

Risky sex and AIDS

The first national survey of behaviors that increase the risk of contracting AIDS indicates that a large majority of people with multiple sex partners do not use condoms, particularly in black and Hispanic communities.

The 1990 survey, coordinated by researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, involved telephone interviews with two sample populations: a randomly selected group of about 2,800 adults across the nation, and a group of nearly 12,000 adults living in 20 major U.S. cities. The latter group, theoretically at greatest risk for developing AIDS, consisted of roughly equal numbers of whites, blacks and Hispanics.

Eight of 10 people in the national sample reported having one sex partner in the previous year, while 8 percent reported multiple sex partners. About 10 percent said they had no sexual encounters during that year. About 12 percent of the urban group acknowledged having more than one sex partner. Reports of multiple partners came from nearly 40 percent of unmarried white and black men between ages 18 and 45, and from 75 percent of unmarried Hispanic men between ages 18 and 29. These men represent prime targets for AIDS education programs, says Margaret Dolcini of UCSF.

Only 17 percent of all participants reporting multiple sex partners said they used condoms without fail in the past year. One in three used condoms in at least half of their sexual encounters. Among blacks and Hispanics, one-third of those with multiple sex partners and one-half of those with risky partners — who took drugs intravenously, had other sex partners or recently received blood transfusion — never used condoms.

One in four of all study participants had undergone testing for the AIDS virus, notes Thomas J. Coates of UCSF. Most of those who sought the test lived in cities, and about 3 percent of these city dwellers tested positive for antibodies to the virus. Curiously, two-thirds of those tested reported no behaviors that put them at risk for AIDS, Coates points out. Their reasons for taking the test remain unclear, he says.

Male homosexual acts occurring in the six months preceding the survey were reported by about 1 percent of the men in the national sample and 4 percent of the men in the urban sample, reports Ron D. Stall of UCSF. Another 1 percent and 2 percent of men in the respective groups reported bisexuality in the previous six months. Although these figures represent conservative estimates, the commonly cited prevalence rate of 10 percent for male homosexuality may be too high, Stall asserts.

He notes that the survey yielded virtually no evidence of men engaging in unprotected anal sex with both men and women—a behavior considered a potential bridge for the transmission of the virus to the general population.

Pretrial publicity: Guilty impact

As William Kennedy Smith awaits his trial on charges of raping a young woman, the news media overflow with accounts of his alleged crime and accusations of past sexual misdeeds. Such cases inevitably raise questions about whether sensational publicity on a criminal defendant affects the ability of jurors to reach an impartial verdict.

New evidence indicates that exposure to pretrial publicity substantially increases the likelihood that jurors will convict the accused, and demonstrates that standard techniques used by judges and lawyers to reduce juror biases usually fail.

Norbert L. Kerr of Michigan State University in East Lansing and his co-workers first divided a group of more than 700 adults into 12-member panels representing juries. Most had just finished actual jury service in the East Lansing area. From one to 53 days before watching a videotaped mock trial of a man accused of robbing a supermarket, the volunteers saw various newscasts and newspaper stories about the crime, all of which

were concocted by the experimenters. Some prospective jurors viewed pretrial publicity containing highly emotional information describing the defendant as a suspect in the separate hit-and-run death of a young child. Others received “factual information” outlining the defendant’s prior criminal convictions. The remainder saw neutral crime reports without the emotional or factual background information on the defendant.

Just before the jurors watched the mock trial, experimenters videotaped interviews of each participant answering standard pretrial questions used by attorneys to weed out biased jurors.

Overall, juries split about evenly in their verdicts of guilt or innocence. But 55 percent of jurors who had been exposed to emotional publicity — including those with the longest delays between exposure and jury service — voted for conviction, compared with 31 percent of those who saw straightforward crime reports. A comparable disparity emerged between jurors exposed to factual information in the days before the trial and those seeing neutral reports, but the effect disappeared with longer delays.

In some cases, the mock judge told jurors to disregard all pretrial publicity — a standard courtroom procedure. But this tactic produced no change in the conviction rate, Kerr says.

A second study revealed that after viewing the videotaped, pretrial interviews with jurors, 100 judges and attorneys with various levels of experience could not predict accurately who would vote to convict or acquit the defendant. In criminal cases attracting heavy media coverage, the questioning of potential jurors by lawyers and instructions from judges to disregard media reports probably cannot stem the effects of pretrial publicity, Kerr contends.

“There’s no simple solution to this problem,” he remarks. Jurors’ memories for publicity might fade with trial delays, but defendants have a constitutional right to a speedy trial. Self-imposed restraint by the media would cut publicity, but legislated curbs on reporting amount to censorship, Kerr adds.

Women’s trail of trauma

About 12 million women in the United States have had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at some time, according to a random national survey conducted in 1989 and 1990. Moreover, the data suggest that around 700,000 U.S. women were raped last year, asserts survey director Dean G. Kilpatrick of the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston.

His group conducted telephone interviews with 4,009 women aged 18 and older. In the first set of interviews, women described previous experiences of rape, attempted sexual assault and physical assault, as well as other highly stressful events such as the death of a loved one or seeing someone killed. One year later, the women reported the frequency of their exposure to the same traumas since the initial interview.

Approximately 13 percent reported symptoms of full-blown PTSD at some time in their lives. Typical signs of PTSD include recurring memories and dreams about a traumatic event, emotional detachment from others, extreme suspicion, and difficulty concentrating. Nearly 70 percent reported suffering some type of severe trauma that can lead to PTSD, Kilpatrick maintains. Another 13 percent described themselves as victims of a completed rape at some time in their lives.

Women reporting a history of severe trauma in the first interview displayed a greater likelihood of experiencing traumatic events and PTSD in the following year, Kilpatrick says. Future research must address why, for these women, prior trauma apparently foreshadows further trauma, he contends.

The findings follow a recent study in which 40 percent of young adults reported highly stressful traumas, and 9 percent developed PTSD at some point in their lives (SN: 3/30/91, p.198).