

Loneliness and Sexual Risk-Taking Among Gay, Bisexual, and Other Men who have Sex with Men in the Context of HIV and COVID-19, Two Ongoing Pandemics

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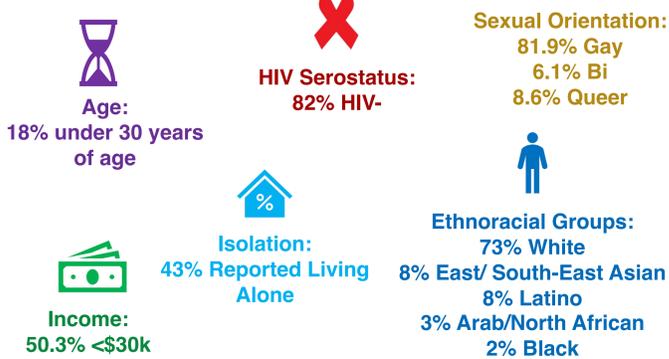
Introduction

- During much of the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing and isolation measures were imposed.
 - However, such public health measures are associated with increases in loneliness and decreases in social support.
- According to the Loneliness and Sexual Risk Model (Torres & Gore-Felton, 2007), higher levels of loneliness are associated with increases in sexual risk-taking.
 - However, will this hold true during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, when most Canadians were instructed to engage in social distancing?
- Other work has shown decreases in willingness to have sex during the COVID-19 pandemic among Gay, Bisexual and other Men who have sex with men (GBM) and a corresponding decrease in the number of sex partners in 2020 (Stephenson et al., 2022).
 - Will age play a role?

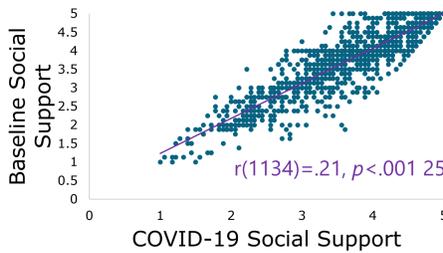
Methods

- Data were collected via the first module of the Engage COVID-19 Sub-study, embedded within the Engage Cohort Study (ECS), an ongoing cohort study tracking the mental and sexual health of GBM in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, Canada.
 - The current data were collected between Sept 2020 and April 2021.

• N = 1,134



Results



Perceived Social Support at ECS Baseline Predicted Perceived Social Support during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic*



*Controlling for age, education, income, recruitment city, living alone, and HIV status

Younger GBM tended to report:



More Loneliness during the early phases of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (beta = .144, p < .001)



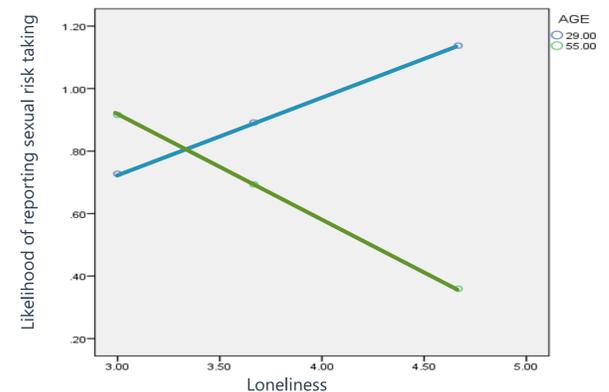
Less Emotional Support during the early phases of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (beta = .170, p < .001)

*Controlling for education, income, recruitment city, living alone, and HIV status

Age moderated the association between loneliness and sexual risk-taking:

Younger GBM experiencing more loneliness were more likely to report engaging in sexual risk-taking* (B = -.02, p = .003, 95%CI: -0.04, -0.01)

*Controlling for age, education, income, recruitment city, living alone, and HIV status



"Sexual Risk-Taking" Included:

- Sex with casual partners
- Anonymous sex
- CAS
- Transactional Sex
- ChemSex
- Group Sex Activity

Loneliness

Measured using the 3-item version of the UCLA Loneliness Scale:

- "Do you feel that you lack companionship?"
- "Do you feel left out?"
- "Do you feel isolated from others?"

Conclusions

- GBM who began with higher levels of perceived social support before the COVID-19 pandemic tended to feel they were better able to access emotional support from family and friends during the early months of COVID-19 in Canada.
- Younger GBM reported more loneliness and less perceived emotional support from family and friends after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The association between loneliness and sexual risk-taking behaviour tended to follow the pattern predicted by the Loneliness and Sexual Risk Model, but only for young GBM - older GBM showed an inverse pattern.
- Thus, the sexual risk-taking of younger GBM seemed to be particularly impacted by loneliness and these men may benefit from additional support to cope more effectively with loneliness.
- Older GBM who did report more loneliness may have experienced this in part because they were adhering more strongly to social isolation measures and thus seeking out fewer sexual encounters (whether higher or lower in risk). Although the current cross-sectional data cannot speak to the directionality of these associations, older GBM may also benefit from additional support to cope with feelings of loneliness in ways besides seeking out sexual partners.
- Our ongoing and future work will delve into themes of loneliness and sexual behaviour more deeply.
 - We will be exploring how fluctuations in social support, loneliness, and sexual risk-taking are linked over time and testing different methods of training individuals to improve their capacity to cope with feelings of loneliness.

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For more information about the Engage Cohort Study, please visit <https://www.engage-men.ca/>