Men acting with Strength and Initiative

THE ISSUE:

Black men who have sex with men (MSM), including bisexual men, are at high risk for HIV in the United States. In some US cities, one quarter to one third of these men are HIV-positive. One in nine Black men aged 25-34 are currently incarcerated, and one in three (1/3) have ever been incarcerated. To reduce HIV, we must understand how to develop HIV programs that address how society affects sexuality and sexual decision making.

WHAT WE DID:

The MASAI Project talked with 60 HIV negative (HIV-) and HIV positive (HIV+) Black men in Oakland and San Francisco had sexual relationships with both men and women. The MASAI Project recruited in bars, churches, gyms, parks, arcades and sex clubs and through the internet. The goal of this project was to explore how bisexual men talked about their sexual relationships with men and women as they connect to their social experiences (such as racial discrimination, higher rates of unemployment, poverty and incarceration).

WHO WE WORKED WITH:

- 40 HIV- and 20 HIV+ bisexual Black men
- 80% had a history of incarceration
- Over half had some or complete college education

We conducted one in-depth interview with each participant, where we asked men about their sexual identity and practices, HIV risk, disclosure of sexual partners to male and female partners, and prison experiences.

WHAT WE FOUND OUT:

Almost half of the men identified as heterosexual or did not identify with a specific sexual identity. See the graph on the right for a complete breakdown of participants.

Masculinity, or “being a man” affected HIV risk and disclosure

HIV risk is related to masculinity. HIV+ and HIV- men in this study reported high levels of unprotected vaginal sex with female partners and unprotected insertive anal sex and receptive oral sex with male partners. Having unprotected sex with women and having multiple partners at the same time were connected to “being a man.”
Disclosure of other sex partners was more frequent with male partners, and less likely with female partners. For some men, telling male sex partners about female partners enhanced their sense of manhood and sexual status. Telling women about sex with men was described as threatening to men's sense of masculinity.

**Outreach systems are key**

Outreach workers had long-standing relationships with community members and agencies, and building on prior trust with this population. Outreach efforts drew on these relationships to effectively recruit bisexual men who did not identify as gay or bisexual.

Visual mapping of social and sexual spaces on street maps was used in order for the MASAI project to see potential areas where our target population gathers and to inform recruitment efforts. However, there are few specific target areas for recruitment of this population and mapping was less effective than network-based approaches to recruitment. Social networks with community agencies and individuals over time were critical for building trust and gaining access to more covert populations.

Intensive resources are needed for online recruitment. More work is needed to explore utility of online approaches in recruiting and conducting research with higher income bisexually active men.

We found that a female recruiter was highly effective for recruitment with bisexual men. There were less perceived challenges to masculinity with a female recruiter than with male outreach workers approaching men for a study on HIV/AIDS.

**WHAT WE RECOMMEND:**

We need culturally relevant HIV prevention research and programs that address the social factors affecting HIV to reduce risk among bisexually active Black men.

We need programs that address gender and power dynamics to reduce HIV among bisexual men and their partners. It is important to create safe spaces for behaviorally bisexual men to dialogue about relationships and sexuality.

We recommend that programs aimed at bisexual men and their partners provide support and education for informed sexual decision-making and disclosure, if desired, with male and female partners. It is important to support men in understanding that they can protect themselves and their partners from HIV even if they don't feel that they can disclose their sexual partnerships.

**MORE INFORMATION:**

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