

# **Young adults STI/HIV-related behaviours before, during and after COVID-19: evidence of a post-COVID-19 deficit in STI/HIV testing, including after control for reduced sexual activity and risk-taking.**

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## **Background:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people's sexual activity, STI/HIV risk and access to sexual health services. While the disruptions caused by lockdowns have been well-documented, there is limited data and research on whether behaviours have reverted to pre-pandemic levels after restrictions were lifted. Using data from a repeat survey among young adults in Australia, we compared participants' sexual activity, STI/HIV risk and STI/HIV testing before, during and after COVID-19 to show that various behaviours did not return to pre-pandemic levels.

## **Methods:**

Debrief is a repeat quantitative survey conducted online in 2018 (S1), 2021 (S2) and 2023 (S3) among 1,190, 2,045 and 2,350 participants aged 18-29 living across Australia. Participants reported their sexual activity, number and types of partners, use of condoms and STI/HIV testing in the past 12 months. Weighting procedures were applied to enhance the comparability and representativeness of survey data. We used logistic regressions to compare behaviours between pairs of surveys and assess whether the deficit in STI/HIV testing observed at S3 remained after control for reduced sexual activity and risk-taking.

## **Results:**

Most behaviours were less frequent at S2 than S1, and a partial reengagement occurred between S2 and S3. However, at S3, behaviours remained significantly less frequent than at S1 for four indicators assessed in the past 12 months: having ten or more sex partners (aOR=0.62, p<.001), sex with casual partners (aOR=0.60, p<.001), condomless intercourse with casual partner/s (aOR=0.74, p=.001), and STI/HIV testing (aOR=0.54, p<.001). STI/HIV testing remained less frequent in S3 than S1 after control for reduced sexual activity and risk-taking (aOR=0.70, p<.001).

## **Conclusion:**

The sexual behaviours and STI/HIV testing of young adults in Australia did not revert to pre-pandemic levels in 2023. The deficit in testing cannot simply be explained by reduced sexual activity and risk-taking. Reengaging youth with STI/HIV testing appears necessary.

## **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

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