



Nonmedical Prescription Opioid Use Among Sex Workers in Vancouver, BC

Background

The nonmedical use of prescription opioids (POs) is a major public health concern in North America. Research shows that nonmedical prescription opioid use (NPOU) is growing among key populations and that POs are increasingly available in street-level drug markets. Despite this evidence, there is little research examining PO use in Canada among key vulnerable populations, such as sex workers.

The Question

What is the prevalence and factors correlated with NPOU among Vancouver sex workers?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **interviews and questionnaires with 692 sex workers between January 2010 and February 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 692 sex workers interviewed, close to one-fifth reported NPOU (injection or non-injection) in the last 6 months.

Factors found to be correlated with recent NPOU included:

- Exchanging sex while high;
- Police harassment/arrest;
- Intimate partner injects drugs; and
- Recent physical/sexual intimate partner violence.

“Increasing evidence demonstrates that criminalized sex work environments and policing subvert harm reduction initiatives.”

Soliciting clients from indoor establishments (vs. street/public spaces) was correlated with a 74% reduced odds of NPOU.

The Policy Implications

- The high prevalence of NPOU use among sex workers underscores the need for further prevention and management strategies tailored to this key population.
- The correlates of NPOU uncovered here suggest that structural interventions addressing policing practices and intimate partner violence should be implemented to deal with the growing concern of NPOU, which often results in increased rates of morbidity and mortality.

Argento E, Chettiar J, Nguyen P, Montaner J, Shannon K. Prevalence and Correlates of Nonmedical Prescription Opioid Use Among A Cohort of Sex Workers in Vancouver, Canada. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. 2014.