



A 'Spatial Isolation' Index: The Built Environment & Sexual & Drug Use Risks to Sex Workers

Background

Spatial isolation of sex workers, or the geographic concentration of sex work in isolated spaces, away from the public eye (e.g. due to police enforcement practices) has been associated with increased harms to sex workers, including gender-based violence, risky sexual/ drug-related behaviours, and lack of access to health care. Regardless, there has been little dialogue between built environment/ spatial research of health inequities, and qualitative/ social epidemiological research of social health harms.

The Question

How can the exchange of sex for drugs be understood through the social, physical and structural features of overlapping street-based sex work and drug scenes?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **questionnaires and interviews with 510 women in sex work in Vancouver, BC between 2010-2011** and external, publically available, neighbourhood environment data. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), 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, with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

Of 510 sex workers, 328 reported working in street-based/ outdoor environments and were included in the analyses.

The built environment was shown to shape risks within overlapping street-based sex work and drug scenes.

The **'Spatial Isolation' Index** showed increased spatial isolation to be significantly associated with exchanging sex for drugs.

'Spatial Isolation' Index

Comprised of seven indicators measuring features of the built environment

1. Sum of the length of major roads
2. Sum of the length of alley roads
3. Percentage of commercial land use
4. Percentage of industrial land use
5. Percentage of parks
6. Number of light posts
7. Percentage of building footprint/total built environment

An analysis of each **'Spatial Isolation' indicator** separately showed that indicators suggesting greater spatial isolation (e.g. parks) were significantly positively associated with exchanging sex for drugs, while those suggesting decreased spatial isolation (e.g. commercial areas, lighting, buildings) were significantly negatively associated with exchanging sex for drugs.

The Policy Implications

- This study highlights the important role that spatially-oriented responses, such as safer environment interventions, and structural responses, such as a decriminalized model of sex work, could potentially play in improving the health, safety and well-being of sex workers.

Deering KN, Rusch M, Amram O, Chettiar J, Nguyen P, Feng CX, Shannon K. Piloting a 'Spatial Isolation' Index: The Built Environment and Sexual and Drug Use Risks to Sex Workers. *IJDP*, 2013. (In Press)