



Food Insecurity Increases HIV/STI Risk for Young Sex Workers.

Background

Food insecurity is increasingly being seen as a critical determinant of health globally. Research has shown that unmet basic needs, including access to nutritious food, can increase vulnerability to HIV/STIs, but there has been little research focused on youth sex workers (YSWs) in countries like Canada.

The Question

What is the impact of food insecurity on sexual HIV/STI risk with clients among youth sex workers aged 14-29 years in Metro Vancouver?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **interviews with 220 youth sex workers between aged 14 and 29 conducted 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 members).

The Results

Of 220 YSWs who participated:

- 45% self-identified as a gender/sexual minority;
- 44% reported Indigenous ancestry.

Over the study period, January 2010 to August 2013:

- **67% reported struggling with money for food;**
- 72% were worried about food running out; and
- **14% had exchanged sex directly for food.**

Food insecurity: *the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate, safe foods, or the inability to acquire foods in a socially acceptable way.*

35% of YSWs reported experiencing client condom refusal (being pressured to not use a condom) at some point during the study period. In this study the prevalence of food insecurity for YSWs was more than 9 times the national average of 8.3%. YSWs who struggled with money for food had 2 times the odds of client condom refusal, **demonstrating the relationship between food insecurity and vulnerability to HIV/STIs for YSWs.**

The Policy Implications

- HIV/STI programming should be youth-centered, address food insecurity, sexual health education, and focus on gender/sexual minority and Indigenous youth.
- **Public policies for food support should be pursued as a form of harm reduction.**
- The decriminalization of sex work would support **sex workers' human rights, agency, safety, and the ability to access health services and food.**

Barreto D., Shannon K., Taylor C., Dobrer S., St. Jean J., Goldenberg S. M., Duff P., Deering K. N. The impact of food security on sexual HIV/STI risk negotiation with clients among youth sex workers. 2016. *AIDS and Behaviour*. 2016. doi: 10.1007/s10461-016-1558-8