



Sex Work Economies: How the Street Cost of Drugs & Using Affects Sex Work Income

Background

Using hard drugs has been linked with entry into street-based sex work for women, and research has shown that using hard drugs can leave women more dependent on sex work to survive. We still know very little about the relationship between the cost of drugs, types of drug use and sex work.

The Question

How do the street cost of drugs, types of drug use, and aspects of sex work relate to the amount of money earned by women in street-based sex work?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team **gave questionnaires and interviewed 129 women in street-based sex work who use drugs in Vancouver, BC between 2006 and 2008.** This project is part of an ongoing study of 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 ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team). For this study, researchers looked at whether women share drug supplies; have an intimate non-client sexual partner; or work while high on drugs; their age and ethnicity; their income and drug expenses; and where they live, and if they work indoors or outdoors.

The Results

The narratives of the women interviewed showed:

- Women earned an average of \$300 from sex work, spent \$400 on drugs, and had 6 clients/week;
- Women in sex work who injected heroin, had more than 10 clients per week, and youth (under 25 years old) earned more from sex work, than older women in sex work;
- Women who had clients that used condoms regularly tended to earn more from sex work, suggesting that other factors, such as where they work or the types of clients they had, might impact on condom use by clients and the amount of money earned weekly from street-based sex work.

The Policy Implications

- The study supports the need for **an evidence-based public health approach to drug use and sex work**, which includes programs for treatment, prevention and support, and alternative approaches, such as opiate-substitution therapy, to address the social cost of heroin addiction.
- Improved addictions treatment could reduce women's dependence on sex work to support their drug use and addiction. Programs specifically for women in street-based sex work should be piloted and evaluated, and should include training, employment, and financial support for those wanting to transition out of sex work.

Deering KN, Shoveller J, Tyndall MW, Montaner JS, Shannon K. The street cost of drugs and drug use patterns: relationships with sex work income in an urban Canadian setting. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 2011 Nov 1; 118(2-3): 430-6.