



Increased Risk of Incarceration for Women in Sex Work in Vancouver, BC

Background

Due to the criminal laws against sex work in Canada, women in sex work face high rates of police harassment and incarceration. There is a large amount of research showing the negative impacts of criminal laws on the health and well-being of women in sex work, but much less is known about the specific factors associated with their incarceration.

The Question

How common is incarceration among women sex workers in Vancouver, BC, and what factors are associated with increased risk of incarceration?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from baseline and follow-up interviews with 720 women sex workers in Vancouver, BC, between January 2010 and August 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 the 720 sex workers interviewed:

- 62% reported being incarcerated in their lifetime.
- Almost 1 in 4 reported being incarcerated at least once during the 44-month study period.

Incarceration in the last 6 months was associated with:

- Younger Age
- Being of a sexual/gender minority
- Being born in Canada
- Heavy drinking
- Living in unstable housing conditions

- Rates of incarceration of women in sex work in Vancouver, BC are alarmingly high.
- The most vulnerable and marginalized sex workers were at the highest risk of incarceration.

The Policy Implications

- This study highlights the social and health disparities associated with incarceration among women sex workers.
- Given the well-known social and health-related harms associated with incarceration, and associations between police harassment and incarceration in this study, our findings further add to growing calls to move away from criminalized and enforcement-based approaches to sex work in Canada and globally.

Socias ME, Deering K, Horton M, Nguyen P, Montaner JS, Shannon K. Social and structural factors shaping high rates of incarceration among sex workers in a Canadian setting. *J Urban Health* 2015.