

HIV Prevention among Township MSM in South Africa

Project Staff: Tim Lane

Project Description: This project has two aims:

1. To describe collective and individual belief systems of low-income township men who have sex with men (MSM) related to their sexuality, sexual health, choice of sexual partners, use of drugs and alcohol, use of condoms, utilization of health services, HIV voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) and disclosure of HIV status, in order to describe prevailing cultural norms around these subjects' behaviors;
2. To assess the prevalence of HIV risk factors and HIV infection among men who have sex with men (MSM) from Soweto township.

This study is the first of its kind in South Africa. Through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and structured observations of MSM social venues, we have been able to describe the gender identities and sexualities that are prevalent in township MSM communities. We will estimate the prevalence of risk behaviors and HIV infection in Soweto using respondent-driven sampling methodology. This will be the first HIV prevalence data for an MSM community in South Africa.

Significance: MSM in sub-Saharan Africa are highly vulnerable to HIV infection, but very little specific cultural, behavioral or epidemiological data exists about African MSM populations. Such information is crucial to the development and evaluation of behavioral interventions that can prevent the sexual transmission of HIV.

Interesting Findings: Township MSM in South Africa identify as gay, bisexual, straight and “down low.” Gay identity is highly stigmatized by non-gay MSM and by the community at large. MSM who do not identify as gay may not perceive unprotected sex between men as a high-risk activity. Drinking alcohol is the most common form of substance use and has emerged as a significant predictor of sexual risk behavior.

Project Recruitment Dates: April 2006-April 2008

Project End Date: December 31, 2010