Patterns of Sexuality in a High-Risk Sample: Results from a Survey of New Intakes at a County Jail

Mark T. Temple, Ph.D.¹

Described the sexual habits and behaviors in a sample of individuals thought to be at high risk for infection with the AIDS virus. The sample is drawn from new arrestees at a county jail in the San Francisco Bay Area. Results indicate that the individuals in this sample are very sexually active: The majority began their sexual activities at a young age; most are currently in a primary relationship; and a large proportion report having had two or more sexual partners in the last 12 months. Furthermore, for the most part, the patterns of sexual behavior reported by respondents did not differ on the basis of gender. Although it was true that men tended to initiate intercourse at an earlier age than women, men and women did not differ with respect to the numbers of sexual partners reported in the last year, frequency of vaginal intercourse, frequency of anal intercourse, or in the distribution of sexual risk-taking. Overall, women in this sample are very much like men in terms of their sexual behavior.

KEY WORDS: sexual behavior; unsafe sex; risky sex; AIDS.

INTRODUCTION

Considering the wide range of sex-related issues that are of great social and public health concern today (including AIDS, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual abuse of children, contraceptive use, etc.) the need for new and better data on sexual habits and behaviors in

¹Alcohol Research Group, 2000 Hearst Avenue, Berkeley, California 94709.

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the general population as well as in high-risk groups is critically important (Abramson, 1990). Yet the availability of such data on the United States population is sorely lacking. What this has meant is that the data necessary for making accurate estimates of the numbers of individuals engaging in sexual behaviors that may be placing them at risk of HIV infection are not available. Indeed, the lack of available data on sexual practices is so great that public health officials have been forced to rely on data collected decades ago by Kinsey et al., (1948, 1953) for making population-based estimates about the numbers of individuals currently engaging in behaviors that place them at risk of HIV infection. These data are now more than 40 years old and fraught with a number of important limitations.

This is not to imply that there have been no studies of sexuality since Kinsey. Rather, a number of important studies have been conducted (e.g., Klassen et al., 1989; Greeley et al., 1990; Hofferth et al., 1987). However, as Gagnon (1988) pointed out, there are at least five problems that limit the usefulness of these studies in the battle against AIDS. First, many of these studies have focused on behaviors or activities that are sensational but marginal and have excluded behaviors that are more common and widespread (e.g., Humphrey, 1972; Reiss, 1983; Thompson, 1983; Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1984; Delacoste and Alexander, 1987). Second, there has been a tendency to focus on attitudes and beliefs, particularly changes in beliefs, rather than actual behaviors (e.g., Klassen et al., 1989). Third, the majority of these studies have only examined sexual practices in Western industrialized countries (Gagnon, 1988; Abramson, 1990). Fourth, these studies have been fragmentary in nature, and have tended to employ different instrumentation and methods, making it difficult to compare results from one study to another (Gagnon, 1988; Abramson, 1990). And perhaps most important, the majority of these studies have been based on samples that are nonrepresentative of the larger population, i.e., samples of unmarried, middle-class, college-going, young, white females (e.g., Luckey and Nass, 1969; Kaats and Davis, 1970), samples of magazine subscribers (e.g., Tavris and Sadd, 1977; Althanasiou et al., 1970; Hunt, 1974), and volunteer or recruited samples (e.g., Hite, 1976). There have been almost no studies based on a representative sample of the general population.

The present paper is part of a group of papers that, together, are designed to provide baseline data on sexual practices, and in particular, sexual practices associated with the risk of HIV infection. Other papers in this series examine patterns of sexual behavior in the general population (e.g., Trocki, 1992), and while there is a clear need for studies of the general population, preliminary results suggest that certain patterns of sexual behavior (i.e., behaviors associated with increased risk for HIV infection) are relatively rare phenomena in the general heterosexual population. This