



Sex Work & Sporting Events: The Public Health Impacts of the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games

Background

The 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, BC, Canada that took place from February 12-28th 2010, received significant media attention amidst concerns of increased human trafficking, supply and demand for paid sex, and risk for HIV/STI, largely concentrated in sex work that is street-based.

The Question

To what extent did the Olympics disrupt local sex work environments, and what were the public health impacts in relation to HIV/STI risks?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team interviewed 207 Vancouver-based women (including transgendered) indoor and outdoor sex workers: 107 sex workers were interviewed during the 2010 Olympics (January 19th to March 14th); and 100 sex workers were interviewed post-Olympics (April 1st to July 1st). 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 demographics of those interviewed:

- Median age: 33 years
- Ethnicity:
 - Indigenous/ ethnic minority – 51.2%
 - Caucasian/ white – 48.8%
- Work spaces:
 - Outdoor/public place – 82.5%
 - Home – 31.6%
 - Indoor space (brothels) – 26.2%
 - Entertainment (dancing) – 16.0%

The Results

Analyses of narratives of sex workers show that despite media concerns, **there was no statistically significant report of increases in the supply of sex workers during the Olympics, or reports of trafficked sex workers before or after the Olympics.** During the Olympics more sex workers reported increased police harassment, decreased availability and increased difficulty meeting clients due to road closures and construction. Police harassment can drive street-based sex workers to isolated spaces far from health and support services, making them more vulnerable to violence and HIV/STI transmission.

The Policy Implications

- There is a need for more research into the public health impacts of large-scale sporting events on vulnerable populations such as sex workers, but this study shows that **host cities of future events should adopt evidence-based public interventions** such as removing criminal sanctions on sex work and piloting & evaluating safer indoor workspaces, to decrease potential public health consequences.

Deering KN, Chettiar J, Chan K, Taylor M, Montaner JS, Shannon K. Sex work and the public health impacts of the 2010 Olympic Games. *Sex Transm Infect.* 2012 Jun; 88(4): 301-3.