



Vulnerabilities Among Lesbian & Bisexual Sex Workers: Youth, Violence & Drug Use

Background

Research on sex workers' health has largely focused on female sex workers with little attention to sexual and gender diversity, despite evidence that transgender and sexual minority populations experience greater social and health inequities like homelessness, stigma and targeted policing. The experiences and HIV risk among lesbian and bisexual sex workers have been under researched.

The Question

What are the factors associated with identifying as lesbian and bisexual among women in street-based or hidden off-street sex work in Vancouver, BC?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **questionnaires and baseline interviews with 510 women in sex work in Vancouver, BC from 2011 to 2013**. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), a longitudinal ethnographic and quantitative 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, with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Of 510 sex workers interviewed, 18.6% (95 women) identified as lesbian or bisexual, and nearly 18% were youth under age 24.

Analysis of the data showed that lesbian and bisexual sex workers were significantly more likely to report HIV risks including:

- Inconsistent condom use with regular clients & client condom refusal, possibly due to increased risk of violence and reduced ability to negotiate condom use;
- Soliciting clients in street-based venues;
- Incarceration; and
- Homelessness.

Lesbian and bisexual women are highly overrepresented in sex work in Canada.

Identifying as lesbian or bisexual was found to be independently associated with: non-injection drug use, being a youth (under age 24), and having experienced physical and/or sexual violence by clients.

The Policy Implications

- This study highlights the importance of considering individual *and* environmental factors, particularly client-perpetrated violence, related to sexual identity among sex workers in future research, and in the development of HIV prevention programs.
- There is an **urgent need for HIV interventions and harm reduction programs tailored to lesbian and bisexual sex workers** to address client violence and stimulant use.

Lyons T, Kerr T, Duff P, Feng C, Shannon K. Youth, violence and non-injection drug use: Nexus of vulnerabilities among lesbian and bisexual sex workers. 2014. AIDS Care.