

FACT SHEET

HIV RISK AND CIRCUITS IN TORONTO'S GAY SCENE

Simply knowing the facts about HIV/AIDS has not been enough to bring about a consistent reduction of HIV transmission among gay and bisexual men in Toronto. Between 2004 and 2007, a team from the University of Windsor (Barry Adam) and the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT) worked on a research study that investigated how sexual behaviours and assumptions about risk were associated with distinct circuits of gay and bisexual men. The research study was based on the observation that, to the extent that there are different circuits of gay and bisexual men, HIV prevention messaging would be more effective if it was tailored to the behaviours, assumptions, and social and sexual networks that characterize these circuits. A circuit can be described as a loose assemblage of men who move in the same circles, thereby developing their own micro-cultures. Each circuit may have its own assumptions and principles about social and sexual interaction that make sense of sex, risk and, ultimately, HIV prevention and safer sex messaging. This fact sheet summarizes the study's findings, which are available in the full project report.

The research study was organized into three phases: (1) Design and implementation of new HIV prevention messaging related to safer sex decision-making among high-risk gay and bisexual men: the Assumptions Campaign and Handy Dandy Campaign; (2) Examination of the uptake of safe sex messages and emerging trends that facilitate or inhibit safer sex: the Toronto Pride survey, 2005; and (3) Interviews with men who reported having unprotected sex most or all of the time.

There are several noteworthy points about the language and methodology that was used in this study. Firstly, use of the term, 'gay and bisexual men' was intentional, as it signalled the salience of culture and practice in risk taking and risk management. Secondly, this project dealt largely with the practice of unprotected anal sex as a high-risk behaviour among gay and bisexual men (i.e., fucking another man without condoms and coming inside him, or being fucked by another man who came inside him). Finally, data collection at Toronto Pride was through a self-administered questionnaire.

Taken from the research report **Risk Management in Circuits of Gay and Bisexual Men: Results from the Toronto Pride Survey.**



THE ASSUMPTIONS CAMPAIGN AND THE HANDY DANDY HOW-TO HANDBOOKS

BACKGROUND

The first phase of this project was participation in the countrywide Assumptions Campaign entitled, 'How Do You Know What You Know?' (www.think-again.ca), and the development of the Toronto-based Handy Dandy Campaign (www.handydandy.ca). The Assumptions Campaign was launched during Pride Week 2004 and the Handy Dandy Campaign was launched at various times between Pride 2004 and Pride 2005. The primary goals of the Assumptions Campaign were to provoke men to question their assumptions about a partner's HIV status and to reinforce the importance of using condoms. The Handy Dandy Campaign involved the creation of three handbooks, namely, Condoms Unwrapped, Getting Together, and Cruising, which were intended to more thoroughly address major issues in safer sex decision-making among gay and bisexual men.

EVALUATION

Effectiveness of these campaigns was evaluated as part of an extensive survey of men conducted during Toronto Pride 2005. Almost half of the respondents (46.9%) had seen the Assumptions campaign, among whom 70% felt the campaign had made them think about assumptions they were making about a partner's HIV status. Awareness of the Handy Dandy handbooks was generally low; only 6-11% of the men surveyed had read them. This may be largely attributable to the small promotion budget for that campaign. The handbooks were more likely to have been seen by men who had reported seeing the Assumptions Campaign. Also, men who had casual partners and HIV-positive men were more likely to report seeing both campaigns. Overall, the evaluation suggested that gay and bisexual men were open to and supportive of HIV prevention campaigns that were tailored to them.

2005 TORONTO PRIDE SURVEY

BACKGROUND AND FINDINGS

Survey data were collected over a single weekend during Toronto Pride 2005, when 922 randomly recruited men completed a written, 73-item questionnaire. Questions sought to gather information about the uptake of safer sex messaging, as well as any emerging trends that facilitated or inhibited safer sex practices among gay and bisexual men. Questions about sexual behaviour asked participants to consider their sexual activities for the six months leading up to the Survey.

The findings provide insight into the existence of different circuits of gay and bisexual men, the sex and risk perspectives that tend to characterize these circuits and, consequently, important considerations for the development of HIV prevention messages and campaigns. From the entire sample of men, 77.4% reported being HIV-negative, 12.6% being HIV-positive, and 7.5% had not been tested or did not know their HIV status.

MEN WHO REPORTED HAVING REGULAR PARTNERS

Of all the men, 54.7% reported having sex with a regular male partner. Within this category, approximately half (48.6%) indicated being monogamous with their partner. Men who were in relationships of five years or longer were less likely to report monogamy than those in the early phases of their relationship (i.e., 6 to 11 months). This finding was consistent with other research on gay men. Protected anal sex (i.e., condom use) between regular partners declined with length of relationship. Finally, men reporting monogamous relationships were strongly under-represented in bathhouses, washrooms, and the Internet. Those in relationships of more than five years were also under-represented in the gay village bar scene.

MEN WHO REPORTED HAVING CASUAL PARTNERS

Sixty-two percent of participants (572 of 922) reported having a casual male partner, and significant numbers of men reported having sex with casual and regular partners.

Men who reported being consistently safe (CS) with casual partner(s)

Among the 572 men, 51.9% reported being consistently safe when having sex with a casual partner. In the survey, CS men were defined as those who indicated that, during the previous six months, they had always used condoms when fucking/getting fucked and they had not had any unprotected anal intercourse (UAI). These men tended to be better represented in a particular set of social venues and were also more likely to use condoms with a regular partner.

Men who reported participating in the bareback (BB) scene

Twenty-two percent of men who reported having casual partners indicated that they participated in the bareback scene or cruised bareback websites. They reported having UAI both with and without coming. BB men were significantly overrepresented in a specific set of social venues and they were more likely to have: (1) been sexually adventurous (e.g. fisting, SM, "party and play," etc); (2) had five or more sexual partners in the previous six months; (3) let their partner decide on condom use, regardless of sero-status; and (4) believed their partners had no desire to use condoms. Some of the beliefs and practices of BB men seemed to be connected to depression and loneliness, erectile problems, using drugs to make sex hotter, or other factors. Previous research indicates that the bareback circuit appears to largely be a development within poz culture though, it is important to note that many HIV-positive men practice safer sex, have monogamous partners, and carefully manage risk to protect themselves and their partners. HIV prevention messaging could benefit from recognizing and addressing the distinct qualities of the bareback circuit, including the common practice of UAI with or without coming.

Men who reported having UAI without coming and/or having their partner come in them

Thirteen percent of men who reported having casual partners also reported having UAI without coming and/or having the partner come in them. While most did not indicate participation in the bareback scene in their questionnaires, their overall responses indicated they were leaning towards the bareback scene, particularly if they had experienced difficulties with condom use and erectile problems in the past. Additionally, the survey found that these men were significantly more likely to have UAI and come with a casual partner than other men in the survey. Engaging in UAI without coming has sometimes been hypothesized as an intentional risk reduction technique and, in contrast, has also been associated with sero-conversion, i.e., becoming HIV-positive.

Interviews with men who reported having unprotected sex most or all of the time

The final phase of this project consisted of individual interviews with 34 men who were recruited based on their agreement with either or both of the following statements:

- "I respect whatever the guy wants regardless of whether he is positive or negative. If he wants to use a condom, that's fine, and if he doesn't, that's fine too."
- "If I lose my erection with a condom on, I prefer to have sex without it."

In the Pride Survey, these statements had been found to be distinctive markers of men having unprotected sex most or all of the time. Recruitment of the 34 men

occurred after and separate from the Survey. The men varied in age, education, income, and ethno-cultural origins. Twenty-four men (71%) reported being HIV-positive and 10 men (29%) reported being HIV-negative.

SERO-SORTING

The men expressed concern about HIV transmission, despite their sexual practices. To manage their HIV risk, many tried to sero-sort by dropping or looking for hints and cues, without directly asking about or disclosing HIV status. This was primarily because raising the topic of HIV status (positive or negative) with a potential sexual partner provoked strong feelings of anxiety, and caused concern about receiving a hostile response and possibly derailing an opportunity to have sex. This was especially the case for the HIV-positive men.

In the majority of settings, most men believed that their sexual partner(s) espoused the same unspoken sero-sorting presumptions. However, previous research and the interview findings indicated that the presumptions generally differed between HIV-positive and HIV-negative men. HIV-positive men tended to presume that when a sexual partner did not bring up sero-status or did not introduce a condom, he was implying consent because he was HIV-positive or he accepted the risk being taken. These presumptions were especially attributed to quick-sex settings, such as baths, where a partner's HIV status was often inferred based on his willingness to go along with unprotected sex. Men in the bareback circuit tended to share these presumptions. HIV-negative men were more likely to presume that when a sexual partner did not bring up sero-status or introduce a condom, he was HIV-negative.

REACTIONS TO THE SUPREME COURT RULING ON DISCLOSING A POSITIVE HIV STATUS

The men were also asked about the 1998 Supreme Court of Canada ruling in the Cuerrier case that stated people living with HIV have an obligation to disclose their sero-status to sexual partners. Fifty-nine percent were aware of the case and/or a general requirement to disclose before sex, and an additional 18% were aware of the move to criminalize non-disclosure.

There was a wide spectrum of responses to the ruling. Some agreed that, in regards to sex, people who are HIV-positive have a responsibility to disclose. Most felt that disclosure could be indirect, situational, or qualified and were concerned about the legal complications that could arise from ambiguous and subjective definitions of disclosure, and whether disclosure could actually heighten one's vulnerability to legal problems. Some men rejected the obligation of HIV-positive people to disclose, on the grounds that sex is a shared responsibility in which both partners should take self-protective measures. This latter perspective has been promoted by many AIDS service organizations (ASOs) for several decades and was also found to be consistent with the ideology of men in the bareback circuit.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIV PREVENTION PROGRAMMING AND MESSAGING

The findings from this research deserve serious consideration in current and future HIV prevention programming and messaging for gay and bisexual men as they show how perspectives on sex and risk vary by circuit, the ongoing challenges of sero-sorting, and the practical dilemma of disclosure. Here are some suggested ways to use these findings.

Community forums and discussions with:

- Various community groups of gay and bisexual men (e.g. leather/ethno-specific/poz groups, etc.)
- HIV-positive and HIV-negative men to stimulate discussion about HIV in the gay community
- HIV-positive men to explain the divergent assumptions that men of different sero-statuses may have

Development of programs that:

- Reduce social isolation as a method for helping to reduce the spread of HIV
- Educate men within the bareback circuit who believe that their sexual partners are acting rationally and are fully informed when they decide to have unprotected sex

Dissemination of findings via presentations, advocacy, and articles for/to:

- Gay press
- Networks such as Toronto's M2Men and working groups, such as those at the AIDS Bureau
- Service providers who work with gay and bisexual men

Targeted outreach to:

- Bathhouses and bars
- Online hook-up sites with real-time chat rooms where ASO staff/volunteers use the research findings to initiate dialogue

HIV risk management in circuits of gay and bisexual men is complex. This study mapped some of these differences and provided insight into some of the processes through which unprotected sex unfolds. As many HIV prevention messages are already well-known by gay and bisexual men, this study suggests there is a need for more innovative strategies that understand how human connections and risk interplay to inhibit or facilitate HIV transmission.

ⁱ Barry Adam, Winston Husbands, James Murray and John Maxwell (2007). Risk Management in Circuits of Gay and Bisexual Men: Results from the Toronto Pride Survey. AIDS Committee of Toronto.

ⁱⁱ The Cuerrier case and related issues are discussed in a series of fact sheets on Criminal Law and HIV published by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. Retrieved April 19, 2008, from <http://www.aidslaw.ca/publications/publicationsdocEN.php?ref=847>.

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