

HIV and Sexual Behavior among Young South Africans: A National Survey of 15-24 Year Olds

The National Survey of HIV and Sexual Behaviour among Young South Africans is one of the largest nationally representative, household surveys of young people in the world. The survey is unique not only in that it includes comprehensive sexual and other behavioral information, it also tested young people for HIV infection, providing the most up-to-date data on HIV prevalence among South Africa's youth by province, gender, age, and other key demographic characteristics. The study was commissioned as part of a larger evaluation of loveLife-South Africa's national HIV prevention programme for young people and conducted by the Reproductive Health Research Unit of the University of the Witwatersrand in partnership with the Medical Research Council of South Africa with independent technical oversight by an expert group based in the Center for AIDS Prevention at the University of California at San Francisco. loveLife is one of the largest comprehensive, national HIV prevention programmes for youth in the world, combining a sustained multi-media awareness and education campaign with a countrywide network of youth-friendly sexual health and outreach services. The survey is the first of three such studies to be conducted at approximately two-year intervals over the expected duration of the loveLife initiative. The main aims of the study are to:

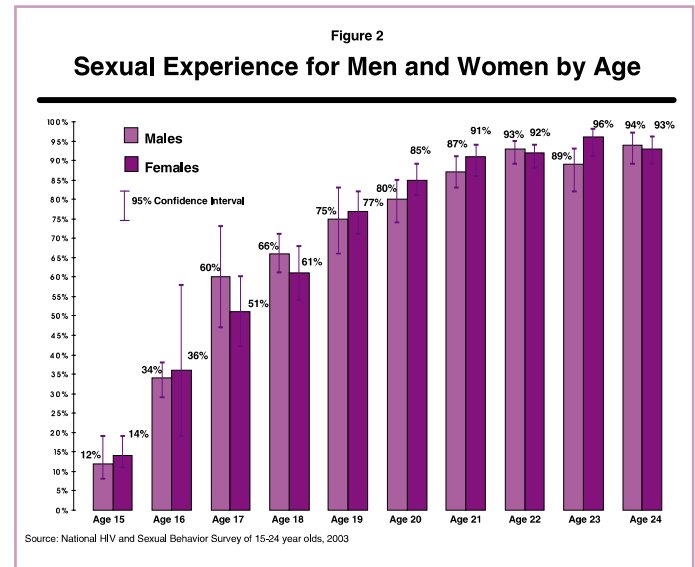
- establish the prevalence of HIV and related behaviours among young people aged 15-24 years;
- examine the extent of young people's exposure to loveLife; and
- monitor changes in HIV prevalence and sexual behaviour among South African youth.

HIV/AIDS in South Africa

South Africa is in the grips of a devastating HIV/AIDS epidemic. Epidemiological studies have shown that the peak incidence of HIV/AIDS occurs in young people aged 15-24 years. South Africa has a real opportunity to reverse the course of the HIV/AIDS epidemic over the next five to ten years by focusing prevention efforts on young people so that sustained behaviour change can be achieved (Impending Catastrophe, 2000; Stover et al. Lancet 2002)

HIV Prevalence

The survey found that overall HIV prevalence among 15-24 year olds was 10.2%. Prevalence among 15-19 year olds was 4.8%; among 20-24 years olds, it was 16.5%. Prevalence was higher among females (15.5%) than males (4.8%) ages 15-24. This was true for each age group: prevalence among 15-19 year olds



was 7.3% for females and 2.5% for males; among 20-24 year olds, prevalence was 24.5% for females and 7.6% for males. Most young South Africans living with HIV/AIDS are female (77%), but HIV prevalence among males and females is roughly equal by age 30.

By province, the highest HIV prevalence was found in KwaZulu-Natal (14.1%) and the lowest in Limpopo (4.8%). Youth living in urban informal areas had the highest HIV prevalence (17.4%), followed by rural formal areas (13.5%), urban formal areas (9.8%) and rural informal areas (8.7%).

Sexual Activity

Overall, approximately two thirds (67%) of young people aged 15-24 reported having had sexual intercourse. Sexual experience increased with age, with 48% of 15-19 year olds reporting having had sex compared to 89% of 20-24 year olds; there were no differences by gender. Among those who reported ever having had sex, 17% indicated that they had not had sex in the past 12 months.

Age at First Sex

Among youth who reported ever having had sex, the mean age of first sex for males was 16.4 years and 17 years for females.

Pregnancy

Among the 68% of women who reported ever having had sex, about half (49%) reported having been pregnant at some point. The mean age of first pregnancy was 18.5 years. Two-thirds (66%) of those who have ever been pregnant reported that they did not want to be.

Forced and Unwanted Sex

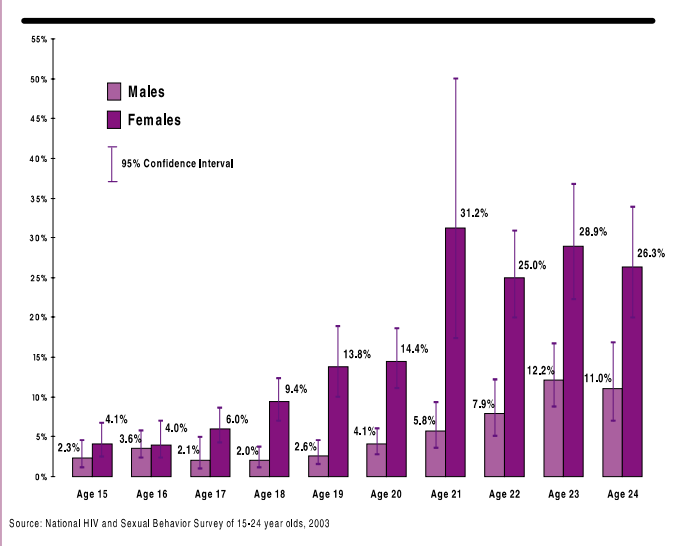
Among sexually experienced young people, 6% reported having been forced to have sex, including 2% of males and 10% of females. Young women were much more likely to report that their first sexual experience was unwanted compared to young men (28% compared to 1%).

Number of Sexual Partners

Among sexually experienced young people, 35% reported only having had one lifetime sexual partner. Sexually experienced males were significantly less likely to report having had only one lifetime partner compared to females (25% vs. 45%). Among

Figure 1

HIV Prevalence among Men and Women by Age



young people who reported having had sex in the past 12 months, 56% of males and 88% of females reported only having one sexual partner in the past 12 months.

Condom Use

About half (52%) of sexually experienced youth reported using a condom at last sex. Males were more likely to report condom use at last sex than females (57% compared to 48%). This disparity was more pronounced among those ages 20-24, where females were significantly less likely to report using a condom at last sex than males (44% compared to 57%).

Of those youth who reported having had sex in the past 12 months (56% of all young people), 33% reported that they always used a condom with their most recent sexual partner while 31% reported that they never used a condom. Among this group, females were significantly less likely than males to report always using condoms with their most recent sexual partner (28% vs. 39% respectively)

HIV Awareness and Perceived Risk

While general knowledge about HIV/AIDS is high, the survey found a significant underestimation of personal risk. Most young people (94%) know that there are ways to avoid HIV infection. Most (77%) reported that condoms could be used to prevent HIV. Almost two-thirds (63%) indicated that they had changed their own behaviour to avoid HIV; 44% reported having talked to their parents about HIV/AIDS; and 20% reported having been tested for HIV.

On the other hand, 62% of HIV infected young people reported that they thought they were at little or no risk of contracting HIV compared to 73% of HIV negative young people.

Awareness of loveLife

Eighty five percent of youth reported having heard of or seen loveLife. There were no significant differences by age or gender. loveLife has reported high levels of awareness across all geographic areas in South Africa. Awareness was highest in urban formal areas (93%) but also high in rural areas (77%). Two thirds (65%) of all South African youth reported awareness of four or more loveLife programmes and over one third (approx. 3 million young people) report having participated in loveLife programmes.

Conclusions

The National Youth Survey provides some of the most comprehensive information to date on young South African's knowledge of HIV/AIDS, risk for HIV, and prevalence of infection. The survey corroborates earlier analyses indicating that young South Africans are at risk for HIV infection, with one in ten currently infected, and underscores the disproportionate impact of risk and infection on young women. The results of this survey also supports evidence from other national surveys that HIV prevalence among youth under 25 years may be stabilizing.

The survey shows that more than two thirds of youth report changing their sexual behaviour because of awareness about HIV/AIDS, and substantial increase in reported condom usage at last sex. Of particular concern is the high percentage of young people, including those already infected, who underestimate their risk for HIV. Looking forward, this survey will provide the solid baseline needed to assess future trends in the epidemic among young South Africans.

Methodology

The survey was a nationally representative, household survey conducted between March to August, 2003. The sample design employed a three-stage, disproportionate, stratified sample of all young people aged 15-24 years in the nine provinces of South Africa. The 2001 census enumeration areas (EAs) were used as the primary sampling unit. One eligible youth in each household was randomly selected. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents under 18 years. Of eligible and enumerated youth, 77.2% completed an interview, so that of all eligible youth, 11,904 (68.2%) completed the interview. All young people were asked to take part in an interviewer administered questionnaire that covered a range of topics including socio-demographic, sexual risk behaviours, attitudes and norms around HIV/AIDS and awareness and exposure to the loveLife programme. HIV testing was conducted by collecting an oral fluid sample using the Orasure(r) Oral Specimen Collection Device. This sample was then tested for HIV-1/2 antibodies using the Vironostika ELISA. HIV testing was anonymous although results were linked through a unique id number. Participants were informed that they would not receive the results of their test as no personal identifiers were collected and were referred to the nearest clinic for Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT). This study was approved by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects, University of the Witwatersrand.

The full survey report is available on www.rhru.co.za and www.loveLife.org.za

For more information on loveLife go to www.lovelife.org.za