

A PROCESS OF VULNERABILIZATION EXACERBATES THE RISK FOR HIV INFECTION AMONG YOUNG GAY MEN

Arn Schilder, C Buchner, ML Miller, S Martindale, MV O'Shaughnessy, RS Hogg, P Spittal
British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. St. Paul's Hospital, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Background

Vancouver's Gay youth like other communities in North America, Europe and Australia have experienced serious increases in the incidence of HIV infection since the year 2000. This is a prospective investigation of more than 1,000 gay youth in Vancouver that began in 1995.

Objective

Few studies address the cultural context of Young Gay men (YGM) and less is known about the early social factors that inform a landscape of vulnerability. To better understand the issue of rising HIV incidence in a prospective study of YGM it is necessary to reveal the cultural dynamics of YGM's earlier lives that place them at increased risk for HIV infection.

Methods

Using nested case-controlled study methodology, 26 participants in the Vanguard study were interviewed — 13 of whom seroconverted since the beginning of the study and 13 age-matched participants who had remained HIV-negative. We sought clues to explain individual vulnerabilities and social risks by tracing the lives of participants, addressing topics such as childhood history, family relationships, experience of violence, sexual behavior, substance use, social and sexual identities, affective relationships and environmental conditions.

Results

Many epidemiological analyses have explored HIV-related risk factors, but few have qualitatively addressed the lives of Gay men. The Vanguard interviews attempt to bring voice to statistics, and have identified *coming out* as a chaotic, risky time. For some, emotional intimacy and validation took priority over physical safety.

The Vanguard analysis identifies three interrelated themes associated with an increased HIV risk at *coming out*. These are: early life and violence, Gay identity, and cultural and social landscape. These data suggest that dangerous *coming out* experiences are often foreshadowed by violence in childhood and adolescence, which served as a *process of vulnerabilization*.

Sexual Violence

"He about seventeen and I was eight years old. I guess I was just giving off this energy. He started molesting me and forced me to blow him. That was my introduction to sex and that went on for years." -HIV Positive Young Gay Man

Early childhood physical and sexual abuse contributes to HIV related vulnerability as adults. In general, researchers have found higher levels of both physical and sexual violence among sexual minority men and an association between a history of violence and HIV-related risk, which is a crucial factor underlying the social relationships that are central to the *coming out* process. More-often-than-not, like the men quoted in these exhibits of textual data there were more combinations of violence among participants with HIV versus the HIV-negative matches.

Physical Violence

"It was awful, like the worst! I remember going to school with hideous bruises on my body and the gym teacher saying: 'What's up?' I would say 'Oh . . . I fell down the stairs.' I remember hardly being able to walk because my father had beat me so hard with a cane." - HIV Positive Young Gay Man

Family dysfunction and imbalances of power between parents left some Vanguard participants with poor or undeveloped interpersonal skills. Moreover, participants were more inclined to have short-term relationships and more casual sex. Overall, HIV negative matches revealed supportive family environments that validated the individual.

This study found that migration to urban centers was often associated with the transition of social identity, leaving many participants isolated and unguided at a time when they were navigating both the options and risks associated with being Gay.

Migration and Risk

"For me and a lot of people especially if you're from a small town, when you first come out, you are a new face in town. You are a kid in a candy store because all these men want you." - HIV Positive Young Gay Man

Another man, who reported recurrent childhood sexual assaults, associated his Gay identity with shame, rejection, and the loss of social status.

Devalued Social Identity

"I think I was probably going through a really rough time. I was 'coming out... and Dealing with being 'Gay' and finally admitting it to myself? I was not really feeling very positive about my future. I was wondering are people going to accept me? Like... really accept me?" - HIV Positive Young Gay Man

Acknowledging an identity that is seen devalued by society is a humiliating experience for anyone, but for sexual minorities, this a normative process of life. To *come out*, is to adopt a spoiled identity, often resulting in a loss of self-esteem, along with both stigmatization and marginalization.

Discussion

In traditional anthropologic discourse, 'rites of passage' are processes of social transition and renewal. These rites are important public rituals that recognize a set of altered relationships and usually demarcate and celebrate changing social and sexual identities. Such rites guide transitions, providing instruction to ensure safe passage. For some young gay men 'coming out' can also be considered a rite of passage, characterized by transition, change and chaos.

Gay youth often migrate to urban gay communities where they feel culturally safe. However, many young men come out unguided and unsupported into new social and sexual environments. Data revealed key challenges for these youth including histories of both sexual and physical violence; familial discord which led to poor or incomplete interpersonal skills; the loss of social identity and support; acknowledging and assuming a devalued social identity; social transitions that were secret if not unmarked, unsupported and/or unguided; substance abuse; isolation and loneliness, depression and mental distress; the need for intimacy and disassociative behaviour during sex. All of these issues, contribute to a process of vulnerabilization, exacerbate risk for HIV infection and make the time of *coming out* a hazardous social transition.

Conclusions

Our results indicate that for HIV+ YGM a process vulnerabilization had occurred that included histories of social, sexual and physical violence; familial discord which led to poor or incomplete interpersonal skills; along with migration to urban Gay villages; the adoption of a devalued social identity; and a loss of social support.

Recommendations

- It is unlikely that HIV incidence will subside if we do not deal with Gay men as whole social beings. To reduce harm requires key actions.
- First, childhood health interventionists must acknowledge that violence exists in the lives of many Gay boys making early intervention a priority.
- Second, health practitioners who deal with adult Gay men need to identify this trauma and intervene appropriately.
- Third, communities need to understand *coming out* as a liminal time and create culturally safe environments including rituals and customs that assist Gay youth to safely transition into adulthood.
- Fourth, health interventionists should incorporate Gay men's cultural beliefs and values in their strategies to make HIV prevention relevant.

Power

"Just after I 'came out' I was going out this with a big beef cake guy who was mad at me because I was at a bathhouse having fun and sex with this another guy. He came up behind me and stuck his dick in me for like 30 seconds and blew his load and infected me, and... left. I remember looking at him saying, 'Why did you do that?' And he just said, 'fuck you' and walked away." - HIV Positive Young Gay Man

In the words of one HIV-positive participant, after lives filled with difficulty and isolation, many young Gay men wanted intimacy and emotional support above anything else.

Intimacy

"Sex with condoms is what you do until you get to the point where you can have sex without condoms. But you get to a point where you want that intimacy. Bareback sex is real. I feel you and you feel me. There is nothing in between us. It is the ultimate in intimacy." - HIV Positive Young Gay Man