



Vulnerabilities Among Lesbian & Bisexual Sex Workers: Youth, Violence & Drug Use

Background

Despite evidence that sexual minority populations experience higher rates of homelessness, stigma, and targeted policing, there is little research looking at the experiences of lesbian and bisexual sex workers with HIV risk and vulnerabilities.

The Question

What are the factors associated with identifying as lesbian and bisexual among women in street-based and hidden off-street sex work in Vancouver, BC?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **questionnaires and baseline interviews with 510 women in sex work in Vancouver, BC from 2011 to 2013**. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), a 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, with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Of 510 sex workers interviewed, 18.6% identified as lesbian or bisexual, and nearly 18% were youth under age 24.

The lesbian and bisexual sex workers interviewed were significantly more likely to report:

- Inconsistent condom use & client condom refusal, possibly due to increased violence and less ability to negotiate condom use;
- Soliciting clients on the street;
- Having been in jail or prison; and
- Homelessness.

STIGMA
Stigma faced by lesbian and bisexual sex workers may leave them vulnerable to client violence, make condom negotiation difficult, and increase their risk of HIV transmission.

Identifying as lesbian or bisexual was found to be associated with non-injection drug use, with being a youth (under age 24), and with having experienced physical and/or sexual violence by clients.

The Policy Implications

- This study highlights the importance of considering individual *and* environmental factors, particularly client-perpetrated violence, related to sexual identity among sex workers in future research, and in the development of HIV prevention programs.
- There is an **urgent need for HIV interventions and harm reduction programs tailored to lesbian and bisexual sex workers** to address client violence and stimulant use.

Lyons T, Kerr T, Duff P, Feng C, Shannon K. Youth, violence and non-injection drug use: Nexus of vulnerabilities among lesbian and bisexual sex workers. 2014. AIDS Care.