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29 Sexual networks of truckers, truckchasers, and disease risks

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When truckers cross state lines they carry not only their cargo but also their accumulated disease pathogens.

The risk of disease transmission by 3.3 million US truckers and their approximately 300,000 Canadian counterparts is both real and under-investigated. Despite significant research done in developing regions (for example, sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia) that demonstrates links between high risk sexual activity within the trucking sector and disease diffusion, social and health scientists in the United States are only beginning to investigate risky sexual and substance use behaviors of several populations along US interstates.

Dale Stratford and colleagues' groundbreaking study of long-haul truckers in northern Florida in the late 1990s is the first study delving into sexual behavior among US truckers and its links to HIV. Nearly one-third of the interviewed truckers said they had frequent sex with female sex workers and that condom use was rare. A number of truckers indicated that "some truckers" use the services of male sex workers because they are less expensive than their female counterparts and more easily available. Some truckers acknowledged using drugs, primarily methamphetamines, cocaine, and alcohol. Many of the drivers knew little about AIDS, with some believing that it is a disease that only affects gay men or that condoms are of no use. Stratford's study, as well as overwhelming anecdotal evidence on truckers' risk-laden social networks, served as the impetus for our investigation. Here we present preliminary descriptive findings from ethnographies we conducted in Arizona and Oklahoma in 2001, and from ongoing fieldwork in metro Atlanta.

Our research reveals extensive high-risk sexual and drug transactions among several population groups (stationary, transient, or mobile) that coexist in close proximity to truck stops and highways. Informal and in-depth interviews with truckers and their risk contacts in various highway milieus indicate that truckers frequently engage in unprotected oral, vaginal, and anal intercourse with sex workers and other men and women along highway routes, and that they often combine their sexual encounters with drug use. Truckers' use of amphetamines, marijuana, cocaine, and crack—either to stay awake and alert while driving, to get high while partying, or to relax and/or sleep during layovers and rest periods—also emerged as a prevalent pattern.

Truckers' risk networks include a number of varied populations. The nucleus of this network—the male trucker (straight, gay/bisexual, or non-gay identified [NGI])—is often surrounded by female sex workers (for example, "lot lizards," CB-prostitutes, "traveling ladies," US and Mexican brothel workers, hustlers), MSM (men who have sex with men) (for example, "truck chasers," "good buddies," or "buffaloes" [male

counterparts of “lot lizards”]), drug dealers, pimps, “polishers” (transient workers who polish the chrome details of trucks), “lumpers” (workers who load/unload cargo), transient and seasonal laborers, homeless individuals, hitchhikers, as well as truck company and truck stop employees.

Members of these networks often play multiple roles, either simultaneously or interchangeably. Every person in the truckers’ risk network can offer distinct insights into the ways that these subcultures operate and how this may impact the transmission of disease. However, space limitations do not allow a detailed discussion of them all. Instead, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the truckers (whether non-gay identified, gay, or bisexual) and “truck chasers” (men who pursue sexual encounters with truckers in various highway milieux) because, as a result of their high risk sexual behaviors, they represent the most critical component of these networks in terms of disease transmission.

Despite our study participants’ unanimous descriptions of extreme heterosexism in the long-haul trucking industry, our interviews make clear that sexual transactions between truck chasers and NGI and/or gay/bisexual truckers are common. While all of the thirty-eight self-identified heterosexual truckers whom we interviewed vehemently denied any personal experience with truck chasers, the great majority of these heterosexual truckers were highly knowledgeable about the ways that other truckers hook up with “good buddies” (trucker slang for gay men) in “pickle parks” or highway rest areas, brake inspection areas, and truckstops.

For obvious reasons NGI men who have sex with men present a real challenge for researchers. Our knowledge of NGI truckers has thus far been heavily based on interviews with truck chasers and gay/bisexual truckers, located through elaborate websites, associations, newsletters, and events that are created by gay/bisexual truckers and other MSM interested in truckers. An annual convention of truck chasers and gay/bisexual truckers provided our research team with a rich opportunity to conduct interviews and focus groups. Convention participants were almost exclusively white men (mostly gay/bisexual truckers) between their mid-thirties and mid-forties. A number of truckers reported previous marriages and children, while others reported continued periodic sexual encounters with women. Truck chasers reported extensive and mostly anonymous sexual encounters with truckers, some numbering their encounters into the hundreds, a couple even into the thousands.

Of course the idea of men cruising for other men in public spaces is not a new phenomenon and has been documented by numerous sources, beginning with Laud Humphrey’s infamous 1970 book, *The Tearoom Trade*. Cruising in the United States has been traced back to the 1890s and was fueled by the proliferation of highway rest stops after World War II. Public or semipublic sex between NGI truckers, gay/bisexual truckers, and truck chasers is a concern only to the degree that these settings can increase the potential for engaging in risky behaviors. While fear of arrest by police and/or fear of homophobic backlash on the part of NGI truckers can enhance the excitement of the encounter, these factors simultaneously raise the level of risk.

Our research suggests that NGI men who have sex with men don’t accurately perceive their own risky behaviors, assuming that their straight identity places them in a low risk category. One of the truck chasers whom we interviewed noted that “straight” truckers who were married to women often voiced a preference for other “straight” married men:

[S]ometimes they will ask you if you are married because sometimes they feel safer having sex with other married men. I don’t know why they think they are not

going to contract HIV from having sex with other married men. I think they feel like that they are not having sex with gay men, so it is going to be OK.

This notion that married men would be less risky partners than gay men is based on the erroneous but popular logic that sexual identity, rather than sexual behavior, is the best predictor of risk.

In contrast to their descriptions of NGI truckers, most of the gay and bisexual men interviewed revealed a fairly sophisticated understanding of safer-sex behavior.

Overall, they reported low risk perceptions of HIV-infection from oral sex (their predominant sexual activity) and pro-condom attitudes toward anal sex. Paradoxically, however, a number of the truck chasers and gay/bisexual truckers interviewed also admitted irregular condom use for anal sex, explaining their selective use in a variety of ways: some based it on their insertive, rather than receptive, role during anal sex; others on their sex partner's healthy appearance; and still others on a desire to increase intimacy and/or illustrate their trust in their partners.

It's definitely a trust issue. Using condoms means no trust. I carry condoms, so if someone asks, then yes, I'll use it. But I never take it out myself. I do look their bodies over for *karposis sarcoma*, drainage, red marks, anything out of the ordinary. I don't do anything unless I can see their body. But I'm trained in health.

This truck chasers' assertion that he can "see" HIV status reveals a shocking level of ignorance regarding HIV transmission. Yet, his admission that condom use implies a lack of trust in his partner raises an equally troubling specter: that some truck chasers might not insist on the use of condoms in risky sexual encounters in order to avoid the implication that the NGI trucker is in fact gay, out of fear of a homophobic backlash. Many of the truck chasers interviewed shared experiences of being physically threatened and/or attacked, sometimes during, sometimes after, a sexual encounter with a NGI trucker.

Our research thus far has only scratched the surface of NGI-MSM trucker/truck chaser networks and issues of sexuality and health risks. At the same time, it dramatically illustrates that as social and health scientists, we need to have a better understanding of the multitude of diverse risk factors that adhere in trucker network milieus in order to create interventions that will adequately educate these diverse and hidden populations.