

COVID-19-related changes in sexual activity, condomless intercourse, and STI testing among young adults in Australia: a comparison of behaviours reported in two Debrief national surveys.

Authors:

Broadly T¹, Adam PCG¹, De Wit JBF^{1,2}, Treloar C¹

¹UNSW Sydney, Centre for Social Research in Health, Sydney, Australia, ²Utrecht University, Department of Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht, Netherlands, the

Background:

The prevalence of STIs was elevated among young adults in Australia before the COVID-19 pandemic due to a high frequency of condomless intercourse (CI) and suboptimal testing for STIs. The extent to which COVID-19 affected young people's sexual health-related behaviours, and the STI epidemic among them, has not been well documented. We compared data from the last two Debrief national surveys among young adults to assess the extent of changes in sexual activity, condomless intercourse (CI), and STI testing in the first year of the pandemic (2020).

Methods:

Debrief is a repeat cross-sectional survey of sexual health behaviours among youth aged 18-29 years across Australia. Participants in the first and second surveys were recruited in early 2018 and early 2021, using social media advertisements. 1177 and 2051 respondents, respectively, provided complete data that were weighted to reflect the demographic structure of the Australian population. Behavioural assessments pertained to the 12 months before the survey.

Results:

Between the first and second surveys, significant increases were observed in the proportions of respondents with no partner in the past 12 months (+13.61%) and with only one partner (+52.61%). Conversely, having two or more partners became less frequent (-12.93%). The proportion of respondents with regular sex partners did not change substantially (+3.25%). However, sex with casual partners drastically declined (-34.39%), as did CI with casual partners (-31.08%). Testing in the past 12 months also decreased substantially (-23.12%).

Conclusions:

We observed substantial COVID-19-related reductions among young people in sexual activity and CI, including with casual partners. These reductions in 2020 may have compensated for reduced STI testing in preventing STI transmission. The dynamic of the STI epidemic after 2020 will depend on the extent of reengagement in sex, STI risk and testing during periods of eased or lifted restrictions.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

None.