



Sex Work Laws & HIV Prevention Failing Youth: Early Sex Work Linked to Police Arrest & HIV

Background

The media and public often say that many migrant and new immigrant or indoor sex workers started sex work before age 18, despite evidence to the contrary. We actually know little about women who start sex work before age 18, and whether this increases HIV risk and arrest when they become adults.

The Question

What are the characteristics of sex workers who started working before they were 18 years old? Are these youth more likely to be HIV positive or arrested as adults?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **interviews with 508 adult sex workers in Metro Vancouver, BC from 2010-2011**. This project is part of an 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. The project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access) cohort, including outreach to street, indoor and online sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team) and ongoing follow-up.

The Results

- The average age women started sex work was 20: 38% (193 of 508) started before age 18.
- Women who reported starting sex work early were largely:
1) **street-based**; 2) **drug-involved**; 3) **born in Canada**.
- Only 3% of sex workers born outside of Canada reported starting sex work before age 18.
- Only one-fifth who started sex work early said they were coerced or "turned out", only 5% of those who started as adults.
- **Starting sex work before age 18 (vs. over 18) was linked to:**
 - **Police arrest for sex work (44% vs. 16%)**
 - **HIV infection (20% vs. 11%)**

*Canada's criminal laws & HIV prevention failing youth:
Women who started sex work before age 18 were twice as likely to become HIV positive and be arrested by police for sex work as adults.*

The Policy Implications

- Criminalization of sex work in Canada negatively affects the most vulnerable youth who started sex work before age 18, with 44% reporting arrest by police for sex work as adults.
- Evidence-based policy reform, including decriminalization of sex work among consenting adults, is needed to ensure health and social supports are made available to vulnerable youth,
- **This study shows a need for HIV prevention and care services just for youth.**

Goldenberg SM, Chettiar J, Simo A, Silverman JG, Strathdee SA, Montaner J, Shannon K. Early sex work initiation independently elevates odds of HIV infection and police arrest among adult sex workers in a Canadian setting. 2013; Epub Ahead of Print.