



Contextualizing Crystal Meth Use Among Sex Workers: Couples & Gendered Risk

Background

There is growing concern of sexual risks associated with using crystal methamphetamine (meth), and a lack of research concerning its use among women involved in street-based sex work, particularly exploring the prevalence and individual, social, and structural contexts of meth use.

The Question

Among women in street-based sex work, is crystal meth use linked to enhanced sexual risks with clients and particular environmental-structural contexts?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew on a two-year (2006-2008) study of 255 women in street-based sex work, who filled in a questionnaire and participated in voluntary HIV screenings. This project is part of a longitudinal qualitative and ethnographic research project on the working conditions, health and safety of the sex industry led by GSHI/BCCfE and UBC, in collaboration with a range of community partners. The project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access) that has ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by both experiential and non-experiential team). For this study, researchers took into account individual, interpersonal and environmental-structural contextual risk factors including: age, HIV status, ethnicity, physical/sexual violence, sharing drug supplies, having an intimate partner who uses drugs, homelessness, working area and police harassment.

The Results

Analyses of narratives of sex workers show:

- 78 (32%) had used meth in their lifetime;
- 61 (24%) used meth during the 2-year follow-up period.

The women who reported meth use were more likely to:

- Inject heroin;
- Have a primary male sex partner who obtains drugs for them;
- Work and live in marginalized public spaces.

Researchers did not find a strong relationship between meth use among female sex workers and enhanced sexual risks: such as number of clients, or unprotected sex with clients or primary sex partners.

Meth use was more prevalent within drug-using sexual partnerships, suggesting a gendered pattern of risk. In male-female couples, drug involvement has been associated with male psychological dominance, increased physical and sexual violence and associated HIV risks.

The Policy Implications

- This study shows a need for policies and interventions that address: 1) the risk environment of street-based sex work (such as safer work spaces and mobile outreach distributing harm reduction supplies); and 2) the context of meth use as gender-sensitive and couple-focused.

Shannon K, Strathdee S, Shoveller J, Zhang R, Montaner J, Tyndall M. [Crystal methamphetamine use among female street-based sex workers: Moving beyond individual-focused interventions](#). Drug Alcohol Depend. 2011 Jan 1;113(1): 76-81.