

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PEER? RETHINKING PEER SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV

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Background:

There is currently little research exploring how young people in Australia feel connected to, and access peer-based HIV services and supports. As such, young people with HIV risk being overlooked as a distinct group in the planning and delivery of these services.

Methods:

This analysis draws from the mixed-method, community-based *Young + Positive* study, the first national study in Australia to document the perspectives of young people (aged 18-29) living with HIV, including those with perinatally and horizontally acquired HIV. Survey data (n=60) and qualitative interviews (n=25) were gathered between 2018 and 2019. We analysed the data using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to understand participant's needs in relation to peer support, and the ways in which the current peer-support structures met and/or disconnected with these needs.

Results:

Participants were mostly male (93.3%), identified as LGBTIQ+ (79.7%) and Australian born (64.2%). While most participants wanted to connect with others who had lived experience of HIV, additional characteristics shaped what it meant to be a 'peer.' These included similarity in age, having a shared worldview and shared intersecting identities. Older PLHIV were not considered to have a sufficient range of shared attributes to be considered peers.

Additionally, many participants did not feel they belonged to existing HIV services or community spaces, particularly those that were perceived to be dominated by people who had been diagnosed in earlier eras. These participants expressed a disconnect between their needs and existing peer supports, with some instead finding and maintaining peer connection in innovative ways outside existing service structures.

Conclusion:

Young people with HIV are a distinct group with specific needs in relation to peer support. Their support needs are not being fully met by the current HIV service system in Australia. Opportunities exist to more meaningfully integrate young people into existing HIV service systems, and to co-design peer-based programs.

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There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

