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Background

HIV/AIDS is a persistent threat to the lives and health of African American women. African American women represent approximately 12% of the total female population (US Census, 2006), but continue to be affected disproportionately by HIV/AIDS, accounting for 64% of all women living with HIV/AIDS in the United States (CDC, 2008).

Prevention efforts focusing on individual behavior have failed to produce a significant reduction in the incidence of HIV in the African American community during the past 20 years (Hall et al., 2008).

An individual’s risk for acquiring and transmitting HIV is determined largely by their behavioral choices, however the context of those choices must be understood in order to develop effective interventions.

Theoretical Framework

Structural factors of racism, community disorganization, poverty, and gender inequality contribute to the formation of sexual networks of African American women.

Sexual networks are influenced by forces beyond individual choice. They may be understood as an adaptive process that occurs in a context of racism, cultural mores, and gender roles (Stryker, 2002).

Purpose

The current study explores the HIV-related behaviors of African American women at the margins of their community. These women are the primary sexual partners of male sex workers who have sex with both men and women (MSM/W).

Methods

The study was reviewed and approved by the University Institutional Review Board.

A convenience sample of 116 women was recruited for this study in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

Inclusion criteria were African American women, aged at least 18, and currently the primary sexual partner of a sex trading MSM/W.

A self-report questionnaire was administered using Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing (ACASI) computer software.

The session lasted approximately 30 minutes. Participants received $10 for their time and participation.

Findings

Economic disadvantage and risks for HIV are present in the lives of the participants.

Sexual risk behaviors frequently occurred in the context of substance use. Most of the women reported using crack cocaine and other illicit drugs.

More than three quarters of the participants reported unprotected oral and anal vaginal sex.

A majority of the participants did not know their HIV status.

Implications

The women in this study were African American with most having housing, income, and relationship insecurity. Most had a history of incarceration and were current substance users. These factors must be carefully considered when designing HIV prevention programs and advocating for safer sex practices.

Programs for these women should focus on the importance of safer sex practices, treatment for drug and alcohol use disorders, and testing for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases.

Programs should consider couples prevention and treatment strategies.

The programs should consider that behavioral decisions are influenced by structural and contextual, as well as individual factors.