



Homelessness, Sex Work & Violence: The Need for Safe, Supportive Housing Models

Background

Despite a large body of research focusing on the contextual factors behind homelessness among injection drug users, little research has been done to date exploring the prevalence and context behind homelessness among women in street-based sex work.

The Question

How common is homelessness among women in street-based sex work in Vancouver, BC and in what contexts does this homelessness happen?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew on data from **questionnaires and interviews conducted with 252 women in street-based sex work in Vancouver, BC, over an 18-month period**, looking at their experiences of homelessness, defined as sleeping on the street for one or more nights in the past 6 months. This project is part of 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 project serves as a qualitative arm 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).

The Results

Profile of a sex worker reporting homelessness:

- Younger age;
- More exposure to sexual violence by partners;
- Higher number of clients per week (10+);
- More likely to engage in intensive daily crack use (10+ rocks daily);
- More likely to serve clients outdoors.

HIV risk factors for sex work:

- Individual – age, ethnicity, drug use;
- Interpersonal – high number of clients, inconsistent condom use, pressure to have unprotected sex, sharing drug supplies, assault by client/partner;
- Work environment – types of outdoor solicitation spaces, indoor vs. outdoor

Link between higher number of clients and homelessness: a lack of housing may increase economic dependency on sex work as a form of survival.

Link between exposure to sexual violence and homelessness: a lack of safe, affordable spaces may reduce ability to negotiate safety, and raise risk of exploitation and abuse.

43% reported at least one lifetime incidence of homelessness

The Policy Implications

- This study shows a need for policies that support safe secure housing options for women in sex work, from low-threshold transitional shelters to supportive housing models.
- The study supports a growing body of research of the harms of a criminalized and enforcement-based approach to sex work, and **evidence-based need for its decriminalization.**

Duff P, Deering K, Gibson K, Tyndall M, Shannon K. Homelessness among a cohort of women in street-based sex work: the need for safer environment interventions. BMC Public Health. 2011 Aug 12: 11:642.