



Exchanging Sex-For-Crack: Risky Sex and Drug Use Niches

Background

Past research has shown that crack cocaine use is associated with increased sexual risks and transmission of HIV/STIs, particularly for street-based sex workers. What we don't know is what risk factors might influence sex workers to exchange sex-for crack cocaine.

The Question

What factors, including those related to sexual risk and transmission of HIV/STI, place street-based sex workers in Vancouver, BC at increased risk of exchanging sex-for-crack cocaine?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **questionnaires and follow-up interviews with 206 women in sex work who smoke crack cocaine in Vancouver, BC from 2006-2008**. 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 Phase I (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access) with ongoing outreach to street-based sex work venues.

The Results

Of 206 sex workers who smoke crack cocaine interviewed, 101 (49%) reported exchanging sex-for-crack over the 18-month study.

Risk Factors for exchanging sex-for-crack were found to include:

- Sharing a crack pipe with a client;
- Smoking crack in a group of strangers in a 'niche' setting; and

Sex-for-crack exchanges were found to increase sex workers' risk of HIV/STI transmission through servicing a greater number of clients (more than 10) per week.

These exchanges may involve a highly gendered power dynamic putting women at risk of violence and HIV/STI transmission, due to difficulty negotiating condom use.

What is a 'niche'?
This study confirms previous ethnographic work in Vancouver that describe marginalized physical spaces, like alleys and crack houses, as 'niche' settings for drug use, where using in groups and sharing drug supplies are the norm, and where sex-for-crack exchanges are fostered and perpetuated.

The Policy Implications

- This study supports the removal of criminal sanctions on sex work to allow sex workers to work and smoke in safer indoor spaces to remove the need to smoke in high risk outdoor niches.
- Safer smoking facilities and access to safer smoking kits may provide an environment for safer smoking practices and choices, and increase exposure to health care and treatment services.
- Gender-sensitive interventions should be developed that address environmental *and* individual-level factors influencing sex-for-crack exchanges by women in sex work.

Duff P, Tyndall M, Buxton J, Zhang R, Kerr T, Shannon K. Sex-for-crack exchanges: Associations with risky sexual and drug use niches in an urban Canadian city. *Harm Reduct J* (2013).