

Sex Workers

Sex work is defined as the use of sexual activity for income or employment or for non-monetary items (CDC, 2014). Sex workers represent a diverse group with varied backgrounds, diverse life circumstances, and different levels of safety (Spice, 2007). Given the nature of the work, sex workers, their clients, and their regular partners are at increased risk of becoming infected with HIV or other sexually transmitted infections. Some sex workers or clients may be involved in additional types of risky behavior, such as injection drug use (World Health Organization).

Very few studies have been carried out to characterize HIV prevalence among sex workers in the United States (Sullivan, Jones, and Baral, 2014). Because this population is stigmatized and the activity is largely illegal, studies have been difficult to carry out. However, at least one study found that HIV prevalence among street-based sex workers, most of whom had a history of drug use, was significantly higher than among other populations (Inciardi, Surratt, and Kurtz, 2006). In recent years, sex workers are increasingly moving from street-based work to providing internet-based services which has made it more difficult to reach this population and understand health-related risk factors (Dank, Khan, Downey, and Kotonias, 2014).

The Medical Monitoring Project, a CDC-funded supplemental surveillance activity to learn more about the experiences and needs of persons living with HIV disease, includes questions about the use of sex in exchange for money, drugs, food, shelter, or other items (CDC, 2015). In Illinois, an estimated 5% of respondents in 2012 reported engaging in transactional sex in the past 12 months. Because respondents only included persons receiving HIV care, this is likely an underestimate of the occurrence of transactional sex among all persons living with HIV disease.

Interventions aimed at empowering sex workers and providing them with HIV prevention, treatment and care, and support services have proven effective in a wide range of formal and informal sex work settings (World Health Organization). The World Health Organization has developed a toolkit for prevention

and care in sex work settings (World Health Organization). In Illinois, various nonprofit organizations provide outreach to sex workers to provide harm reduction interventions (Harm Reduction Coalition, 2015) and non-judgmental care (PROS Network).

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