EXCHANGING SEX FOR CRACK-COCAINE: A COMPARISON OF WOMEN FROM RURAL AND URBAN COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT: Studies of the HIV risks of crack-cocaine using women have focused on those living in the inner city, urban areas of the country. However, reports indicate that the rates of syphilis and HIV infection have shown greater increases in rural areas than in urban ones. This paper reports the findings of a comparative study of 60 female crack-cocaine users, 25 from rural southeast Georgia and 35 from Miami, Florida, to determine their drug using and sexual practices, as well as their knowledge about AIDS and HIV transmission. Their patterns of initial and continuous drug use were similar, as were their sexual practices. However, the Miami women were more likely to have had a greater number of sexual partners than the Georgia women. Both groups were knowledgeable about AIDS and the transmission of HIV, yet all participated in activities that put them at high risk for HIV infection and transmission. Some 12 percent of the 60 respondents reported testing positive for HIV. The study suggests that at least within these populations, there are few differences between rural and urban crack using women in terms of their crack use, sexual practices, and potential for HIV infection and transmission.

INTRODUCTION

Both the professional and popular literature have documented that crack-cocaine has become a drug of choice among many inner-city populations across the United States. The widespread use of crack in these locales, particularly by low-income minorities, has resulted in increased property crime, violence, prostitution, and sexually transmitted diseases, including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). Growth...
ing rates of syphilis and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) among inner-city women have become significant: between 1986 and 1987, for example, syphilis case rates per 100,000 increased 43 percent for black women and 22 percent for white women, while rates for white males decreased during this same period. At the same time, among women ages 15 to 44, deaths from AIDS rose from 18 in 1980 to 1,430 in 1988. Among black women, ages 15 to 44, AIDS was the leading cause of death in New York and new Jersey.

The rise in syphilis and AIDS rates has been linked to an increase in the use of crack and the practice of exchanging sex for drugs among women drug users in urban areas. Of 109 black women admitted to a New York City hospital for pelvic inflammatory disease, for example, 87 percent of those testing positive for HIV infection were crack-cocaine users. A study of black adolescent crack users in the Oakland-San Francisco area found that those who combined crack use with sexual activity were more likely to report a sexually transmitted disease than those who did not.

The majority of studies of female crack users has focused on women living in inner-city, urban areas. However, reports indicate that women in rural areas are becoming increasingly vulnerable to syphilis and HIV infection. While national rates of syphilis cases rose 68 percent between 1986 and 1989, in southeast Georgia the number increased 800 percent during the same period. Over 90 percent of the syphilis cases occurred among blacks, who represent only 28 percent of the population, with black women having a higher rate of the disease than black men. Reported AIDS cases in Georgia increased from 510 new cases in 1987, to 800 in 1988, 1,106 in 1989, and 1,223 in 1990. The increase in crack use in the rural communities has been suggested as a cofactor in the rise of these sexually transmitted diseases.

It is not uncommon for female crack users to depend on the bartering of sexual services to support their drug use. Their drug use and sexual practices often vary, depending upon their location and access to drugs, as well as the extent of their addiction. Within this context, this paper reports the findings of a quantitative and qualitative study of the drug use and sexual practices of female crack users in selected rural Georgia communities and inner-city Miami, Florida. The study was designed to answer the questions: what are the sociodemographic characteristics of women who exchange sex for crack; what are the drug use and sexual histories of these women; what attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge about AIDS and HIV transmission are characteristic of those who trade sex for crack; and, how are rural and...