



Vulnerabilities to HIV Infection Among Women in Survival Sex Work

Background

Women in survival sex work face multiple sexual and drug-related harms that directly increase their vulnerability to HIV infection. Although research on women who use injection drugs has explored predictors of sex work and HIV infection, little research has been done on survival sex workers in this setting.

The Question

How prevalent is HIV among women in survival sex work, and what sexual and drug-related vulnerabilities are associated with HIV infection?

The Study

Researchers from the Maka Project and what is now called the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) drew upon **data collected from 198 women in sex work in 2004 through a baseline questionnaire, HIV diagnostic testing, and pre-/post-test counseling**. For this study, researchers took into account age, ethnicity, health status, and sexual and drug risk patterns. GSHI now carries on this research as part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), a longitudinal ethnographic and qualitative 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. AESHA has ongoing outreach to indoor and outdoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Analyses of the data collected from sex workers interviewed showed:

- 26% were HIV+ at their baseline interview.

Baseline HIV infection was found to be associated with:

- Early age of sex work initiation;
- Aboriginal ethnicity;
- Daily cocaine injection;
- Intensive, daily crack smoking; and
- Unprotected sex with an intimate partner.

Initiation into sex work during youth or adolescence was associated with a two-fold increase in baseline HIV infection.

The Policy Implications

Innovative and evidence-based strategies are urgently needed that address the sexual and drug-related vulnerabilities to HIV infection among survival sex workers and in particular, interventions targeting the precursors to early initiation into sex work that have been identified in other research.

Shannon K, Bright V, Gibson K, Tyndall MW. Sexual and drug-related vulnerabilities to HIV infection among women engaged in survival sex work in Vancouver, Canada. *CJPH*, 2007; 98(6): 465-9.