

Surveying HIV Risk Factors Among Young People in Washington, DC

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As part of National HIV Testing Day on June 26, 2006, Metro TeenAIDS surveyed a group of young people on their behaviors and attitudes related to HIV risk factors, HIV testing, and condom use. The survey consisted of 466 young people ages 13–24. Metro TeenAIDS received responses from 252 males, 202 females, and 6 transgender youth. Survey respondents were 91% African American and 81% reported being heterosexual. A majority of respondents (53.4%) reported that they live east of the river in Wards 7 and 8 and another third (31.4%) reported being from either Wards 5 or 6.

The findings highlight the diverse set of risk factors for HIV infection among the various populations surveyed:

- Sexually active gay and bisexual males report lower rates of condom use and lower rates of HIV testing than their heterosexual peers;
- Lesbian and bisexual females report higher rates of sexual activity than their heterosexual peers;
- Heterosexual males are most likely to be sexually active;
- Many young people do not know their HIV status;
- Sexually active youth report inconsistent rates of condom use.

Our findings underscore the need for a strengthened focus on HIV programming for youth in DC. These findings support Metro TeenAIDS' belief that the number of youth infected with HIV/AIDS could be significantly reduced if more young people delayed sexual activity; practiced safer sex; and regularly tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

This survey was conducted as part of Metro TeenAIDS' commitment to understand the population we serve. We hope these findings will prove valuable to nonprofits and government agencies that work to implement effective HIV-prevention strategies for young people in the Washington, DC area. The resulting data will also inform our on-going efforts to support young people in the fight against HIV/AIDS and to provide effective services that meet their needs.

There is a need for a strengthened focus on HIV programming for youth in DC.

AGE OF RESPONDENTS

13–15	19.2%
15–17	27.9%
18–20	29.5%
21–24	23.5%

RESPONDENT ZIP CODES

20020	30.3%
20003	17.1%
20019	16.2%
20002	14.3%
20032	6.9%
Other	15.2%

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Estimates suggest that between 1,000 and 1,500 HIV-infected youth live in our nation's capital.

Background on HIV in Washington, DC

According to national estimates, approximately one-half of all new HIV infections in the United States occur among people under 25 years of age. Given that Washington, DC has the highest rate of AIDS of any major metropolitan area in the country, and that national surveys show high rates of sexual activity among DC youth, there is much concern that the HIV rates among adolescents in the District of Columbia are staggeringly high.

Additionally, local STI rates for DC's youth are almost twice the national average. Many studies indicate that an STI-infected person is four to nine times more likely to contract HIV if exposed to the virus.

Although our city does not yet have exact data on the number of youth living with HIV, estimates suggest that between 1,000 and 1,500 HIV-infected youth live in our nation's capital. That's the equivalent of nearly one teen in every classroom, yet fewer than 300 HIV-positive teens are receiving age-appropriate social services and effective health care.

Moreover, it is extremely concerning that HIV-infected youth are neither getting tested for HIV to learn their status, nor seeking care. Adolescents, especially those who are sexually active, may be reluctant to seek medical care due to stigma-based fears about confidentiality, lack of access to services, and perceived high costs. As a result, many HIV-infected young people unknowingly transmit the infection to their sexual partners and, quite possibly, to their children. In addition, these individuals are unlikely to take advantage of early interventions that will connect them with care such as HIV treatment and secondary prevention services. Together, these factors lead to unnecessary sickness and death among DC's HIV-infected youth, impacting families, the community and the future workforce.

The findings from this survey underscore the reality that teens in Washington, DC are sexually active and putting themselves at risk for HIV infection. The city must expand efforts to provide youth with the information and skills necessary for:

- Delaying the onset of sexual activity;
- Increasing testing for HIV and other STIs among youth who are already sexually active; and
- Increasing consistent condom use.

HIV testing must be a strong component of the larger strategy to end new HIV infections among youth.

HIV RISK COMPARISON

	MALES		FEMALES		TOTALS/ AVERAGE
	Heterosexual	Gay/Bi	Heterosexual	Lesbian/Bi	
■ Are you sexually active?					
Yes	93%	88%	71%	92%	85%
No	7%	12%	29%	8%	15%
■ If you are sexually active, do you use condoms?					
Always	68%	35%	57%	39%	59%
Sometimes	28%	39%	38%	35%	32%
Never	4%	26%	5%	26%	9%
■ Have you ever been tested for HIV?					
Yes	76%	56%	52%	78%	65%
No	24%	44%	48%	22%	35%
■ Did you get your results?					
Yes	96%	83%	99%	89%	96%
No	4%	17%	1%	11%	5%

Testing messages need to be diverse in their approach and scope—not all youth respond to the same testing messages.

When young people don't know if they carry the HIV virus, they put themselves and others at risk.

Finding #1: Sexually active gay and bisexual males report lower rates of condom use and lower rates of HIV testing, as compared to their heterosexual peers.

Compared to their heterosexual peers, males who reported being homosexual or bisexual put themselves at higher risk for contracting and spreading HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Survey data revealed that they are:

- Less likely to always use condoms if sexually active; and
- Less likely to get tested for HIV.

Finding #2: Lesbian and bisexual females report higher rates of sexual activity than their heterosexual peers.

Compared to other groups surveyed, females who reported being lesbian or bisexual are:

- More likely to be sexually active; and
- Less likely to report using a condom when they have sex, compared to their heterosexual peers. This finding confirms other studies that have shown higher rates of teen pregnancy among young women who identify as being lesbian or bisexual but who still have sex with men.

Finding #3: Heterosexual males are the most likely to be sexually active, as compared to other groups of teens.

The survey found that heterosexual males are the most likely to be sexually active. Heterosexual males are, however, less likely to exhibit other key risk factors than are other teens. They are:

- Most likely to report “always” using condoms than all other groups (almost twice as likely as gay and bisexual males, for example); and
- More likely to be tested for HIV than gay/bisexual males or heterosexual females.

Still, given the high rates of sexual activity, inconsistent condom use, and the stigma of reporting same-sex sexual behavior of young heterosexual males, it is essential that HIV prevention programs continue to focus on the needs of this population.

Finding #4: Many young people do not know their HIV status.

A significant number of young people are at risk for HIV infection, yet while many do get tested, a large percentage do not know their HIV status:

- 35% of survey respondents report that they have never been tested for HIV.
- Many teens do not return for their test results: 17 percent of gay and bisexual males, and 11 percent of lesbians and bisexual females report that they did not return to learn their HIV test results.
- Among the 65% of respondents who report that they have been tested for HIV:
 - 25% have not had an HIV test in at least 6 months.

Especially alarming is that many young women are not getting tested for HIV. For the 71% of heterosexual girls who report engaging in sexual intercourse, the risks of contracting and spreading HIV and other sexually transmitted infections is very high. The risk factors for females presented here reflect the changing face of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in DC, where African American women and girls now account for the majority of new HIV infections.

- Compared to other teens, heterosexual girls are the least likely of any group to know their HIV status, with 48% reporting that they have never been tested for HIV.

Ensuring that teens and young adults monitor their HIV status—even when they practice safer sex—is critical to curbing the HIV/AIDS epidemic in DC. In a city where 1 in 20 adults is infected with HIV, it is essential that all sexually active individuals seek regular testing services. When young people don't know if they carry the HIV virus, they put themselves and others at risk. Yet we find it encouraging that half the participants in this survey indicated that they are interested in learning more about HIV/AIDS and STIs.

The lack of diagnosis and appropriate care means that AIDS disproportionately claims the lives of our community's most vulnerable residents, including young people living in DC's most disenfranchised and poverty-stricken neighborhoods.

Finding #5: Sexually active youth report inconsistent rates of condom use.

Among the 84.7% of respondents who reported being sexually active:

- 59% report that they “always” use a condom;
- 32% report that they “sometimes” use a condom; and
- 9% report that they “never” use a condom.

Almost half of the young people surveyed report that they use a condom only “sometimes” or “never” (41%). This finding highlights the need for more education and outreach to ensure that sexually active young people in our community have the knowledge and encouragement they need to stay healthy and protect themselves from HIV/AIDS.

About the Survey:

Survey findings were derived using a convenience sample of young people (N=466). Data was collected on National HIV Testing Day in June of 2006. There are a number of limitations with this data set, such as differences in the sample sizes between heterosexual and lesbian/gay/bisexual respondents. Caution should be used when generalizing these findings to the greater DC population.



METRO TEENAIDS

Metro TeenAIDS is the only local community health organization dedicated to supporting young people in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Through education, support, and advocacy, MTA prevents the spread of HIV; promotes responsible decision-making; and improves the quality of life for young people infected with, or affected by, HIV/AIDS. We will continue to seek out data and support research that can provide greater insight into how HIV/AIDS affects young people in our community.

To learn more, contact Metro TeenAIDS at **202.543.9355** or visit our website at **www.metroteenaid.org**.

Analysis by Shattuck and Associates, Inc.