



The Impact of Food Security on HIV/STI Risk Negotiation with Clients Among Youth Sex Workers

Background

Food insecurity is increasingly being recognized as a critical determinant of health globally. Research has shown that unmet basic needs, including access to nutritious food, can lead to increased sexual vulnerability, but little research has focused on youth sex workers (YSWs) in resource-rich countries.

The Question

What is the impact of food insecurity on sexual HIV/STI risk negotiation with clients among youth sex workers aged 14-29 years in Metro Vancouver?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **interviews with 220 youth sex workers between age 14 and 29** conducted between January 2010 and August 2013. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), an ongoing 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 members).

The Results

Of 220 YSWs aged 14-29 who participated:

- 45% self-identified as a gender/sexual minority; and
- 44% reported Indigenous ancestry.

Over the study period, January 2010 to August 2013:

- 67% reported limited financial ability to afford food;
- 72% were worried about food running out; and
- 14% had exchanged sex directly for food.

Over three-quarters of youth sex workers interviewed were considered food insecure at some point over the study period.

35% reported experiencing client condom refusal and at least one type of food insecurity at some point during the study period, demonstrating the relationship between financial food insecurity and vulnerability to HIV/STIs for youth sex workers. In this study the prevalence of food insecurity for YSWs was more than 9 times the national average of 8.3%.

The Policy Implications

- HIV/STI programming and prevention should be youth-centered, address food insecurity and sexual health education, and should focus on gender/sexual minority and Indigenous youth.
- Public policies for food support should be pursued as harm reduction, and should not rely on strained charitable organizations.
- This research supports the decriminalization of sex work to support sex workers' human rights, agency, safety, and the ability to access health services and food.

Barreto D., Shannon K., Taylor C., Dobrer S., St. Jean J., Goldenberg S. M., Duff P., Deering K. N. The impact of food security on sexual HIV/STI risk negotiation with clients among youth sex workers. 2016. *AIDS and Behaviour*. 2016. doi: 10.1007/s10461-016-1558-8