



Sex Work Economies: Street Cost of Drugs, Sex Work Income & Drug Use Patterns

Background

Illicit drug use has been found to be an important precursor to entry into street-based sex work for women, but little research has examined how the street cost of drugs, types of drug use and sex work characteristics independently relate to income earned by women in street-based sex work.

The Question

How do the street cost of drugs, types of drug use and characteristics of sex work independently relate to income earned by women in street-based sex work?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team used data from a sample of **129 women in street-based sex work who use drugs in Vancouver, BC who completed a baseline questionnaire and follow-up interviews from 2006 to 2008**. This project is part of an longitudinal ethnographic and qualitative study of 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). For this study, researchers took into account interpersonal risk factors, such as sharing used syringes and/or pipes, having an intimate, non-commercial sexual partner, social factors like age and ethnicity, and income and living/work environments.

The Results

Analyses of the narratives of sex workers showed:

- On average, women in street-based sex work reported earning a weekly income of \$300 from sex work, spending \$400 weekly on drugs, and having 6 clients;
- Women in sex work who injected heroin, those with higher numbers of clients (10+ weekly), and youth (under 25 years) reported significantly higher sex work income as compared to older sex workers;
- Consistent condom use by clients was associated with higher sex work incomes, suggesting that other factors may interact to shape the relationship between condom use by clients and weekly sex work income in street-based sex work economies, including work environment and client population characteristics.

The Policy Implications

- The study supports the need for **an evidence-based public health approach to drug use and sex work**, which includes programs for treatment, prevention and support, and alternative approaches, such as opiate-substitution therapy, to address the social cost of heroin addiction.
- Improved addictions treatment could reduce women's dependence on sex work to support their drug use and addiction. Specifically tailored programs should be piloted and evaluated.

Deering KN, Shoveller J, Tyndall MW, Montaner JS, Shannon K. The street cost of drugs and drug use patterns: relationships with sex work income in an urban Canadian setting. *Drug Alcohol Depend.* 2011 Nov 1; 118(2-3): 430-6.