

Girls Speak Out

**Understanding Violence, Substance Use
and Mental Health- Related Service and
Support Needs Among Girls and Young
Women in British Columbia**



Who we are: Woman Abuse Response Program BC Women's Hospital Health Centre

- Provincial outreach program supporting communities to improve health services for women and girls affected by abuse
- Promoting integrated and coordinated responses between health, mental health, addictions, justice, social and community services
- *Girls Speak Out* Project team: Louise Godard, Naomi Armstrong, Alexxa Abi-Jaoude, Jill Cory & Caryn Lafreniere

Project Goals



- Gain a greater understanding of girls' and young women's experiences of abuse, mental health and substance use
- Use young women's voices and recommendations to inform the direction of services, education and research

Methodology

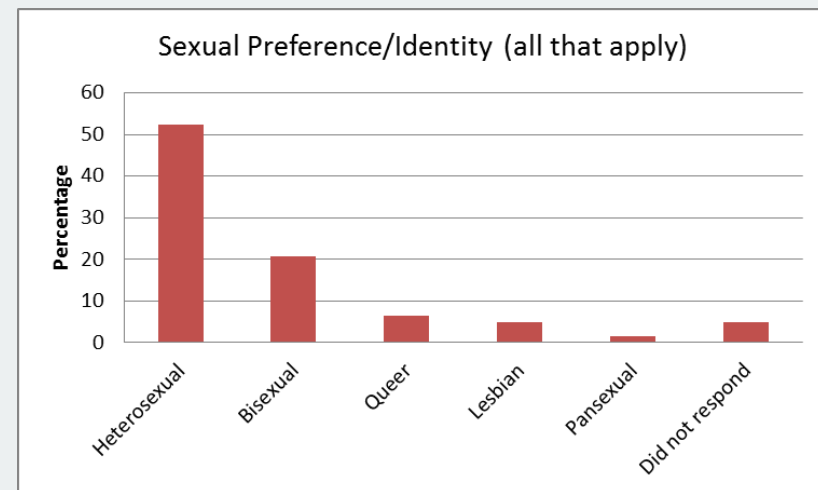
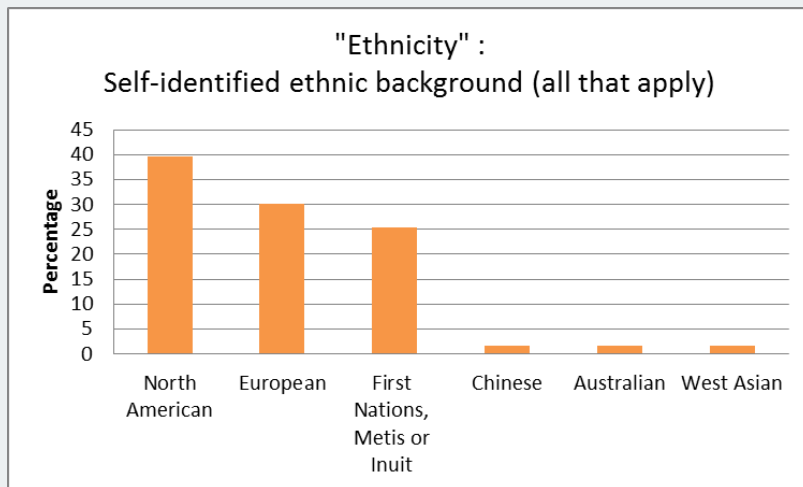


- Nine focus groups in community settings with 56 self-identified girls:
 - 16-24 years old
 - Experiences of violence, substance use, mental health concerns (*broadly defined*)
 - Currently receiving support and recruited by community organizations
- Simple frequency analysis done on survey data
- Inductive coding and grounded theory methods used to analyze qualitative data

Who we spoke to



- **Age:** **61%** 16-19 yrs old
vs. **39%** 20-24 yrs old
- **Location:** **68%** from Vancouver Island
vs. **32%** from Lower mainland

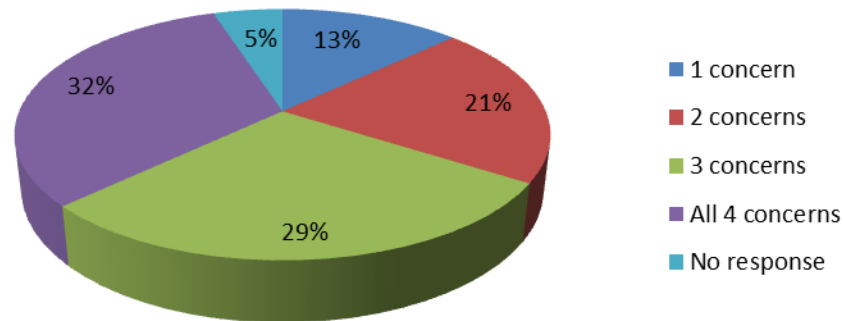


Girls' experiences



- **85%** reported experiencing violence and abuse;
- **67%** reported substance use;
- **55%** reported struggles related to insecure housing or homelessness;
- **53%** reported mental health concerns

The number of concerns reported by participants



What girls said: Various forms of abuse

- Physical abuse from male partners
- Psychological abuse from male/female partners
- Abuse from parents/step parents/guardians
- Abuse from partner's family
- Sexual assault
- Abuse by institutions (i.e. MCFD)

“And that’s what pisses me off so much about like [the] ministry [...] They’re just - they think that they’re invincible and they think that they can do whatever they want to people, but like in fact, they’re one of the biggest abusers. Point blank, they’re one of the biggest abusers.” - Katie

What girls said:

Their understandings of abuse



- Self-described naivety and normalization of abuse; also evident in the dominant discourse of abuse

“And I , well, younger people too are like a lot more naïve too, so when you first get into a relationship, you can think that that is normal, but it’s actually not.”-Jen

- Acknowledgement that normalization of abuse is an impact that contributes to the cycle

“unfortunately my abuse started when I was really young, and from that, it’s just that’s what you believe you deserve after that, that’s just it. So it screws you up so bad mentally you don’t know what’s what.” - Gabby

What girls said: Understandings of abuse cont.

- Normalization of abuse contrasted with girls' evident insight or “gut feeling”

“and you can feel that pit in your stomach, just like that pulling, where you're like “why am I doing this?” You feel it in your chest, you feel it everywhere and you're breathing, just about to walk into the room and you know you're in trouble cause of something”-Edith

- Challenges to following insight or “gut feeling”

“I remember [...] like I met this guy and I just knew he was bad ever since the moment I met him, but I was like an alcoholic back then and... he would always drink me up[...]. I talk to people and they say like, it's not my fault, but like, you know, I feel almost as it is, because you know, I knew from the very beginning.” - Alex

What girls said: Impacts and links to substance use and mental health

- Mental/Emotional impacts

“like I’ve been with guys who have made me feel like absolutely shit and that I’m worthless, so then that obviously brings on depression and anxiety probably for me.” - Jesse

- Substance Use and Self-harm

“if I was in too stressful situation I would shut down and then I would get depressed. Um and my coping mechanism was cutting...I was stressed and would get depressed and then would cut and then would get stressed about cutting and then would cut more.” - Shania

What girls said: Differences and similarities to adult women



- Peers and family can be supports or deterrents to accessing supports
- Described similar dynamics of abusive relationships
“I find like the lengths that people will go to like hide it, hide that they’re getting hurt by their partner are sometimes in the extreme cause they love them and they think they’re just going through this thing or they think they’re going to be alone forever, like “no one else will want me” - Myra
- Loyalty to parents despite abuse (new “sandwich generation”)
- Social media as another dimension of abuse for girls
 - A tool used by parents, justice system, for (over?)-monitoring
 - Used by girls for social support

What girls said: Discourse on age and legitimacy



“adults saying “kids will be kids” - are kids being kids when they kill themselves then? Like are kids being kids when they cut themselves, overdose on drugs, hang themselves because of the other “kids being kids?” - Sage

“But it’s just really hard to like fight for just even basic things especially in Vancouver because of the history that a lot of people assume. That younger kids, like even teens our age , they assume [...] we’re all drunks or we’re all drug users and shit. Or we have the perfect life and we still live with our parents.” - Jordy

What girls said:

Services, supports and barriers

- Generally limited services for girls around these issues
- Eligibility: aging out of services
“So in my experience, what really sucks was when I turned 19, a lot of the support stopped which I thought was really bad, like I was just getting to a good point and instantly suddenly it was like all my support got stopped.” - Janine
- Eligibility: better services on parole or “in system”

What girls said:

Services not sufficiently reaching out

“it’s not like I had any adult that was there trying to get me help. And I didn’t - I was fourteen years old, I didn’t realize that there’s people out there to help you with situations like that.”- Farrell

What girls said:

Services/approaches that cause harm

- Rushing to diagnose

“And it was totally uncomfortable because she’s like right off the bat [...] “oh, so you’re depressed.” No, I’m just tired of being hit all the time.”

- Kiera

- Large power difference between girl and provider

“with the psychologist that I had seen and with a couple other counselors I had dealt with, it was like, you know, I was down here at the bottom and I needed help and they were up here at the top and they could help me [...]and it just, it felt really like, oppressive is the wrong word but it felt very [...] hopeless.” -

Addy

- “guilty until proven innocent” approach

Girls' recommendations: On important services

- Counsellors in schools for “real” issues
- Youth clinics
- Safe housing
- Support groups

Girls' recommendations: On positive service providers and approaches

- Young service providers or can relate to youth
- Shared experiences or deep understanding and empathy
- Support people to “vent” to
- Confidential!!
- Low pressure, girl-led
- Unstructured, flexible, drop-in

Girls' recommendations:

On positive service providers and approaches

“sometimes you don't need people to give you like information and stuff, you just need someone to like hear you out and listen to you, like and sometimes it's hard to find people who you feel comfortable doing that with, and I think it's somebody who's like not going to judge you, somebody who's just gonna like listen to you vent and talk about these things.” - Nahanni

Final thoughts/observations



- Girls' capacity
- Girls' support/empathy for each other
- Girls' focus on relationship-building
- Girls' desire to help others in difficult situations

Project challenges



- Lack of diversity
- “Gate-keeping”
- Expectation that girls would not identify with mental health and substance use terminology
- Transience and vulnerability of target population
- Lack of support and systemic silence makes it hard to discuss these issues

Next steps



- Summary report
- Including girls' voices from more diverse backgrounds
- Phase 2: Support groups

“Groups where girls can actually like talk and found out that like, they’re not the only person and that, like, there are ways out of it.” - Jen

Thank you!



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Woman Abuse Response Program

BC Women's Hospital & Health Centre

[http://www.bcwomens.ca/Services/HealthServices/
WomanAbuseResponse](http://www.bcwomens.ca/Services/HealthServices/WomanAbuseResponse)

