

Sexual Practices and HIV Risk Behaviors among African American Women

Jo Brocato, PhD., Thomas Alex Washington., Ph.D., Yolanda Green Ph.D.,
California State University, Long Beach,-School of Social Work
Gabriel Robles, MSW New York University, Silver School of Social Work



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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 14% 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 (Sterk, 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 (MSMW).

Methods

The study was reviewed and approved by the University Institutional Review Board. A convenience sample of 106 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 MSMW.

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.

Characteristics of African American Women Partners of sex-trading MSMW (N=106)

Variable	M (SD)	% (n)
Age	31 (64)	
Relationship status		
Single		59 (53)
Married		11 (12)
Separated		12 (13)
Divorced/Widowed		17 (18)
Highest level of education ^a		
Less than high school		47 (50)
GED		34 (36)
High school diploma		19 (20)
Employment Status		
Unemployed		81 (86)
Employed		19 (20)
Living Situation		
Own house /apartment		48 (51)
Living with Family/Friends		33 (35)
Unstable housing (street/shelter)		19 (20)
Incarceration History		
Never incarcerated		23 (24)
Incarcerated at least once		77 (82)
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual		85 (90)
Bisexual		15 (16)
Parenting status ^b		
Raising children		48 (51)
Partially raising children		33 (35)
Children not in my custody		19 (20)

^a Participants did not have education beyond HS.
^b All participants reported having at least one child

HIV Risk and Drug Use Behaviors of Partners of sex-trading MSMW (N=106)

Variable	M(SD)	% (n)
Number of sex partners last 30 days	1.3 (.71)	
Any unprotected oral sex on male partner last 30 days		87 (92)
Any unprotected vaginal sex last 30 days		90 (95)
Any unprotected anal sex last 30 days		74 (78)
Drug use past 3-months		
Crack		89 (94)
Cocaine		89 (94)
Heroin		21 (22)
Any sex while under the influence of drugs		89 (94)
Any sex while under the influence of alcohol		77 (82)
HIV test in the last 12 months		81 (86)
Self-report HIV status		
Negative		13 (14)
Positive		28 (30)
Don't know		59 (62)
STI in the last 12 months		50 (74)

Differences in Self-report Sexually Transmitted Infection by High Risk Behaviors (N=106)

Variable	Self-Report STI last 12 months % (n)	p
Any unprotected vaginal sex last 30 days		
Yes	63 (59)	<.001
No	9 (01)	
Any unprotected anal sex last 30 days		
Yes	48 (37)	.30
No	54 (15)	
Crack use past 3-months		
Yes	65 (61)	.01
No	8 (01)	
Cocaine use past 3-months		
Yes	67 (62)	<.001
No	0 (00)	
Heroin use past 3-months		
Yes	8 (02)	.06
No	58 (49)	
Any sex while under the influence of drugs		
Yes	67 (71)	<.001
No	0(00)	
Any sex while under the influence of alcohol		
Yes	60 (50)	<.001
No	8(02)	

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, anal, and 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