

Barriers to Health Services Among Women in Sex Work Who Use Drugs: Mapping Violence & Policing

Background

Within street-based sex work and drug using populations, there is growing evidence of the role of place, both the physical setting and meanings attached to places, in impacting the effectiveness and reach of health and harm reduction services.

The Question

How are health services and needle availability impacted by violence and policing among women in street-based sex work in Vancouver, BC?

The Study

Researchers from the Maka Project and what is now called the Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) engaged in a **community-based research partnership and extensive peer-led outreach involving mapping, interviews and questionnaires with 198 women in street-based sex work in Vancouver, BC, over a 6-month period in 2006**. 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.

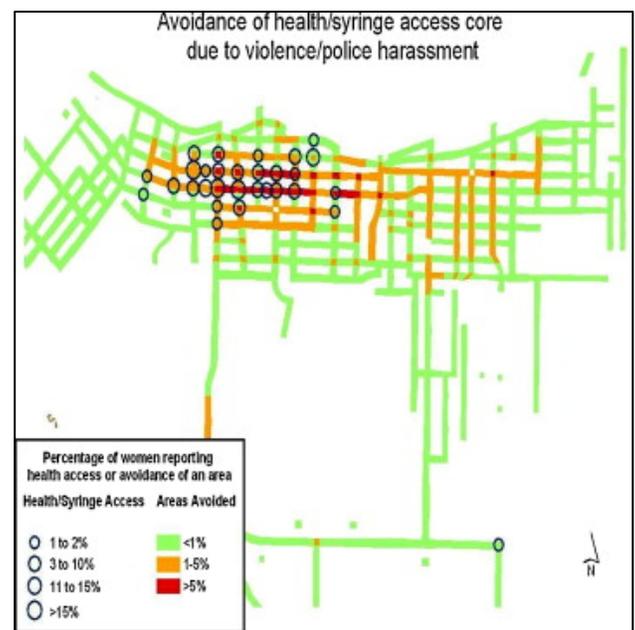
The Results

Analyses of the narratives of sex workers showed a significant geographic relationship between a core area where many health services and needle exchanges are located, and avoidance of this area due to violence and police harassment. This correlation was significantly elevated among:

- Younger women;
- Aboriginal women;
- Active injection drug users; and
- Daily crack cocaine smokers.

The Policy Implications

- Sex workers avoiding violence and police are displaced to industrial settings and side streets away from health and harm reduction services.
- This study offers evidence for environmental-structural level prevention and interventions, supported by legal reforms, that allows for safer sex work environments, including peer-based prevention, outreach and mobile resources, and peer-supervised safer sex work settings.



Shannon K, Rusch M, Bright V, Alexson D, Shoveller J, Tyndall MW. Mapping violence and policing as an environmental-structural barrier to health service and syringe availability among women in survival sex work. *IJDP, Special Issue on Women and Harm Reduction*, 2008; 19(2): 140-7.