



Nonmedical Use of Prescription Opioids by Sex Workers in Vancouver, BC

Background

The nonmedical use of prescription opioids (POs) is a major public health concern in North America. Research shows that nonmedical prescription opioid use (NPOU) is growing among vulnerable populations, including sex workers. Despite this evidence, there is little research focused on NPOU and sex workers.

The Question

How common is nonmedical prescription opioid use among sex workers in Vancouver BC and what factors are associated with it?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from interviews with 692 sex workers between January 2010 and February 2013. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), 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, with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Of 692 sex workers interviewed, close to **1 in 5** reported nonmedical prescription opioid use in the last 6 months.

Nonmedical prescription opioid use (NPOU) was associated with:

- Exchanging sex while high;
- Police harassment or arrest;
- Having an intimate partner who injects drugs; and
- Recent physical or sexual intimate partner violence.

Sex workers who reported working indoors (vs. on the street or in public spaces) were found to be at 74% reduced odds of nonmedical prescription opioid use.

There is increasing evidence that the criminalization of sex work and associated policing hinder harm reduction initiatives.

The Policy Implications

- The high rate of nonmedical prescription opioid use among sex workers demonstrates the need for further prevention and management strategies tailored for sex workers.
- The factors found to be associated with nonmedical prescription opioid use (NPOU), including policing practices and intimate partner violence, show that structural interventions should be implemented to deal with the growing concern of NPOU.

Argento E, Chettiar J, Nguyen P, Montaner J, Shannon K. Prevalence and Correlates of Nonmedical Prescription Opioid Use Among A Cohort of Sex Workers in Vancouver, Canada. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2014.