



HIV and sub-Saharan African communities in Australia: Briefing Paper #4

Young people

This briefing paper, which examines specific HIV-related issues that may affect young people of African background, is part of a set of papers which summarise the key points made in the AFAO discussion paper, *HIV and sub-Saharan African Communities in Australia*. A full list of papers is on the back of this page.

Many African communities in Australia, especially refugee communities, have a higher proportion of young people in their population than the wider Australian community. For example according to the 2011 Census, around 14.7% of people born in Australia are in the 15-24 age group, compared to 28.5% of people born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 28.4% of people born in Sierra Leone, and 24.9% of people born in South Sudan.¹

In a series of community consultations and two national forums hosted by AFAO (2009 to 2012), community leaders and African health and community workers expressed concern about young people's sexual behaviour. Some felt that in Australia's 'free' society young people are taking more sexual risks, others noted an increase in teenage pregnancies. They were also worried that young people are not getting reliable information about sexual health through school sex education programs. At the forums – which included a number of young adult participants – there was vigorous discussion about young people's behaviour, the sexual exploitation of young women, and adults' responsibilities to ensure young people are supported and empowered by their community to make safe sexual choices.

What the research tells us

Epidemiological data does not indicate a high rate of HIV among African young people in Australia; however there is evidence that they may have relatively high rates of teenage pregnancy.² Some service providers have also suggested that some young people are involved in injecting drug use. This indicates behaviours which may put young people at risk of acquiring HIV.

In 2010 the Australian Human Rights Commission report *In Our Own Words – African Australians: A review of human rights and social inclusion issues* identified lack of information about sexual health, early pregnancy, and sexually transmissible infections (STIs) as issues with an impact on the health and wellbeing of newly arrived young people with African backgrounds.³

Research into sexual health literacy among refugee youth in Victoria found that 'attention to the sexual and reproductive health needs of young people has been largely absent' from refugee health promotion.⁴ Young people from Africa who were interviewed for this research project were more aware of HIV than other STIs. In general, they understood that it was transmitted by unprotected sex; however, they did not consider HIV to be a significant risk in Australia.⁵ The researchers recommend that: 'sexual health promotion should be an explicit component of early resettlement services for youth with refugee backgrounds and strategies need to take account of the pre-migration and resettlement contexts'.⁶

Gender inequity also has an impact on the sexual health of teen and young adult African women. Lack of education prior to settlement in Australia, sexual violence and coercion, arranged marriages, difficulty negotiating condom use, and exploitation by older male partners may all increase their vulnerability to STIs and HIV.

SEE ALSO AFAO BRIEFING PAPERS #2: MEN AND #3: WOMEN (ENGLISH ONLY)

Sexual health programs

Due to these widespread community concerns and research findings a number of organisations have developed programs that address young people's sexual and reproductive health needs. Young people's involvement in designing and implementing these sexual and reproductive health programs is vital to their success.

BRIEFING PAPERS:

HIV AND SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA

1. Overview (Available in English, French, Arabic and Amharic)
2. Men
3. Women
4. Young people (available in French and English)
5. People with HIV
6. Gay men and men who have sex with men (MSM)
7. Criminalisation
8. Prevention & awareness
9. Stigma (available in French and English)

Download these briefings from:
www.afao.org.au/library/discussion-and-briefing-papers

More papers will be translated as funding permits.

The AFAO discussion paper from which these papers are drawn, *HIV and sub-Saharan African communities in Australia* is available from AFAO on request.

Hip hop, drama and music are particularly effective ways of engaging with young people around these issues.

Examples of successful programs include:

- Youth Drama Drive, which creatively engages with African and other young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities through music, performance and dance (PEACE Multicultural Services, SA)
- Sharing Stories (Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre – MMRC, WA)
- The Sister2sister program, which employed an African tradition of women sharing information, advice and guidance with each other as a strategy to address low levels of awareness about sexual and reproductive health (Multicultural Health and Support Service, Vic)
- Engagement with young men through soccer (Multicultural HIV and Hepatitis Service, NSW, Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland, and MMRC, WA).

It is also important for services concerned with young people's sexual and reproductive health to engage with parents and families, especially around supporting communication about sex and protective behaviour.

Communication about safe and responsible sexual behaviour may be particularly challenging for parents who perceive Australia's more open sexual culture as immoral and threatening to cultural cohesion. Adults and adolescents' differing views on sex and risk⁷ can contribute to inter-generational conflict and communication difficulties, which have already been recognised as an issue within African communities.⁸

Examples of effective projects for parents include:

- the HIV Drama Project and resulting DVD 'Teach your son ... condoms are good', which models how mothers can support their sons to have protected sex – MMRC (WA)

- World AIDS Day Family Fun Night, which aimed to increase parents' ability to discuss sexual health with their families – MMRC (WA)

Information about these and other programs is available in *HIV and CALD communities: Mapping HIV Health Promotion Programs and Resources* (AFAO 2015). Available from: <http://bit.ly/map-15> (English only).

¹ Department of Immigration and Border Protection. (2013). Community Information Summaries. Statistics from 2011 Census. Retrieved from: <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/statistics/comm-summ/>

² McMichael, C., Gifford, S. (2010). Narratives of sexual health risk and protection amongst young people from refugee backgrounds in Melbourne, Australia. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 12(3), 263.

³ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2010). Health: African Australians - Compendium (2010). Australian Human Rights Commission. Section 7.2,e, (i). Retrieved from: <http://www.humanrights.gov.au/africanus/compendium/health/index.html#section7>

⁴ McMichael, op.cit., 263.

⁵ Ibid. 268.

⁶ Ibid. 263.

⁷ Dean, J., Mitchell, M., Stewart, D., Wollin, J., Dbattista, J. (2013) Intergenerational Differences in Sexual Health Knowledge among the Queensland Sudanese & South Sudanese Communities. Conference presentation, Australasian HIV/AIDS Conference 2013 (25th Annual ASHM Conference), 21 - 23 October, Darwin.

⁸ Reiner, A. (2010). *Literature review – Background paper for African Australians: A review of human rights and social inclusion issues*. Australian Human Rights Commission, 49.