



Sex Work Laws & HIV Prevention Continue to Fail Youth: Early Sex Work Linked to Police Arrest & HIV

Background

Little is known about the experiences of women who start sex work before age 18, or how this relates to their HIV risk and criminalization in adulthood. Despite evidence to the contrary, media and the public often suggest that many migrant/new immigrant sex workers, or those working in indoor spaces like massage parlours, started sex work before the age of 18.

The Question

What are the characteristics of sex workers who started working before they were 18 years old? Are these youth more likely to be HIV positive or criminalized in adulthood?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **questionnaires and follow-up interviews with 508 women in sex work in Vancouver, BC from 2010-2011**. 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 is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access) with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential team).

The Results

- The average age of sex work entry was 20: 38%, or 193 of 508 women, started before age 18.
- Women who reported starting sex work early were largely:
- **1) street-based; 2) drug-involved; 3) born in Canada.**
- Only 3% of foreign-born sex workers reported starting sex work before age 18.
- Only one-fifth of women who entered sex work early reported being coerced or "turned out", and only 5% among those who began in adulthood.
- **Starting sex work before age 18 (vs. over age 18) was independently linked to:**
 - **Police arrest for sex work (44% vs. 16%)**
 - **HIV infection (20% vs. 11%)**

Canada's criminalized laws & HIV prevention failing youth: Among adult sex workers, those who started sex work before age 18 were twice as likely to become HIV positive and be arrested by police for sex work in adulthood.

The Policy Implications

- The current criminalization of sex work in Canada negatively affects the most vulnerable youth who started sex work before age 18, with 44% reporting arrest by police for sex work as adults.
- Evidence-based policy reform, including decriminalization of sex work among consenting adults, is needed to ensure health and social supports are available to vulnerable youth.
- This study shows an urgent need for HIV prevention and services tailored to the needs of youth.

Goldenberg SM, Chettiar J, Simo A, Silverman JG, Strathdee SA, Montaner J, Shannon K. Early sex work initiation independently elevates odds of HIV infection and police arrest among adult sex workers in a Canadian setting. Epub ahead of print.