



HIV Risk Perceptions Among African American College Women in the South

Sarahmona M. Przybyla, MPH

LaToya M. White, MPH

Carol E. Golin, MD

Department of Health Behavior and Health Education

School of Public Health

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

American Public Health Association Annual Meeting

November 5, 2007



HIV Racial Disparity in the U.S.

- While only 13% of the US population, African Americans account for 49% of new HIV infections
- Recent data demonstrates a disproportionate trend in HIV prevalence among minority women
- From 2000-2003, HIV/AIDS rate for African American females was 19 times the rate for white females
- Among women living with HIV/AIDS
 - 64% African American
 - 19% White
 - 15% Hispanic



HIV and Youth

- Nearly half of all HIV infections occur among people under 25
- African American youth comprise the largest group of young people infected
 - 61% of HIV/AIDS cases under age 25
- Of HIV+ youth ages 13-24, 38% female
- 15% of overall HIV/AIDS cases among women were youth ages 13-24



HIV and College Students

- Despite engaging in high-risk sexual activities, college students have a low perceived risk of HIV infection
- 2004: First documented HIV outbreak among students on North Carolina college campuses
 - 2000: 2 HIV cases among college males
 - 2001-2003: 56 HIV cases among college males
 - 88% African American
 - Most men who have sex with men (MSM)
 - Some men who have sex with men and women (MSM/W)

Leone PA, et al., (2004). HIV transmission among black college student and non-student men who have sex with men--North Carolina, 2003. *MMWR*, 53(32):731-4.



HIV and College Students

- Findings among MSM/W:
 - Concern that African American college women might be at risk
 - African Americans predominately have same-race partnerships, which confine STIs within their own social networks
- Further research on the risky sexual behaviors of African American college women needed to develop targeted prevention programs on college campuses

Hightow LB, et al. (2005). The unexpected movement of the HIV epidemic in the Southeastern United States: transmission among college students. *JAIDS*, 38(5): 531-7.



Influence of the Media

- Lack of research about media influence on African American college women
- Studies assessing media's influence on adolescents have found that media has influence on sexual initiation and behavior modeling
- Mass media has become a “sex educator” for adolescents, with frequent glamorous images of sex without consequences
- Studies have found that exposure to sexual content on television promoting sex outside of marriage has had influence on sexual initiation



Gaps in the Literature

- Few studies have explored sexual risk behaviors of African American college women, yet HIV trends support the need for prevention efforts
- Further research needed on social and behavioral factors that place African American college women at risk for HIV infection
- Of the social and behavioral factors identified, which are the most influential?
- Are there risk factors yet to be identified?
- Does the media play a role in any of the identified factors or present a unique contributing factor?



Methods: Procedures

- Ten focus groups conducted between April-June 2006 to explore HIV risk behaviors and their antecedents among African American college women
- Groups were held on the UNC campus and lasted approximately 90 minutes
- Same female facilitator and note-taker for all ten groups



Methods: Recruitment

- Flyers at Campus Health Services
- Mass email announcement to all female UNC-CH students
- Advertisement in campus newspaper
- Specific email announcements to sororities and student organizations (Black Student Movement, National Panhellenic Council, Safer Sex Squad)



Study Eligibility

- Eligibility criteria:
 - Age 18 or older
 - Female
 - Identify as African American
 - Enrolled as a full-time student at UNC
- Eligibility screened over the telephone
- Eligible respondents given a choice of available focus group dates



Data Collection

- Written consent obtained
- Sessions audio-recorded and written notes taken
- Interview guide with semi-structured and open-ended questions
- Questions to prompt discussion about:
 - Perceptions of current HIV trends among African American women, young adults, and college students
 - Safer sex among young adults and college students
 - HIV/STI risk and prevention behaviors
 - Social factors contributing to HIV and sexual risk behaviors
 - HIV prevention programs on college campuses



Data Analysis

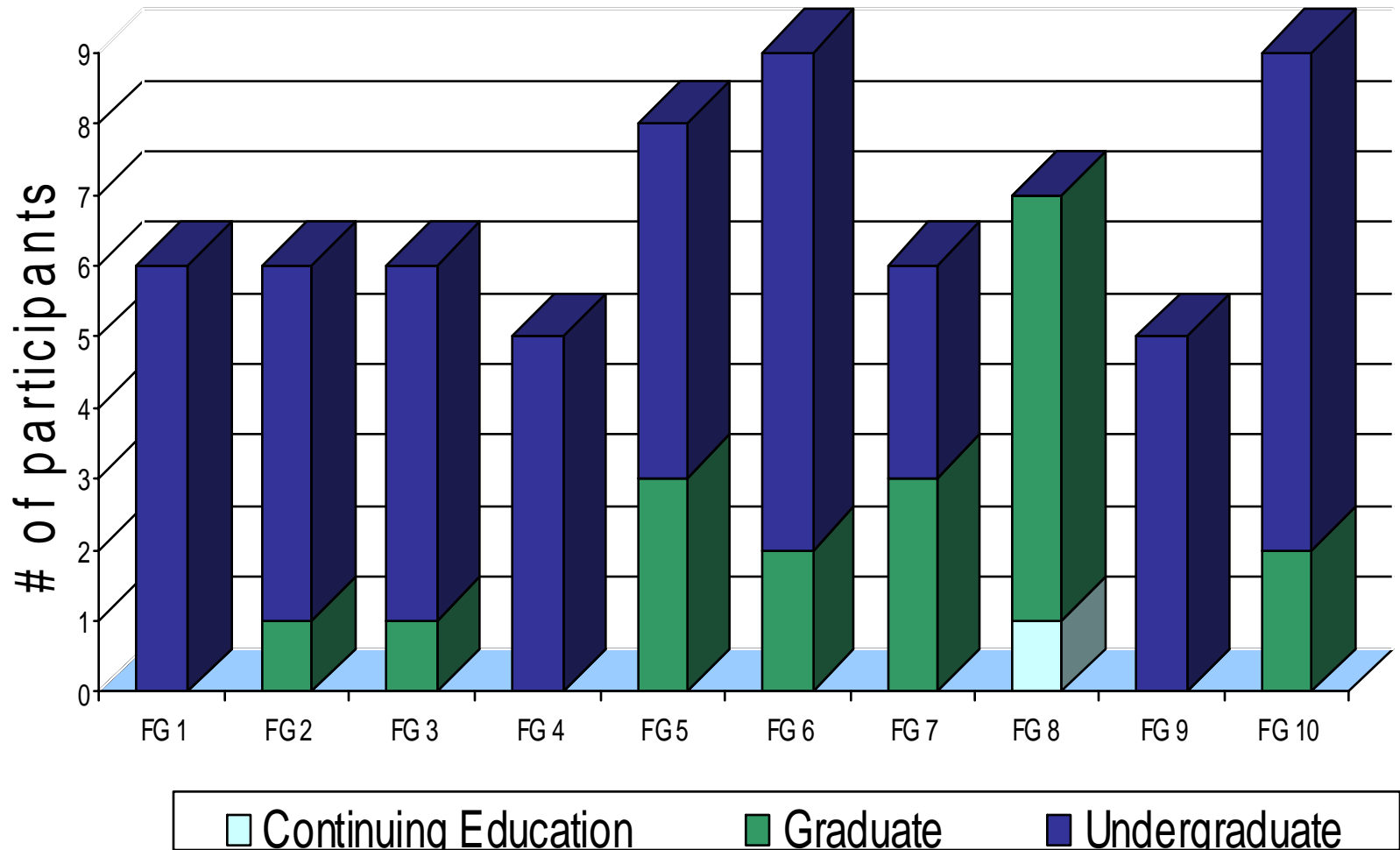
- Focus groups transcribed
- Secondary data analysis performed using ATLAS.ti
- Codes and categories developed to identify key concepts and main themes
- Based on the salient themes and code frequencies, recurring social norms and sexual decision-making practices identified
- Data also analyzed to determine if topic comparisons could be made between groups based on student classification



Results: Study Participants

- 66 women
- Mean age: 22.3 years
- Age range: 18-32 years
- Sample included undergraduates at all four levels, graduate students, and one continuing education student
- Mean of seven participants per group
- Most groups were predominately undergraduates

Results: Study Participants





Results: 3 Recurring Themes

- 1) Women perceived that conservative norms about sex in the African American home differ from those on campus, thus African American women are unprepared to deal with sex in a healthy way
 - Sense of sexual freedom compared to the less open environment in the African American family
 - Sex is not taboo to talk about on campus
 - More information and education about sex on campus

“I know that my mom didn’t talk to me about sex and if she did, it was just like, don’t do it...I never really knew stuff about condoms and birth control...until I came to college. For some black women, that might be too late.”



Results: 3 Recurring themes

1) Perception of sex at home vs. campus (cont.)

“For some women, it’s just ‘I’m going to do it (have sex) and keep it on the hush... You can’t talk to your family. So you just don’t have any education...in a Caucasian household, it’s maybe more open.”

- Low perceived risk – “safe” on campus because:
 - Only hear about the risk on Historically Black campuses

“When I first heard about [HIV infection rates on campuses], it was discouraging and scary...now I feel like it doesn’t really affect me...I heard that the cases were only at [HBCU campuses] but not at UNC”

- Surrounded by people of like mind

“There’s a level of immediate trust...on campus...we all have similar goals...living in an apartment complex, you’re not going to get as close to some guy, one of your neighbors...”



Results: 3 Recurring themes

1) Perception of sex at home vs. campus (cont.)

- New relationship ideologies
 - Few mutually monogamous relationships
 - Gender ratio imbalance among African American students influencing partnering

“When there’s not a lot to choose from, when there’s not enough Black men and there’s a whole lot of Black women who want a Black man. Then you’re gonna share men, like, that’s just the way it’s gonna be.”

- Strained relationship dynamics due to few positive examples – matriarchal single parent home more common

“[African American women] don’t have any idea of what a male figure should be or what role he should play in their life, so when a guy comes along...she puts up with a whole lot more than she should.”



Results: 3 Recurring themes

2) Women perceived that media sets a norm around sex to which African Americans aspire

- African American women hyper-sexualized in popular media - objectified in Hip-Hop

“women in rap videos are just seen as something to have sex with”

- Sex shown as glamorous and romantic with few consequences

“I think the media glorifies promiscuity. I think of shows like Sex and the City... where they're sleeping with different men every episode. You don't see anything about condoms, or anything about commitment”



Results: 3 Recurring themes

2) Media and sex (cont.)

- Sex is pervasive on T.V. and easily shared on the internet
- Negative messages outnumber the few positive campaigns in popular media outlets

“...On BET you got people in the video, you got 3 strings covering up everything, then you going to go to the commercial segment and they say, ‘Rap it Up’”



Results: 3 Recurring themes

- 3) Women perceived that the stigma around homosexuality in the African American community may lead African American MSMW on campus to put African American women at risk for HIV & STIs
- Have multiple female partners to appear to be manly or “a player”
 - Hide their relationships with men; do not disclose their sexual orientation to female partners
 - Believed by women to not practice safer sex with men to avoid admitting their homosexuality

“If they [African American men] carried condoms and put condoms on and had sex with a man, then they’re admitting that they’re gay. But in their mind, if they don’t use condoms, then they’re not gay.”



Results: 3 Recurring themes

3) Stigma around homosexuality (cont.)

- Represent an uncomfortable and unfamiliar situation for African American college women

“I think that on the surface we have accepted [homosexuality] but not really in truth. It’s like it’s okay for white people to be gay, but don’t bring that here into the black community.”

“I think it has a lot to do with the black family in general. The black community feels threatened by homosexuality because it threatens the black family, the stability of the black family”.



Implications for Future Research

- Expansion of this study to multiple campuses, reaching a larger sample
- Study of the media influences on this population
 - Identify and address negative messages
 - Utilize the reach of media to expand positive messages
- Explore the impact of social issues and the changing family structure on the relationship between African American men and women



Conclusions

- Trends in HIV infection identify African American college women as a population that could benefit from targeted prevention interventions
- Cultural, social, and environmental factors play an important role in behavior and thus health outcomes
 - More research is needed on how African American college women perceive these factors and how these perceptions influence sexual decision making



Acknowledgements

- We would also like to thank the focus group members whose participation made this project possible.
- Sarahmona Przybyla is a recipient of the George H. Hitchings New Investigator Award for Health Research and Science Education of the Triangle Community Foundation, Raleigh, NC.
- Special thanks to Adaora Adimora, MD for her guidance and valuable insight.



References

- CDC (2006). Fact Sheet: *HIV/AIDS Among Women*. Atlanta: US Department of Health and Human Services.
- CDC (2006). *Fact Sheet: HIV/AIDS Among Youth*. Atlanta: US Department of Health and Human Services.
- CDC (2007). Fact Sheet: *HIV/AIDS Among African Americans*. Atlanta: US Department of Health and Human Services.
- CDC. Fact sheet: Young people at risk: HIV/AIDS among America's youth; 2003.
- Hightow LB, et al. (2005). The unexpected movement of the HIV epidemic in the Southeastern United States: transmission among college students. *JAIDS*, 38(5): 531-7.
- Hightow LB, et al. (2006). Men who have sex with men and women: a unique risk group for HIV transmission on North Carolina College campuses. *Sex Transm Dis*, 33(10):585-93.
- Leone PA, et al., (2004). HIV transmission among black college student and non-student men who have sex with men--North Carolina, 2003. *MMWR*, August 20, 2004 / 53(32);731-734.
- Office of Minority Health (2007). HIV/AIDS and African Americans. <http://www.omhrc.gov/templates/content.aspx?ID=3019>