

The Ballroom Community Project: Social Networks and Social Support for Young African American MSM

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Project Description: This research investigates the relationship between social networks, social support and HIV-related risk behavior among young African American MSM (YAAMSM) who participate in the Ballroom community. The Ballroom community consists of houses, figurative and sometimes literal homes for queer youth of color, and the elaborate balls they host and compete in. The Ballroom community exists in urban centers across the US, and provides African American queer youth with support for same-sex desire and identity, along with multiple forms of support for HIV prevention. For many young people, houses within the Ballroom community constitute a form of family due to the social marginalization they experience in day-to-day life.

Despite the long history of this community and its prominence in the lives of queer youth of color, little to no scholarly research has been done to assess the impact of Ballroom community involvement on the lives of its participants. This research looks at the forms of social support that young men receive through their involvement in the community, particularly with regard to HIV-related risk behavior. The study will be carried out in three phases:

1. An ethnographic phase to determine the forms social networks and social support take with YAAMSM in the Ballroom community,
2. A phase to develop and adapt appropriate scales of social networks and social support for a YAAMSM population, and
3. A cross sectional survey of social networks within YAAMSM Ballroom communities to determine the influence of social networks and social support on HIV-related risk behavior.

The data accumulated during this study will be used as the basis for developing an intervention tailored specifically to the Ballroom community. Approximately 300 YAAMSM will be recruited into the study, which will take place in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Significance: African American MSM have the highest rates of HIV among MSM racial/ethnic groups nationally, yet AAMSM engage in risk behaviors at the same rates as other groups of MSM. Very few HIV interventions have been specifically designed and rigorously tested with this population. Through studying the impact of social networks on health-related behavior, the research team hopes to develop strategies for effective HIV interventions based on existing social structures within the community that have the potential to reach YAAMSM in a genuine, organic way. Since very little research has been done with the Ballroom community, this research has potential to make great contributions to public health approaches, as well as scholarly literature.

Project End Date: July 2012

Project Recruitment Dates: Recruitment will be ongoing.