

Web-Based HIV Behavioral Surveillance (WHBS)

Project Staff: Willi McFarland (Principal Investigator), Greg Rebchook (Co-Principal Investigator), Alberto Curotto (Project Coordinator), Henry Raymond (Project Administrator)

Project Description: The AIDS Office of the San Francisco Department of Public Health and CAPS developed and piloted an Internet-based, behavioral surveillance method of men who have sex with men (MSM), to compare data collected online to those collected in person through the national and local behavioral surveillance system (NBSS). We will compare the online sample of MSM to the more traditional, venue-based sample to assess any differences in behavioral risks between the two groups. Besides San Francisco, the project is implemented in five other US metropolitan areas: Baltimore, Boston, Dallas, Los Angeles, and New York. Data collected from approximately 3,000 men through this effort will be used to strengthen the national and local capacity to monitor the HIV epidemic and to develop, implement and evaluate effective HIV-prevention programs that both make use of Internet-based technologies and target populations that potentially may not be reached by the NBSS insofar as they don't frequent physical venues.

Significance: Many studies have documented that Internet chatrooms and personal ad websites are popular with MSM and *may* be related to their HIV risk-taking behavior. San Francisco was among the first cities to detect a link between Internet use and HIV-related risk behavior, tracing a cluster of new syphilis infections to a specific chatroom.

Interesting Findings: We recruited 91 MSM from Internet chatrooms for an online interview to assess multiple factors, including attitudes about online HIV prevention. The vast majority of respondents stated a need for more HIV prevention online. They endorsed or suggested approaches such as: HIV prevention chatrooms, outreach in existing chatrooms, opportunities to chat privately with HIV counselors, new HIV prevention websites with Q&A features, online social marketing, and interactive web-tools or games. Common recommendations included using testimonials by HIV+ MSM; addressing drug-use, targeting youth and straight-identified MSM, helping men create personal profiles that reinforce safer behavior, and providing access to free HIV testing and condoms. 16 respondents (18%) expressed skepticism about online HIV prevention programs' efficacy--reasons included the sexual nature of MSM's online venues, the indifference of men online toward HIV, and the belief that men would not attend to online health information messages. When asked how they would feel if approached online by HIV prevention workers, 57% said that would be fine; 17% would be receptive as long as the counselors were professional, not preachy, and not too intrusive; 15% were ambivalent; and 11% would not want to be approached. When asked if they were aware of current online HIV prevention resources, 67% said they were not aware of such resources; 29% were aware; and 4% said they were aware of resources but did not need them. (Rebchook GM, Curotto A, Kegeles SM. Attitudes towards and recommendations about online HIV prevention programs for men who have sex with men (MSM) who use Internet chatrooms. *Int Conf AIDS*. 2004 Jul 11-16;15:abstract no. WePeC6093)

Project Web Site: sfbams.info

Project End Date: September 2006