

The power of peers: evaluating the effectiveness of peer-led HIV and sexual health education workshops for gay, bisexual, queer, and other men who have sex with men

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Background: For almost 40 years peer education workshops have been a backbone of HIV and sexual health education for gay, bisexual, queer, and other men who have sex with men (GBQMSM). As there have been few evaluations of these workshops in Australia, we analysed the contemporary impact of these programs delivered by a community-led organisation.

Methods: We conducted a retrospective analysis of demographic and pre/post workshop evaluation data from 399 participants attending 44 youth-focused and all-ages workshops between 2019-2024. Three scales were derived from Likert statements (scored 1-5): HIV/sexual health knowledge, communicating for safer-sex, and LGBTQ+ community connection. Bivariable and multivariable linear regression models were used to compare pre-/post-workshop scale scores.

Results: Of the 399 participants, 241 (60%) completed both pre- and post-workshop evaluation forms. Participants reported a significant increase in their HIV/sexual health knowledge (mean=4.13 vs mean=4.59, $p<0.001$), communicating for safer-sex (mean=3.46 vs mean=4.05, $p<0.001$), and LGBTQ+ community connection (mean=4.02 vs mean=4.52, $p<0.001$). Participants reporting greater increases in HIV/sexual health knowledge were born in Asia compared to Australian-born participants (Coeff=0.21, 95%CI=0.02–0.40, $p=0.034$), or attended youth (18-26y/o) workshops compared to all-ages (18+y/o) workshops (Coeff=0.31, 95%CI=0.11–0.50, $p=0.003$). Those speaking languages other than English reported smaller increases compared to English-only speaking participants (Coeff=-0.25, 95%CI=-0.43–0.08, $p=0.005$). Youth workshop participants also reported a greater increase in communicating for safer-sex compared to those attending all-ages workshops (Coeff=0.41, 95%CI=0.12–0.71, $p=0.007$). Participants reported a greater increase in LGBTQ+ community connection if born in Africa, Middle East, or Pacific Islands compared to Australian-born participants (Coeff=0.45, 95%CI=0.01–0.90, $p=0.047$) or were visiting on a temporary visa compared to being citizens/permanent residents (Coeff=0.25, 95%CI=0.00–0.50, $p=0.047$).

Conclusion: Peer education workshops remain an effective tool in the HIV response, delivering significant improvements in HIV knowledge, safer-sex communication, and community connection. These workshops are particularly impactful for young people, those born overseas, and temporary visa holders; populations with lower PrEP uptake and rising proportions of HIV rates.

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