

A Latent Class analysis of Sexual and Romantic Relationships among HIV-Positive and HIV-Negative Gay and Bisexual Men in Vancouver

Relationships among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men are diverse, displaying a range of behaviours and preferences about sex and sexual pleasure that should be further explored in research.

What is the BC-CfE Momentum Health Study?

Evidence from British Columbia and elsewhere has demonstrated the expansion of access to antiretroviral HIV treatment (ART) can result in population-level reductions in HIV incidence. This is the concept behind the made-in-BC Treatment as Prevention[®] strategy, or TasP[®], which aims to expand early HIV testing and treatment to improve patients' health and curb the spread of HIV. Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM) represent the most affected HIV risk group, both in BC and Canada. The BC-CfE Momentum Health Study is designed to measure changes in HIV risk behaviour, attitudes toward TasP[®] and the proportion of HIV-positive gbMSM with unsuppressed viral load over time in the Vancouver region. The study uses respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to obtain a more representative sample reflecting the diversity of the gbMSM community in Vancouver.

FACT BOX

Little research has been conducted exploring relationship statuses, sexual agreements (monogamous/open), number of recent sex partners, participation in sex parties and participation in anonymous sex encounters among gay and bisexual men who have sex with men (gbMSM). Even less is known about how patterns in sexual behaviour may vary by HIV status.

What are the key study findings?

- Sexuality among gbMSM is traditionally studied from a risk perspective, particularly looking at condomless anal sex in relation to HIV prevalence.
- This study explores differences in behaviour associated with risk of acquiring HIV between casual and committed sexual relationships among gbMSM.
- Measurements were based on marital status, presence of a 'regular' sexual partner and the status of living with a 'regular' partner for more than 12 months, along with measuring sexual experiences in monogamous and open relationships where a regular partner was reported.
- Individuals were categorized as 'single with less sex partners', 'single with more sex partners', 'monogamish', 'open with less sex partners', and 'open with more sex partners'.
- Variables associated with the sexual experiences of gbMSM were also analyzed, including number of sexual partners, participation in sex parties and participation in anonymous sex.
- Factors related to mental health were explored, including anxiety and depression.



What do these findings mean?

- Relationships among gbMSM are diverse, displaying a range of behaviours and preferences about sex and sexual pleasure.
- When informing the development of interventions aimed at empowering gbMSM, it is important to acknowledge the range of sexual choices and preferences as a positive part of male sexuality.
- Researchers, health care providers and others should pay attention to how various factors of sexual and relational experiences may be related to positive aspects of sexuality, as well as to social, sexual and mental health factors.
- The tendency in research has been to focus primarily on 'regular partners' as a single group. This study revealed variations in sexual agreements and sexual activities within a range of distinct classes of regular partnerships.
- Continued research is needed, particularly on the varied meanings of monogamy and how this definition changes over time.
- While this study measured love and affection, it is not entirely representative of relationship quality. Going forward, additional factors such as intimacy, passion, trust, commitment, relationship satisfaction and power equity could be explored.
- These findings are relevant for sex researchers, educators, health care providers and therapists in working towards a better understanding of and response to the diversity of same-sex relationships among gbMSM.
- Supporting gbMSM in creating satisfying relationships and pleasurable sexual experiences is an important goal that is worthy of continued research, advocacy and support.

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