

# **Impacts of covid-19 restrictions on australian gay and bisexual men: qualitative findings from a national online study**

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## **Background:**

COVID-19 related restrictions may have particular impacts on gay and bisexual men (GBM), a key population for HIV and STI prevention. Community connectedness, which can be formed through participation in social and sexual networks, can play a protective role in GBM's general and sexual health. GBM can have poorer mental health compared with the general population, so COVID-19 restrictions that prevent social interaction and physical contact may be a threat to these GBM's wellbeing.

## **Methods:**

In April 2020, participants in national, online study of GBM were invited to complete a survey about COVID-19. Of the 903 respondents, 513 provided free-text responses to a question about the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on their lives. Framework analysis was used to interpret these data.

## **Results:**

Ten themes were identified. Participants described anxieties about the future, financial loss/uncertainty, loss of activity and social interaction, significant adjustments to daily life, frustration with governmental and workplace policies, coping strategies during restrictions, and concerns about contracting or passing on the virus. COVID-19 impacts more specific to GBM included: the loss of gay community events and venues, reduced capacity to intimately connect with sexual and romantic partners, and the impact of severed community connections on mental wellbeing. Mental wellbeing was a theme that intersected with most other themes, with many men providing detailed descriptions of the struggles and anxieties they faced during restrictions, including loneliness.

## **Conclusion:**

COVID-19 restrictions constrained GBM's capacity to socially and physically connect with sexual partners and peers, increasing social isolation, cutting physical and symbolic ties to community, and challenging the sense of community connection that can facilitate wellbeing. These findings reinforce the importance of maintaining community connection for some GBM's health, and the need for investment in LGBTIQ-specific community infrastructure and interventions as part of the COVID-19 response.

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