

EFFECTS OF LGBT COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS AND PARTICIPATION ON SEXUAL HEALTH IN INTERNATIONAL MSM STUDENTS

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Background: International sexual minority students, particularly men who have sex with men (MSM), experience disparities in health, including a higher prevalence of HIV and lower levels of HIV/STI testing. Previous research has identified connectedness to and participation in the LGBT Community as a protective factor for MSM in general; however, no research on this among international student MSM could be identified.

Methods: A cross-sectional survey was completed by 168 tertiary international MSM students (median age: 25 years) in NSW. Variables include demographics, sexual identity and behaviour, sexual health services use, and LGBT Community Connectedness and Participation.

Results: Most (71%) reported being solely attracted to men; 67%, identified as gay and 61% reported only male sexual partners in their lifetime. When asked about sexual partners in the past year 80% reported having male partners only. Forty-two percent of participants reported no or few gay/bisexual friends and spending none or little free time with other sexual minority people. Participants expressed a desire for more sexual minority friends (65%), spending more time with other sexual minority people (60%), and being more involved in the Australian LGBT Community (57%), which was perceived to be a positive community. Those spending more time with sexual minority people or reported having more gay/bisexual friends reported a significantly higher uptake of PrEP, and levels of lifetime and past-year HIV/STI testing.

Conclusion: This first comprehensive study among international MSM students in Australia demonstrates strong correlations between sexual health behaviour and HIV/STI testing, and connectedness with other sexual minority men. Furthermore, international MSM students do not feel included in the local LGBT Community but demonstrate a strong desire to be involved. Future health promotion campaigns targeting this population should consider incorporating strong community (building and connectedness) elements in their campaigns.

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