

Reinforcing Epidemics: Poverty, Violence, Crack and HIV among Women in El Salvador

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Objectives

- To document sexual risk practices associated with crack use in the greater metropolitan area of San Salvador, El Salvador.
- To document contextual and behavioral factors affecting potential HIV transmission among crack smokers who engage in risky sex.

Methods

- In-depth interviews
 - Sample of male and female crack users (21 women, 12 men)
 - Separate sample of sex workers (20 women)
 - Over 18 years old
 - Women were over-recruited
 - Recruited in drug treatment centers, health clinics, shelters or on the street

Interviews

- Brief demographic interview:
 - Age
 - Employment
 - Income level
 - Sources of income
 - Education level
 - Gang membership
 - Quantity and frequency of drug use

In-depth Interviews

- Personal history: childhood and school experiences, family composition
- Drug use history
- Drug use sites
- Involvement in gangs
- Sexual experiences and HIV risk experiences while using crack
- Sex work initiation
- Sexual experiences and condom use with clients and regular partners
- Violence during sex work

Demographic Characteristics

- 80% women, 20% men
- Mean age, 29 years
- 71% completed less than 9th grade (80% women, 50% men)
- 12% had never attended school (16% women, 0% men)
- 39% earned less than \$150 in the last month (42% women, 20% men)
- 16% earned less than \$50 (18% women, 0% men)
- 33% belonged to a gang (37% women, 25% men)

Sources of Income in the Last 30 Days

- Full time work (20% men, 8% women)
- Part time work (20% men, 8% women)
- Temporary work (20% men, 5% women)
- Street vending 31%
- Panhandling (10% men, 15% women)
- Family (20% men, 10% women)
- Partner (20% men, 10% women)
- Remittances (40% men, 20% women)
- Robbing (20% men, 15% women)

Crack Use

- **Men**

- Mean age at first use
18
- Used an average of 22
days in the last month
- Spent an average of
\$35 per day on crack

- **Women**

- Mean age of first use
22
- Used an average of 16
days in the last month
- Spent an average of
\$44 per day on crack

Sex work and Crack Use

- All but one woman from the crack smoking sample engaged in sex work at some point in their lives.
- All but one woman from the sex worker sample had smoked crack.
- Different trajectory than in U.S.

Prevalence of Childhood Sexual Abuse and Adult Sexual Victimization

- 50% were raped before the age of 14
- 78% of the women were raped at some point in their lives
- 30% were raped multiple times throughout their lives

Childhood Sexual Abuse

- Were raped by family members in their own homes in over 50% of the cases
- Others were raped while selling goods on the street
- Girls were blamed or feared being blamed for the abuse
- Girls often kept silent after abuse, felt guilty, damaged or “ruined” after the abuse

Initiation of Sex Work

- Girls left their homes when they were between 8 and 18 years old. The majority were between 12 and 16.
- Left to escape poverty, abuse or both.
- The majority dropped out of school, and had few employment skills

- Carmen: I was living with a friend, she sold with me at the bus stop and let me stay with her at her house. She told me, “Let’s go to San Salvador and make some money. We can sell chicken in a restaurant.” Pollo Zoila, the business was called, I remember it well, I have it here in my mind and when we entered they said, “These girls are really pretty,” and they sent me to the whorehouse. I wasn’t in the restaurant. “You have to sleep with all the men.” “But I don’t want to do that,” I said. “But you have to like all the other girls.” I cried every night. “If you want to make money and bring home money to your family, you have to sleep with all the men and you will make money.”

Introduction to Drug Use

- Raquel: I started working ...[in a] salon...They sold powder cocaine there and they cooked it in spoons, in cans and they made crack...And I started to go with clients who smoked and they gave me [crack]. And that's where I learned to smoke crack.
- Angelica: I started using drugs [in the brothel] at fourteen. The first thing that clients do is give you a Regia [beer], a shot [of liquor], a box of cigarettes. That's what men do.

Drugs help women deal with past sexual abuse and current sex work

- Esperanza: When I'm [having sex with a client] it's painful because I feel dirty to see that one man in touching me, then another. I've felt really dirty but the need for money made me go to bed with so many men.
- Interviewer: What is it that you use generally?
- Esperanza: Coke, crack makes me shy and doesn't let me work because I don't like them to touch me, I get scared, so coke or drunk like that, or being like my body's asleep to not feel that the man is abusing me.
- Maritza: Like I've always been abused, so almost always when I prostitute I had to be drugged to be able to stand the people because it was the only way I could be nice to them, you know.

The vicious circle: Drugs, sex work, and violence

- When their drug use increased and their physical appearance deteriorated, many women turned to street level sex work where their risk of physical and sexual victimization and HIV risk increased considerably.
- Women earn less money on the street than in brothels, and also need more money to support their increasing drug habits. Therefore, they may agree to more risky sex, or sex for crack exchanges.

- Ana: When they gave me rock here, I liked it and I sold all my things and after that I was screwed because I used drugs and I didn't have any money. When I was really using drugs, I left there [the brothel] and I started walking the streets, robbing, panhandling...I started to sell myself for a dollar. I didn't use condoms anymore. I did everything in the street, speaking vulgarly, two or three dishes, doing it normal, oral and vaginal. I did it wherever.
- Daisy: Like when I started there were just a few [clients per day] because I charged a lot. So the places where I worked, they were luxury places. So for me to be with two, three men, that was a lot...and with that I was done for the night. And I earned a lot of money so that I didn't work three days. Well, now, when I started my life as an addict, of course all the money I earned in prostitution, it was all lost in drugs...I went to the Parque Centenario and I had to be with 20, 25, 30 men a day.

- Lucia: The majority of time [I didn't use condoms]. I mean, really I didn't care and when there were clients who said, "Look, how much?" "Three dollars," and they said, "But without a condom how much?" "Then four," because I was running a risk I knew but I was interested in the money...I had to die of something I said, what I don't want right now is to die of the craving to use [drugs].
- Maria: I've done it too, selling myself only for drugs sometimes. For example, they would buy drugs, "What do you want, money or drugs?" Well, if I want to smoke, "I need to smoke," like that right? Give me one part cash and one part drugs," like that.

Sexual Assault and Sex work

- Rosa: One time they took me from here where I was working to the sugar fields. They threw me down a hill, three men. Another time, I got into a car with just one guy and he said, “How much?” “Give me ten dollars,” I told him. So he said, “We’re going here to the hotel Aguila” that was just down the street. So after I got in the car I told him, “Look, here’s the hotel.”...He said, “Today you’re going with me hija de puta and you’re going to die.” So I said, “I don’t know you, I’ve never done anything to you.” When we entered Soyapango a bunch of gang members got into the car, he was stopping every other minute. You know how many got in? Thirteen. And the thirteen had sex with me....They left me naked, without shoes, they hit me hard and they left me thrown away in a dump. [After I got back to the motel] I couldn’t stop crying and crying and crying, and look man, I said, how you suffer because of drugs, because you want more and more and more.

Strategies for Protection

- **STDs and HIV**
 - Condoms
 - Checking clients for symptoms
 - Medical attention
- **Sexual Assault**
 - Working with regular clients
 - Not getting into cars
 - Using hotels with security guards

- Interviewer: What measures have you taken based on these negative experiences that you've had with clients?
- Laura (30): There are clients who are good and there are clients who are disturbed, because there are some who abuse you, hit you. They've wanted to hit me but I don't let them. Always I go to places that are close by, I don't like to go far and I let the clients go behind me or I go ahead and they follow me when they're in cars...Now if they want to grab you from behind [have anal sex], I don't let them. And that's a problem sometimes too. "And aren't you a whore?" they say and the problems start and that's where you can't let them. I don't let them although they're going to hit me, but you've got to defend yourself and start to shout. And when you shout, here in these motels around here, there's security.
- Interviewer: And do you always go to motels where there's security?
- Laura: Yes, you tell them before, "Look just in case...", because there are clients that are difficult, that are disturbed, "If I shout or bang something, be ready," I tell them, "Do me the favor." "Yeah, yeah," they say. And they come through.

Self-reported HIV

- Self-report data gathered in qualitative interviews indicate that HIV may be considerably higher in this high-risk population than Salvadoran national rates (0.6%)*
- 8.5% of participants reported they were HIV positive.
- 79% knew at least one person who was positive, had AIDS or had died of AIDS.

Conclusions

- Poverty, sexual victimization and gender inequity are contextual factors that compel some women to engage in sex work and crack use.
- Addiction to crack increased women's risk for HIV as they turned to street level sex work, and engaged in riskier sexual behaviors.

Recommendations

- Multi-level interventions
 - Interventions to reduce the prevalence of sexual abuse and rape
 - Greater access to drug treatment
 - HIV prevention through peer-led interventions and traditional outreach activities
 - Addressing poverty and limited educational and economic opportunities through adult education programs and job training for sex workers, gang members and crack smokers