

Qualitative Evaluation Project (QEP)

Project Staff: G. Michael Crosby, Nicolas M. Sheon

Project Description: This project aimed to understand the context of risk behavior among MSM engaging in unprotected anal sex in San Francisco. A convenience sample of 150 MSM was recruited between January and December 2000. Sampling attempted to match the characteristics of the target populations and participants of two community-level HIV interventions that were developed through a research collaboration between the San Francisco AIDS Foundation and researchers at the University of California San Francisco Center for AIDS Prevention Studies. First, Black Brothers Esteem (BBE) targets low income, disenfranchised African American MSM in San Francisco's Tenderloin District. Second, Gay Life targets largely middle-class self-identified gay and bisexual men who tend to reside or socialize in the Castro and South of Market Districts. Sampling also included a proportion of men who participated in both programs as well as those who did not. Additional criteria included men between the ages of 18-55 who engaged in unprotected anal intercourse with another man within the last six months. The men participated in in-depth interviews that elicited a narrative of a recent UAI as well as the participant's experience of the epidemic and life in San Francisco.

Significance: This project hopes to shed light on recent increases in sexual risk taking among MSM in San Francisco. The qualitative and narrative approach of the interview helps place individual risk and serodisclosure practices in a local cultural, historical and social context.

Interesting Findings: The interviews suggested that HIV-negative MSM's sense of isolation from a "community" combines with treatment optimism to produce fatalism about seroconversion. Fearing rejection by HIV-positive partners who refuse to use condoms, HIV-negative men see little advantage in disclosing to casual partners. When they did disclose their HIV-negative status, partners frequently failed to reciprocate and expressed hostility or apathy about condom use. HIV-negative men also expressed guilt or embarrassment about their status, viewing themselves as outsiders to the gay community in San Francisco that was perceived as overwhelmingly HIV-positive. By contrast, many HIV-positive men appeared eager to disclose their positive status as a strategy to release themselves from responsibility for transmission and facilitate "bareback" or unprotected sex. In justifying their risky sexual practices, MSM cited a community-wide shift toward non-disclosure and barebacking since the advent of Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HAART). Disavowal of individual responsibility for safer sex in deference to perceived community norms contributes to a spiraling of risk behavior and HIV incidence.

Article in press at Social Science and Medicine titled "Ambivalent tales of HIV disclosure in San Francisco" available at: doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2003.08.026.