

HOME Project (Health Options Mean Empowerment)

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Project Description: The purpose of the HOME project is to design and test an intervention to reduce HIV risk among women whose male partner is being released from San Quentin State Prison. This study is funded by the National Institute of Nursing Research (NINR). The 12-month HOME intervention ran from February 2005 through January 2006. Weekly activities addressing HIV and STD prevention, women's health, and population-specific topics such as parole information were held at a center for visitors directly outside of the gates of San Quentin. Eleven women who visit incarcerated men were trained as peer educators and were closely involved with project staff in facilitating weekly activities. We collected data during the intervention period using the same quantitative surveys used in our formative research. We also are comparing participants in two cross-sectional surveys, one conducted immediately prior to the launch of the intervention and one conducted immediately after the intervention left the field. Finally, we conducted longitudinal qualitative interviews with the project peer educators.

Significance: Women with incarcerated partners are at particular risk for HIV infection. Their partners are over five times more likely than men in the general population to be HIV+. Incarcerated men also have a high incidence of injection drug use. Women with incarcerated partners are primarily low-income women of color for whom racism, poverty and sexism contribute to increased HIV risk and whose life stressors are exacerbated by their partners' imprisonment.

Interesting Findings: In an effort to deepen our understanding of how circumstances of forced separation and the interdiction of physical contact affect women's sexual behavior, we investigated the development and maintenance of heterosexual couples' intimacy when the male partner is incarcerated. We recognize that correctional control extends to these women's bodies, both when they are within the facility's walls visiting their mates and when they are at home striving to remain connected to absent men. Using our formative qualitative interviews with 20 women who visit their incarcerated partners and 13 correctional officers who interact with prison visitors, we examined how institutional constraints such as the regulation of women's apparel, the prohibition of physical contact, and the lack of forums for privacy result in couples forging alternative "spaces" in which their relationships occur. Romantic scripts, the build-up of sexual tension during the incarceration period and conditions of parole promote unprotected sexual intercourse and other HIV/STD risk behavior following release from prison. (Comfort M, Grinstead O, McCartney K, Bourgois P, Knight K. You cannot do nothing in this damn place": sex and intimacy among couples with an incarcerated male partner. *J Sex Res.* 2005 Feb;42(1):3-12.)

Project End Date: June 30, 2006