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# Sexual Mixing, Drug Exchanges, and Infection Risk Among Long-Haul Truck Drivers

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**Abstract** Despite extensive anecdotal evidence on US long-haul truckers' risk interactions on the road, links between their sexual mixing and drug exchanges and their potential risk for STI/BBI acquisition and dissemination remain insufficiently documented. Grounded in social ecological theories and multi method ethnographic data, this paper examines the sexual transactions and drug exchanges of key members of US trucker risk networks within diverse trucking milieux. Research has uncovered four key trucker-centered populations and their diverse risk exchanges: (a) straight male truckers who engage in casual sex with women; (b) female sexworkers (known as "lot lizards") who solicit truckers; (c) intermediaries who broker sex and drug exchanges between truckers, drug dealers and sexworkers; and (d) male truckchasers who cruise for truckers in physical and virtual milieux to engage in sex. Concurrent sexual partnerships of truckers have the potential to amplify initial infections by linking individuals of disparate epidemiological settings, thereby enabling pathogens to travel rapidly and efficiently to disparate regions. The comprehensive delineation of the role of long-haul trucking in potential disease spread is required for the

development of effective STI/HIV prevention programs for populations of interest.

**Keywords** Long-haul truckers · Risk networks · Drugs · STI/HIV risk

## Introduction

Long-haul truck drivers carry not only their own disease pathogens and vectors, but more importantly the capacity to introduce infections into new regions [1]. While ethnographic evidence has been presented on US truckers' sexual transactions on the road [2] and corroborated by epidemiological research on truckers and incidents of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (e.g., syphilis outbreak along North Carolina highways) [3], there remains a void on the types and extent of truckers' engagement in risk-laden drug exchanges and sexual mixing. Recent evidence corroborates that truckers engage in risky sexual encounters with women and men, while on the road, that are often combined with substances used to relax at the end of exhausting days, to party during downtimes, or to help remain alert during long drives [1, 4–6]. For the first time, epidemiological investigations have brought to light the magnitude of STIs and blood borne infections (BBIs) and substance use among US long-haul truck drivers: HCV (8.5–10 %), anti-HBc (10.4 %), chlamydia (1.3–1.7 %), gonorrhea (0.2 %), syphilis (0.2–3.3 %), and HIV (0.2–3.3 %), marijuana (18.1 %), methamphetamine (9.1 %), and crack (4.1–95 %) [7, 8]. Within this contextual framework, this paper delineates the sexual transactions and drug exchanges of key members of US long-haul truckers' risk networks within diverse trucking milieux (for more information on trucker networks and trucking milieux

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see Ref. [9]). While we delve into the human geography of risk, this paper neither asserts that most long-haul trucking settings in the US share the social and spatial risk characteristics described herein nor that most long-haul truck drivers exhibit similar risk-laden behavioral patterns.

## Data and Methods

Data come from the formative, multi method phase of a large-scale ethnopediological study that delves into the ascertainment of the role of trucker networks' configuration in STI/HIV infection risk. Respondent-driven sampling procedures [10] were used to recruit truckers and their risk contacts in order to collect several forms of data. The study was approved by the Arizona State University IRB office, implemented all human subject protections, and was conducted without obtaining any identifying information from study participants. Data collection commenced with non-participant observation at five (rural and urban) Arizona truckstops and informal interviews with 71 individuals including long-haul truckers, female sexworkers (FSWs), intermediaries (mostly transient individuals who serve as a conduit for truckers, FSWs, and drug suppliers by facilitating exchanges of illicit substances and sexual services), and truckstop employees. Information gleaned from this phase led to targeted in-depth personal interviews with 33 truckers, 10 FSWs, and 9 intermediaries conducted at one rural (Casa Grande area) and one urban (Phoenix metropolitan area) truckstop. Following leads gained during these interviews, researchers attended a convention of gay/bisexual truckers and truckchasers held in Oklahoma where 2 focus groups (with 8 individuals in total) and 7 individual interviews were conducted with long-haul truckers and truckchasers. Following other leads gained at the convention, researchers conducted phone interviews with 14 truckchasers and 5 gay/bisexual truckers recruited from websites targeting men who have sex with men (MSM) and MSM interested in truckers in particular. Diverse collected data provided insight into participants': (1) occupational background (i.e., trucking history, health history); (2) sexual and substance-use behaviors (i.e., concurrent sexual partnerships, substances used); (3) psychosocial factors (i.e., coping mechanisms, sexual identity); (4) spatial domains (i.e., trucker pathways, trucking settings); and (5) socio structural issues (i.e., healthcare access, working conditions).

Data were transcribed and entered into NVivo for textual analysis. Preliminary thematic coding was used to establish measures of relationships between truckers and their risk contacts within a wide array of trucking milieu; and an open coding approach was used to bracket text into themes [11]. The nature of the data warranted multilayered

coding of text into several themes following the establishment of inter-coder reliability and validity [12], which was repeated as new coding categories of inquiry emerged. Once preliminary thematic bracketing was completed, analysis was used to complete four tasks: (1) axial coding and memoing to explore themes and relationships among trucker settings, engagement of different populations with these settings, sexual behaviors, and relationships and interactions between and among populations; (2) thick descriptions of sexual settings for additional detail; (3) explanations of how trucking settings and conditions influence sexual interactions and drug transactions and expose populations to risk; and (4) conceptual mapping to graphically explore relationships among foregoing themes.

## Results and Discussion

Findings present the four key populations of truckers' multimodal risk networks extending the old typology of *highway cowboys*, *old hands*, *Christian truckers*, and *old-married men* [5]. Findings are not based on random sampling procedures, but do uncover the social organization and structure of high-risk trucking settings and their populations.

### Long-Haul Truck Drivers

In response to researchers' questions regarding anecdotal references to some truckers' sexual transactions with women on the road, male truckers not only acknowledged the encounters but added their personal justification for them. The explanations were echoed by security guards at truckstops, intermediaries, FSWs, and truckers themselves:

...truckers away from home for weeks at a time cannot resist the temptation of cheap sex when a woman knocks on their cab late at night—and the '500-miles away from home rule' justifies the behavior....

During interviews truckers were asked about their personal engagement in these behaviors, which they explained as often impulsive ways to satisfy their male ego, a physical need, or simply as a remedy for loneliness.

...anybody can go a week, 2 weeks, maybe a month...but some guys are gone 2–3 months...so I think...just the lifestyle that trucking involves leads to...doing things you normally wouldn't do... (Trucker, white, 44).

Truckers' decisions involving sex are frequently determined by their physical location on the US map at the time and distance from home. Many truckers shared their

knowledge of seemingly legitimate US businesses in Texas that transport truckers to brothels across the Mexican border under the guise of van tours:

...that's in El Paso...they do advertising non-stop...trips to Guadalajara, Mexico...\$10 a trip... They'll collect a vanload of truckers, will run them across the border, and will offer incentives, like 2 free shots of tequila, or a 6-pack of beer.... (Trucker, white, 45).

In their sexual encounters, most interviewed truckers have an incomplete, contradictory, or fatalistic understanding of and approach to potential risks, and therefore do not use protection consistently.

...about 40 % of the drivers on the road don't care (about protection)... (Trucker, Hispanic, 33).

...65–70 % go with these ladies...lots of them have venereal diseases...some AIDS...they [truckers] go home, don't tell their wives they slept with somebody else, they jump in the sack and poof!...they give them what they just got out on the road... (Trucker, white, 57).

Most truckers readily acknowledge the use by some drivers of alcohol, crank, speed, cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamines—all easily available at and around most urban truckstops in particular and other settings catering to truckers:

...you get in places like Atlanta, Memphis, Philadelphia...they're gonna come on the CB... 'anybody want any white dust?' You know that's cocaine... whatever, it's all there man...when it gets dark all truckers do is CB... looking for women and drugs... (Trucker, white, 42).

When interviewed drivers were asked about their personal use of substances, responses were mostly abrupt and short, namely because drug use (beyond legal repercussions) can negatively impact truckers' professional welfare. While many admit to greater drug use in the past, they also describe various methods (alone or aided by trucking companies) to cheat drug tests.

...used to do speed and heroin, but not any more... (Trucker, African American, 42).

...most guys use one type of drug or another, but won't say it to you or even others... (Trucker, white, 40).

Due to widespread homophobia among truckers and professional persecution or exclusion, gay and bisexual drivers have remained largely a closeted group [9]. Nevertheless, during our interviews several gay/bisexual

truckers indicated concurrent sexual contacts with men and women, but in smaller numbers than what straight-identified truckers reported with women. Gay/bisexual truckers also described their use of protection as mostly selective and defined by the partner's appearance and type of sex act performed—which may be partially explained by low perceived HIV/STI risk.

Interviewer: Do you use condoms?

Trucker: Not at all, it'd never give me a release...most of us don't think of oral sex as the same thing, or in the same category as in the bend down or anal...I wouldn't give my butt to anybody, but I'm not too slow to get down on my knees.... (Gay, white, 41).

When a gay trucker was asked about types of sex he performed and the meanings he ascribed to them, he echoed the loneliness and need for intimacy mentioned by several straight truckers:

...mostly blowjobs'cause it gives the physical contact you lack, without the same risk...you're gone for so long...you long for human contact...in the woods, sex is quick and purely for orgasm...in the truck it's more intimate... (Gay trucker, white, 38).

Internet postings gleaned from MSM websites were found to delve into motives and sexual repertoire of gay/bisexual truckers. An excerpt from a gay trucker is revealing:

...travel every week...I-10 to 231 to I-65, I-24 to 41...love to suck cock and swallow good loads...I'm a top, but willing to bottom for the right person...travel north on Saturday and back south on Tuesday...love to rim a nice ass...Email me and let's hook up... (Gay trucker, Internet posting).

#### Female Sexworkers

'Lot lizards,' 'traveling ladies,' motel ladies, and streetwalkers comprise some of the most frequently found categories and street names of FSWs in and around trucking milieux. FSWs at truckstops are referred to as 'lot lizards' due to their movement in and out of and between trucks as they solicit sex, whereas others are referred to as 'traveling ladies' because they hitch rides with truckers for a period of time. They are often present at truckstops and other settings that provide services to truckers, predominantly when security is lax. Other members of truckers' risk networks confirm extensive exchanges between FSWs and truckers:

...there are two things that you're going to find in truckstops...drugs and whores... (Intermediary, white male, 32).

Interviews revealed that most FSWs who work at trucking settings have been exposed to violence and traumas, drug addiction, disease, and homelessness. Many live in economically depressed areas, where they oftentimes form sexual partnerships of their own with members of other core groups (small proportions of persons with an STI who are frequently infected with and transmit the disease, and who sustain the endemic and epidemic transmission of STIs [13]—as a way of survival. Living around truckstops further increases the women's risk for physical, emotional and sexual abuse as well as their risks for acquiring and transmitting a disease and for stigmatization. Most FSWs in these settings sell sexual services primarily to truckers because they are believed to have more money to spend and thus represent better business decisions:

...truckers are more convenient...you jump in the truck, get in the back...boom-boom, bye-bye...  
(Sexworker, Mexican-American, 28).

Sexual transactions involving truck drivers are solicited primarily via CB radio communication but are also initiated by intermediaries who also engage in selling drugs. Intermediaries often offer drivers package deals that include both women and drugs and share revenues with the FSWs or their pimps. The actual sex act usually takes place in the cabs of trucks parked in truckstops; in fact, the very end row of parked trucks, which is less visible is referred to as the 'party row.' One FSW claimed to service about 40–50 truckers a day, charging about \$20 per driver and conducting business mainly from the 'party row' of the truckstop. FSWs reported irregular use of condoms either because truckers refuse to use them or because they pay more money for 'skin-to-skin' sex; the FSWs frequently agree to make more money or due to their low-risk perceptions.

Interviewer: About how many times did you have straight sex?

Sexworker: ...about 100... (White, 29).

Interviewer: During these, how many times did you use a condom?

Sexworker: ...about 50.

Interviewer: What do you do when someone refuses to use a condom?

Sexworker: Well, I make sure that I use baby wipes.  
(Native American-Hispanic, 37).

FSWs provide almost anything they are asked, from vaginal and anal to oral sex and manual masturbation among others. Yet, they have minimal access to medical care should they need treatment for any contracted STI.

All of the FSWs interviewed for this study reported substance use. They also indicated often receiving 'pot,' crack, and crack from truckers instead of cash and using

them together with truckers or alone and often providing sex in exchange for drugs. As one particular truck driver and sex worker explained:

...working girls may have 20–30 partners in a night and they're not bathing in between...they're jumping from truck to truck and most of them are drug users too, they're supporting their habits... (Trucker, white, 39).

Interviewer: ...Did you do drugs with truckers in the last month?

Sexworker: ...Everyday...crack and speed (White, 45).

Some FSWs often travel with truckers for a period of time, some have regular truckers they see each time they drive through town, some form long term friendships; each of these represent a particular kind of multiplex network with its own meanings, interactions, connections, and duration. FSWs report that most of their trucker clients are married, which they deduce from wedding bands, photographs in truck cabs, or truckers' own remarks. These networks hold a strong potential of influencing the dissemination of STIs by bridging high- and low-STI prevalence populations and geographies.

#### Intermediaries

Intermediaries are permanent or transient individuals who occupy the middle ground in the risk topography of trucking milieu. They are frequently homeless, often recently released from incarceration, and more often than not in bad health, with the majority struggling with substance addiction. Intermediaries can be found in inner cities and semiurban and rural areas where truckstops, other trucking establishments, commercial sex work, and drugs are available.

Individuals who function as intermediaries play several roles including that of polisher, lumper, pimp, and drug pusher/runner, and they often broker exchanges of illicit substances and sex services among truckers, FSWs, and drug dealers. As they hustle, they constantly negotiate their roles in relation to others they regularly come in contact with, including truckers, truckstop personnel, law enforcement officials, and other intermediaries. In intermediaries' own words:

Interviewer: How many hours do you pimp or deal?

Intermediary: ...12 hours...try to get here every morning at 4 when security leaves...try to be gone at 4 in the afternoon by the time they get here. (African-American male, 34).

...I walk across, wave my hands, they [truckers] flag me down...I ask what they want...'dope...' There is the "mafia," down to the middlemen (distributors), to the sellers, to the truckers...I'm the seller, the supplier gives

the distributor, he gives us the stuff to sell... (Intermediary, white male, 32).

...They [truckers] get on the CB and they ask for it...and the ones you already know, you know what they want...most of them always want pussy and crack... (Intermediary, Mexican-American male, 24).

Interviewed polishers and lumpers, who sometimes travel between different truckstops and locations in search of work, claim that 75–90 % of truckers use drugs. The intermediary negotiates with the dealer or pimp and ultimately gets a cut for himself, while brokering package deals, “girl and drugs for a combo price.”

...See it [truckers buying drugs] all the time...I’ve never seen them use it, but living in the streets...you go over in the motel rooms and...they’re running in and out of drug dealers’ rooms.... (Intermediary, African-American male, 42).

Intermediaries usually hustle in the parking lots of truckstops; also in these places, arrests, assaults, robberies, and even deaths have been recorded, along with rumors of truckstop security officers getting kickbacks from drug dealers. Similar to sexual transactions, most drug transactions take place over the CB radio, often guiding truck drivers to an agreed-upon location, such as an empty lot or motel near the highway.

...Probably half dozen [truckers] a day ask [for drugs]...they ask me where to find women at...I already had five of them today ask me.... (Intermediary, African-American male, 38).

Intermediaries also report that some truckers buy drugs only for the purpose of paying FSWs:

...But not all truckers use drugs...there are truckers who will buy drugs and don’t use it...they buy drugs to pay the girls, it’s cheaper hello!...they learned over the years, it’s cheaper if you use drugs to pay (Intermediary, African-American male, 41).

Polishers and lumpers often become facilitators of convenience as drivers who want drugs and/or women may ask them to make the appropriate arrangements. Several drug runners noted that they began working at the truckstops as polishers or lumpers and found that running drugs proved far more lucrative. Intermediaries not only play a critical role in the provision of risk, but also corroborate truckers’ crack, speed, and sex exchanges. In fact, while FSWs’ interactions with truckers are considered to be an open secret, it was a polisher who informed field researchers about smaller-scale sexual mixing between truckers and other men at truckstops—although truckchasers have indicated that this is not a common

occurrence due to safety concerns, as men attempting to solicit sex with truckers at a truckstop can trigger physical assault. Our interviews also revealed that the formation of social and sexual partnerships among intermediaries and FSWs and other hustlers is highly common and even form a type of social support within these population groups. This could be one of the explanations of the endemic nature of many infections, often present among populations at-risk in urban environments [7].

#### Truckchasers

The homophobic nature of the trucking subculture has pushed truckchasers below the radar of most people [9, 14]. Truckchasers are MSM who cruise for truck drivers in order to engage in sexual acts with them. They employ diverse strategies for cruising, and have developed a complex behavioral etiquette to signal their intentions to truckers [14]. Their interactions are carefully scripted and depend mostly on nonverbal communication and shared, but usually unarticulated, meanings [14]. Initial contact ranges from loitering in public bathrooms at highway rest areas to tapping the car’s brake-lights, leaving the car-door ajar, deliberate stares, suggestively rubbing one’s crotch, or initiating a conversation on certain CB channels by using various clicking sounds [14].

The attraction of many of the interviewed truck drivers for truckchasers is a highly complex phenomenon that is beyond the scope of this paper, but is primarily linked to the masculine image of drivers that has been fetishized. As a result, most truckchasers are attracted to those truckers who project a masculine image and view them as the epitome of manhood [9, 14]. A series of excerpts from researchers’ online chat discussions with truckchasers recruited from MSM websites illustrates this motive:

...if we (truckchasers) wanted that kind of an individual [effeminate], we’d be heterosexuals and go after women...The hairier, bigger, more bearish, Marlboro-man look, and that sort of thing, is...a turn-on... (Truckchaser, white, 34).

Considering the attraction of the ‘straight-man image,’ many truckchasers are drawn to married or bisexual truckers, as one truckchaser explained during a phone interview:

...I’ve formed a close relationship and strong friendships with 8 married drivers over the years...have met their spouses and have visited their homes...I play it very straight in their territory...when asked how we met, the driver replies...‘I load/unload at his company all the time’.... (Truckchaser, white, 53).

Sex in a semipublic space, as exemplified by highway rest areas, considered more exciting due to associated risks (e.g., getting arrested), as well as the public element and the anonymity of the sex. In one online chat group, one truckchaser described public cruising spots in the following manner:

...one of my favorite spots is a picnic area just north of [city]...doesn't have a restroom...some picnic tables and a chain-link fence with an opening into the wooded area behind...never have to look for truckers, they know what's there and always stop and venture back for a quick one...sometimes you might get lucky and they'll invite you into their truck... I'm 56 and have been doing this since I was 26... (Truckchaser, 56, chatgroup discussion excerpt).

In the same chatgroup, two other truckchasers articulated their attraction to risks associated with sex in rest areas, as follows:

...it is more exciting...the risk and the anonymity...there's always the risk that it will be a police officer, or an insane person who wants to hurt you...you're not necessarily cognizant of it, but certainly in the aftermath of some connection it's something you think about...the risk I like is not physical danger, but just that the police might arrest me (Truckchaser, white, 43).

The homophobic nature of trucking, referred to earlier, significantly exacerbates the inherent risks associated with MSM cruising for truck drivers:

...Uh...somebody told me 'hey, go to this truck and pretty much just knock.' Of course...I went and it turned out the guy had been listening on the CB, but he wasn't interested...And so it was pretty much 'you get the fuck away from my truck faggot or I'll kick your ass'...I just walked away (Truckchaser, Hispanic, late 30s).

Interviewed truckchasers described involvement with more than one trucker simultaneously; in fact several estimated having 'serviced' from several hundred to several thousand truckers:

...I have three categories: dates, husbands, and boyfriends...dates are people I've slept with...around 3,500...boyfriends are people I've had some sort of a relationship with...around 150...and husbands, I've had 8...those are people I've maintained a live-in type of relationship.... (Truckchaser, white, 40s).

As reported by truckchasers, the types of sex performed and the use of protection often depend on physical

restrictions imposed by the space where the sex activity occurs:

...Mostly...it's just blowjobs...couple of times I barebacked top because I thought it was less risky...but recently several of my friends who were also barebacking top have become HIV-positive, so now I realize it's more risky than I thought.... (Truckchaser, white, 35).

...about 70 % of truckchasers don't carry condoms (Gay trucker, white, 47).

Truckers' increasing use of the Internet has led to an explosion of sex cruising venues beyond the conventional. Actual sex encounters that would otherwise never materialize are initiated and facilitated by the Internet and often occur along highways. Interested truckers and truckchasers post their personals on MSM websites and provide driving schedules, meeting points, and other contact information. As a result, a high volume of sexual encounters among primarily bisexual and secondarily straight-identified truckers and truckchasers evolve from virtual hookups—particularly because the Internet attracts MSM interested in anonymous sex [15]. In one truckchaser's words:

...I-95 between [towns] ex-navy chief who services truckers as he did his str8 marine recruits...Misses 'em like hell and needs real men replacements since marine contingent left Sub Base in [town]....Have private quarters near truckstop on I-95 at exit [number] near [town]...Prefer after 9 pm'til midnight, but you can try days with discretion...Uncut and/or married a plus, appreciate black beauty...No reciprocity expected...Can host if with advance notice (Name, phone, email).

## Conclusions

The main goal of this paper was to explore the gamut of potential infection risks for long-haul truck drivers and discuss the role of key core groups in the social and spatial geography of risk around trucking milieux. As we are interested neither in the prevalence of risk nor in ascertaining causal links between trucking and risk behaviors, our sample was only representative of those who are involved in those illicit activities.

The sexual and drug exchanges of interviewed long-haul truck drivers are clearly defined, shaped, and constrained by their working conditions. Explanations of why certain truckers engage in high-risk behaviors require a solid understanding of their social (and sexual) identities as well as the occupational, social and spatial conditions within which these identities are constructed. The manner in

which social identities develop within an always stressful and frequently dangerous on-the-road life, presents truckers with a unique repertoire of sexual relationships and drug exchanges. It is these complex occupational stressors and psychosocial dynamics of sexuality and risk that make it imperative to understand the psychosocial and spatial context of infection risk and potential disease transmission in highway, trucking, and cruising milieu. Many truckers' concurrent risk partnerships and their capacity in bridging high- and low-risk groups have the potential to amplify initial infections because they link individuals of disparate epidemiological settings, creating large connected components that function like a well-designed road network enabling pathogens to travel rapidly and efficiently to multiple destinations. The preliminary findings from this small-scale formative study have shed light on the patterns and organization of risk among US trucker-centered populations. A systems-grounded approach to the epidemiology of trucking will enhance the understanding of these complex issues, which eventually will assist in the development and implementation of multi sectoral, multilevel risk-reduction interventions.

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