ongoing research 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, with outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team).

## The Results

### Profile of a sex worker who has experienced homelessness:

- Younger age;
- More exposure to sexual violence by partners;
- Higher number of clients per week (10+);
- More likely to engage in intensive daily crack use (10+ rocks daily);
- More likely to serve clients outdoors.

### HIV risk factors for sex work:

- Individual – age, ethnicity, drug use;
- Interpersonal – high number of clients, inconsistent condom use, pressure to have unprotected sex, sharing drug supplies, assault by client/partner;
- Work environment – types of outdoor solicitation spaces, indoor vs. outdoor

*Link between higher number of clients and homelessness:* a lack of housing may make women more dependent on sex work as a form of survival

*Link between exposure to sexual violence and homelessness:* a lack of safe, affordable spaces may make it harder for women to negotiate their safety, and make it easier for others to exploit them

**43% reported at least one lifetime incidence of homelessness**

## The Policy Implications

- The study shows a need for more safe secure housing options for women in sex work, from low-barrier transitional shelters to supportive housing with flexible curfews and guest policies.
- The study supports a growing body of research of the harms of a criminalized and enforcement-based approach to sex work, and **evidence-based need for its decriminalization.**

Duff P, Deering K, Gibson K, Tyndall M, Shannon K. Homelessness among a cohort of women in street-based sex work: the need for safer environment interventions. BMC Public Health. 2011 Aug 12: 11:642.