



Youth Who Sell Sex: The Need for Safe, Supportive Housing and Tailored Interventions

Background

Street-entrenched youth (under age 24) are one of the most vulnerable health populations, as they are more likely to have experienced high rates of abuse, stigmatization and marginalization. They face an increased risk for substance abuse, HIV and poor access to health services.

The Question

What are the individual, social and structural factors that shape the experiences of youth in sex work?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team **gave questionnaires to 56 young women and girls in sex work in Vancouver, BC between 2005 and 2008** asking about their experiences with sex work. 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

In comparison with older women in sex work, youth were more likely to:

- Spend fewer years in sex work;
- Be of Aboriginal ancestry;
- Be homeless.

Those experiencing homelessness face higher HIV risks and are:

- More likely to service clients in public spaces;
- More likely to inject heroin on a daily basis;
- Significantly less likely to access methadone maintenance therapy.

There is a need for culturally appropriate prevention, treatment, healing and housing services specifically for young, Aboriginal women:

More than half of the 56 youth who participated in this study were of Aboriginal ancestry

The Policy Implications

- The criminal law prohibiting communicating for the purposes of prostitution has a disproportionately adverse effect on vulnerable youth, pushing them outdoors and to isolated environments away from health and social supports, and should be removed.
- Sex workers experiencing homelessness face elevated risks of HIV, and require tailored and innovative interventions to support these young women and girls' safety, including age and gender-specific supportive housing models, methadone treatment and 24-hour safe spaces.
- Resources should be directed toward Aboriginal communities. Health authorities should develop prevention, treatment, healing, and housing services specifically for young Aboriginal women in street-based survival sex work.

Miller CL, Fielden SJ, Tyndall MW, Zhang R, Gibson K, Shannon K. Individual and structural vulnerability among female youth who exchange sex for survival. *J Adolesc Health* 2011 Jul; 49(1): 36-41.