



Sex Work & the Public Health Impact of Vancouver's 2010 Olympic Games

Background

The 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, BC, Canada took place from February 12-28th 2010, amidst concerns supply and demand for paid sex, human trafficking, and a greater risk for HIV/STI, which is largely found in street-based sex work.

The Question

In what ways did the Olympics disrupt local sex work environments, and what were the public health impacts around HIV/STI risks in Vancouver?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team interviewed 207 Vancouver-based women (including transgender) indoor and outdoor sex workers: 107 sex workers were interviewed during the 2010 Olympics (January 19th to March 14th); and 100 sex workers were interviewed post-Olympics (April 1st to July 1st). This project is part of a longitudinal 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. The project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access) that has outreach for street and indoor sex workers (by both experiential and non-experiential team).

Who were the women interviewed?

- Median age: 33 years
- Ethnicity:
 - Indigenous/ ethnic minority – 51.2%
 - Caucasian/ white – 48.8%
- Work spaces:
 - Outdoor/public place – 82.5%
 - Home – 31.6%
 - Indoor space (brothels) – 26.2%
 - Entertainment (dancing) – 16.0%

The Results

The women interviewed said there were no major increases in the number of sex workers or of trafficked sex workers before, during or after the Olympics. **During the Olympics more sex workers said they had experienced police harassment, that clients were not as available, and that they had more difficulty meeting clients due to road closures and construction.** Police harassment can drive women in street-based sex work to isolated spaces far from health and support services, making them more vulnerable to violence and HIV/STI transmission.

The Policy Implications

- There is a need for more research into the public health impacts of major sporting events on sex workers. This study shows that **host cities of future events should adopt evidence-based public interventions** such as removing criminal laws on sex work and piloting and evaluating safer indoor workspaces, to improve health and safety and reduce HIV/STI risks.

Deering KN, Chettiar J, Chan K, Taylor M, Montaner JS, Shannon K. Sex work and the public health impacts of the 2010 Olympic Games. *Sex Transm Infect.* 2012 Jun; 88(4): 301-3.