

Social engagement between gay men has declined but remains associated with HIV testing, PrEP uptake and number of sexual partners: analysis of national Gay Community Periodic Survey data 1998-2019.

Authors:

Chan C¹, Bavinton B¹, Broady T², Mao L², Prestage G¹, Holt M²

¹ The Kirby Institute, ² Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW Sydney

Background:

Community involvement has played a central role in HIV prevention in Australia, particularly when gay men faced high levels of homophobia and HIV-related stigma. However, changes in patterns of socialising and societal attitudes to diverse sexualities may have diversified the social networks of gay and bisexual men (GBM) over time. This may challenge public health and community engagement strategies, particularly with GBM who are not engaged with or reached by gay community-focused messaging.

Methods:

We analysed trends in gay social engagement (GSE; spending time with gay men and having gay friends) on an eight-point scale between 1998-2019 using national data from the Gay Community Periodic Surveys. Trends were analysed using multivariate regression. Multivariate logistic regression was performed on 2019 data to determine participant characteristics associated with high or low GSE.

Results:

Results from 154,246 GBM were included from 1998-2019. GSE declined from 1998 (Mean=5.76, SD=1.34) to 2019 (Mean=5.20, SD=1.56; $\beta=-0.03$, $p<0.001$) with a steeper decline in GBM aged under 25 (from 5.63 in 1998 to 4.66 in 2019; $\beta=-0.05$, $p<0.001$). In 2019, having high GSE was associated with older age (aOR=1.01, $p<0.001$), identifying as gay (aOR=2.07, $p<0.001$), being university educated (aOR=1.26, $p<0.001$), having full time employment (aOR=1.11, $p=0.033$), greater than 20 recent male sexual partners (aOR=1.84, $p<0.001$), ever having been tested for HIV (aOR=1.87, $p=0.001$), and current PrEP use (aOR=1.83, $p<0.001$).

Conclusion:

The decline in GSE over time, particularly among younger men, suggests GBM have more diverse social networks compared to the 1990s. High GSE remains associated with protective factors, such as HIV testing and PrEP use, but also higher numbers of sexual partners. If GSE continues to decline, this may present challenges to gay community-focused HIV prevention messaging. Further monitoring of GSE is suggested to adapt HIV prevention strategies targeted at GBM.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Kirby Institute and The Centre for Social Research in Health are supported by the Australian Government Department of Health. The Gay Community Periodic Surveys are supported by state and territory health departments and surveillance funding from the Australian Government Department of Health. No pharmaceutical funding was received for this research.