

This research summary provides an overview of findings from a recently published study describing the impact of COVID-19 on the sexual health and wellbeing of men who have sex with men in the USA.

Sanchez, T., Zlotorzynska, M., Rai, M., Baral, S. (2020). Characterising the impact of COVID-19 on men who have sex with men across the United State in April 2020. *AIDS and Behaviour*, doi.org/10.1007/s10461-020-02894-2

New research from the United States of America (USA) provides data on the impact of COVID-19 on the sexual behaviours, wellbeing, and access to and use of HIV and STI services among men who have sex with men (MSM). This is one of the first studies to publish data on the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of gay men and other men who have sex with men.

A national online survey was conducted with MSM to examine the effects of COVID-19 on their wellbeing, sexual health, substance use and access to HIV and STI services. The survey also asked participants about COVID-19 restrictions in their local area and contact with COVID-19 disease. The survey also assessed participants' willingness to collect specimens at home for mailed in SARS-CoV-2 testing for the purposes of diagnostic testing and research purposes. These questions were included to assist in planning a future COVID-19 prevalence study.

Participants were recruited through the *American Men's Internet Survey* (AMIS) an online behavioural survey conducted annually in the USA among MSM. Only men who completed the AMIS survey in August through December 2019 round and who had agreed to be contacted via email for future studies were sent the link to the *COVID-19 Impact Survey*. The survey was conducted from 2 April 2020 to 13 April 2020 and was completed by 1051 men. The median age of participants was 35 years and most of the men were white, non-Hispanic, (70.4%), had private health cover, and lived in urban or suburban counties. The sample also included a proportion of Hispanic and Latino men (13.9%) and Black, non-Hispanic men (8.5%). 122 men in the study (11%) were HIV positive. Only one participant had been diagnosed with COVID-19. One-third of participants reported having a symptom associated with COVID-19 in the previous 24 hours, however, only a few participants reported having any contact with someone with COVID-19 disease.

Many of the men reported decreased quality of life (69.4%), increased anxiety (72.7%) and decreased connection with friends (56.1%) and family (29.8%) due to COVID-19. Many participants also experienced difficulties meeting basic resource needs such as paying rent or purchasing food. Only a small number of men reported losing access to health insurance because of COVID-19 (1.9%), however, 19.1% of men had lost their job because of COVID-19 and 32.4% had reduced hours of paid employment.

Participants reported changes in sexual behaviour due to COVID-19, with half the participants reporting fewer sex partners (51.3%) and decreased opportunities to have sex (68.0%). A substantial proportion of men (48.8%) said they had decreased their use of hook up and dating apps to meet men in person, however, just over one-third of men (35.1%) increased their usage for the purpose of connecting with other men. Importantly, while a substantial number of men reported fewer sexual partners, 47.6 percent reported no change and 44.9 percent said they still used hook up and dating apps to meet men in person. About a quarter of participants (26.0%) said they had increased alcohol use due to COVID-19 and a smaller number of men (9.9%) said they had increased recreational drug use. Younger participants aged 15 – 24 years were more likely to have increased use of apps to connect with other men, have experienced problems accessing condoms and increased drug and alcohol use than men over 25 years of age.

A quarter of participants reported decreased access to STI testing or treatment, and 18.8 percent reported decreased access to HIV testing. Of the 204 participants who were taking Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) a small proportion (7.1%) had experienced problems getting a script for PrEP and 4.7 percent reported having trouble getting PrEP medication due to COVID-19. Covid-19 was also adversely impacting HIV care for some HIV positive men in the sample, with over a quarter of men living with HIV (27%) reporting reduced access to HIV care and 23.8 percent experiencing reduced access to Laboratory testing. The majority reported no changes to their access to (91.5 %) or use of HIV medications (91.0%). Men aged between 15 and 24 years were more likely to report problems accessing HIV and STI testing and treatment services.

The majority of participants were willing to collect specimens at home for mailed SARS-CoV-2 testing for the purpose of diagnostic tests (97%) and for research (95%).

Key messages

- The findings of this study suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic is, ‘reinforcing health inequities’ in the USA including among MSM. Many of the men in the sample reported adverse effects on their wellbeing, social interactions, and economic circumstances due to COVID-19. The authors note the adverse effects being experienced by MSM are likely to deepen over the course of the pandemic and potentially impact access to HIV medications and PrEP. To address these potential adverse effects, the authors argue for the introduction or in some cases expansion of telehealth, relaxing of follow-up laboratory tests and increasing prescription refill numbers.
- The study found many of the men had reduced their number of sexual partners in response to COVID-19, the authors note this is likely to result in an immediate decline in STI and HIV transmissions among MSM, however, they also note this decline is likely to be temporary as stay at home orders are eased and fewer people adhere to physical distancing recommendations.
- The Australian experience of both HIV and COVID-19 is different from that of the USA, and therefore not all the findings are relevant to Australia. However, these findings may be useful for thinking about HIV services, and prevention messaging for gay men and other men who have sex need over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly as stay at home orders are eased and the number of COVID-19 cases decline.