EXCHANGE SEX AND SUBSTANCE USE WITHIN A SAMPLE OF HOMELESS YOUTH IN LOS ANGELES

Catherine Branson, MPH
UCLA Fielding School of Public Health

What is “exchange sex”?

- Exchanging sex for money, gifts, food, shelter, clothes or drugs
- Also known as “transactional sex” or “survival sex”
- Practiced by 20-30% of homeless youth (Beech, 2003; Manhattan et al., 2001 vs. 2-3% of housed youth (Homma, Nickerson, & Sawy, 2012)
- Steadily increases with the amount of time youth spend homeless (Gourie, 2003; Chen et al., 2004)
- Prospective research found an 13% incidence rate of homeless youth initiating exchange sex over a median of 2.4 years of being homeless (Weber et al., 2004)

Who are homeless youth?

- This study includes:
  - runaways (i.e., youth who have spent more than one night away from home without parental permission)
  - throwaways (i.e., youth who have been forced to leave home by their parents)
  - street youths (i.e., youth who live in high risk non-traditional locations such as under bridges and in abandoned buildings)
  - systems youth (i.e., youth who have previously been involved in government systems such as foster care or juvenile justice) (Moore, 2005)

Presenter Disclosures

Catherine Branson
The following personal financial relationships with commercial interests relevant to this presentation existed during the past 12 months:

No relationships to disclose
Homeless Youth

- In the US, 1.5 - 2 million homeless youth each year are living on the streets, in shelters, or in other temporary accommodations (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2006; Ross et al., 2005).
- Compared to normative populations of youth, homeless youth are more likely to report:
  - mental health diagnoses
  - experiences of trauma (abuse, death of parent, etc.)
  - high rates of substance use
  - irregular sleeping habits
  - poor dietary practices
  - chronic exposure to the elements (see review by Edidin, et al., 2012).

Homelessness and Sexual Risk

- Shared causal factors for homelessness and risky sexual behavior among adolescents include trauma and substance abuse.
- Homeless youth report high rates of risky sexual practices such as early sexual debut, having multiple partners, and inconsistent condom use (Goldenberg et al., 2014; Jenness et al., 2011).
- Homeless youth experience high rates of HIV (2 to 10 times the risk of other adolescents in the United States) (Young & Rice, 2016) and STIs (ranging from 11% among males to 63% among females) (Edidin et al., 2012).

Risks Associated with Exchange Sex

- Infectious disease (HIV, Hepatitis C, STIs) (Edwards, Iritani, & Halfors, 2006; Jenness, et al., 2011; Shannon et al., 2012).
- Exposure to sexual victimization and other violence (Howe & Hersh, 2015).
- Arrest and criminal prosecution (Goldenberg et al., 2004; Jenness, et al., 2011).
- Facilitates substance use (Rhodes, Grier, & Bourgois, 2006)
  - relying on a partner for drugs
  - requiring assistance with injecting
  - being second on the needle (Miller et al., 2005).

The role of substance use

- Facilitates sexual risk
  - More frequent and riskier sex associated with substance use and dependence (Meyer et al., 2011; King et al., 2012) especially stimulant use (Chapman et al., 2005).
  - Less consistent condom use
  - Riskier injection practices
  - More likely to accept offers of more money for sex without a condom (Deering et al., 2013), possibly to avoid symptoms of drug or alcohol dependence (Rekart, 2005).
  - Exchange partners are more likely to offer greater payment to forgo condom use to dependent users (Johnston, 2013).
Analysis

Sample

- Convenience sample
- 154 youth recruited from a homeless drop-in center in Santa Monica (in the greater Los Angeles area) in 2010.
- Part of a pilot longitudinal intervention study promoting hepatitis A & B vaccination (P.I. Adey Nyamathi, Ph.D.)
- Eligibility requirements for the intervention trial:
  - Homeless
  - aged 15-25 years
  - engaged in drug use within the previous 6 months

Sample

- Almost three-fourths (74%) male and between 20 and 25 years of age.
- Over one-fourth (28%) reported IDU and over half (53%) reported 10 or more lifetime sex partners.
- The sample was also primarily
  - White (55%),
  - educated through high school (60%),
  - acquainted with the juvenile or adult justice system (68%),
  - and depressed (53%).

Assessment

- Baseline behavioral assessment:
  - Lifetime substance use and recent substance use
  - Demographic variables included gender, age,
  - Length of time spent on the streets
  - Household composition at the last residence.
  - Number of sexual partners and partner type (main, casual, or anonymous)
  - Emotional support
  - Three exchange sex variables
Exchange sex items

- Exchanged sex for money in lifetime
- Exchanged sex for drugs in lifetime
- Exchanged sex as a stress coping strategy in response to an item that presented “traded sex for something you wanted or needed” as a possible response to the question “When I felt stressed I...”

Descriptive Results

- Out of 154 youth, 30 (20%) reported exchange sex
- Of these:
  - Twenty-one (70%) exchanged sex for drugs
  - Nineteen (63%) exchanged sex for money
  - Twenty-seven (90%) reported doing it for money or drugs as a stress coping mechanism.

Descriptive Results (cont.)

- Had an intimate partner: 41%
- Had 20 or more lifetime partners: 26%
- Prevalence of exchange sex approximately equal between males and females (20% vs. 17%)
- Substance use in previous 6 months:
  - Marijuana: 91%
  - Binge drinking: 62%
  - Amphetamines: 33%
  - Cocaine: 24%
  - Heroin: 14%

Multivariate Analyses*:

Logistic Regression

- Significant associations with having ever practiced exchange sex in their lifetime*:
  - Substance use in previous 6 months:
    - crack (OR 4.26, p = .000)
    - amphetamines (OR 3.44, p = .001)
    - cocaine (OR 3.00, p = .033)
    - heroin (OR 2.14, p = .033)
    - injection drug use past 6 mo. (OR 2.52, p = .012)

* Controlling for age, race/ethnicity, and gender
Multivariate Analyses: Logistic Regression

- Odds of practicing exchange sex increased significantly with age (OR = 3.27, p=.001) but were not statistically significant for White vs. Minority race/ethnicity or for gender.
- Odds of exchange sex increased with a greater number of same sex partners (p=.004) only among males.

Discussion

- Drug use drives the practice of exchange sex among youth more than any demographic characteristic part from age.
- Stimulants were associated with higher odds of exchange sex than other classes of drugs.
- Consistent with previous research, injection drug use is a key correlate of exchange sex.

In this sample, just as many young men engaged in exchange sex as young women.
- The odds of exchange sex increased with a greater number of same-sex partners (p=.004) only among males.
- These results indicate that male homeless youth should be equally targeted for risk reduction interventions to prevent harm from exchange sex.

Recommendations

- Harm reduction and structural interventions are needed to minimize health and safety risks of sexual victimization, other violence, and infectious disease for youth who practice exchange sex.
- Interventions should target both male and female youth.
- Low threshold housing and greater availability of drug treatment services would reduce the risks associated with exchange sex among homeless youth.
THANK YOU!

c.branson@ucla.edu