



Latino Men's Study: Year-In-Review

September 2011 | Edited by GR Galindo

HIV funding is currently shifting towards biomedical approaches to prevention and treatment. In this era of increasing “test and treat” efforts, advanced HIV combination therapy, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), and the “medicalization” of HIV prevention services, now — more than ever — it is critical to fully describe sexual risk and resiliency factors of Latino gay and bisexual men in order to develop culturally relevant interventions that improve our health and well-being. This study is but one small step in accomplishing that goal.

Why did we do the study and what was it about?

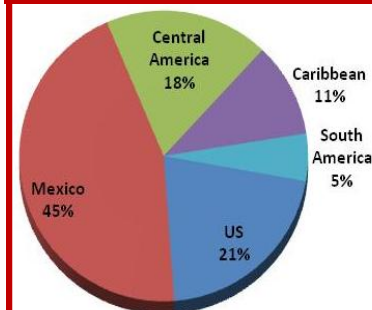
As we enter into the 4th decade of the US HIV/AIDS epidemic public health professionals are still left without an evidence-based intervention specific to the needs of Latino gay and bisexual men. Challenges in creating prevention programs for Latinos lie in examining risk influences from individual and sociocultural levels while also taking into account social discrimination and institutional level outcomes, which have all been linked to HIV-transmission.

Program design for Latino gay men is complex and must consider systems that not only connect behaviors to risk, but also celebrate cultural norms that impact one's character development and the resulting meaning that we Latino gay men ascribe to a particular identity. The purpose of the *Latino Men's Study* was to use one-on-one interviews to explore how different factors impact HIV-transmission so that sustainable and culturally appropriate programs for our community can be created.

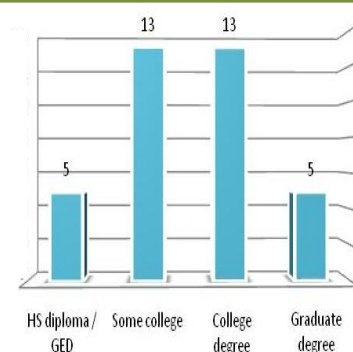
Who did we talk to and how did we get them?

We passed out over 500 business card size fliers to recruit Latino men through different strategies. We talked to Latinos at community-based organizations, through venue and street-based recruitment, and asked men to refer others in their networks. Eligibility for the study included: being a Bay Area resident, having had more than one male partner in the past year, inconsistent condom use, 18-45 years of age and being able to hold a conversation in English. Men who met those criteria were asked to participate in an interview, which lasted about 2 hours. In total, 36 Latino gay men from the Bay Area (mainly San Francisco and Oakland) took part in the study. The table below and charts to the right highlight some of the participants' characteristics.

Birthplace of participant's parents



Participant's educational level

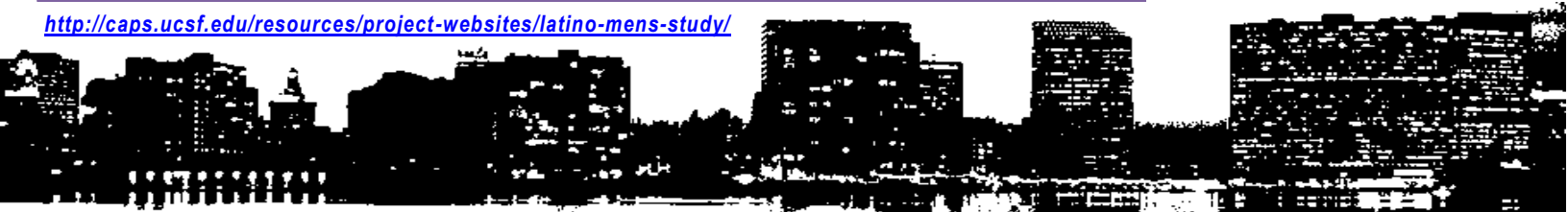


	US born (n=23)	Non-US born (n=13)	Total (%)
Age			
Younger (18-30)	13	6	19 (53%)
Older (31-45)	10	7	17 (47%)
Employment			
Full-time	11	4	15 (42%)
Part-time	8	3	11 (22%)
Student	2	3	5 (14%)
Unemployed	2	3	8 (22%)
Income			
<\$35,000	11	6	17 (47%)
\$35,000 - \$55,000	11	7	18 (50%)
\$55,000+	1	--	1 (3%)
HIV status			
Negative	11	6	17 (47%)
Positive	7	4	11 (31%)
Unsure / Don't know	5	3	8 (22%)
Average # of sex partners in past 12 months	19.0 (range: 3-100)	14.6 (range: 3-50)	17.4 (range: 3-100)

Latinos make up 22% of new HIV infections in San Francisco, with 82% of those being among Latino gay and bisexual men.

—SF Dept of Public Health

<http://caps.ucsf.edu/resources/project-websites/latino-mens-study/>



What's up with acculturation?

Acculturation is the process of taking on the cultural elements of dominant society. Prior work with Latinos has, in large part, worked under the thought that language barriers associated with immigration have added to health disparities. So, previous studies looking at Latino gay men have included lots of non-US born Latinos. However, in California where nearly half of new babies born are Latino and many in the Latino population are second generation (parents born in the US) or greater, the role of acculturation, more than language or home country, may serve as a better indicator of HIV risk and sexual health among Latinos. Some say that in comparison to highly acculturated Latinos, those who are less acculturated to US society, including migrants and immigrants, are protected by traditional Latino (sexual) values. Others say that the acculturation of US cultural norms protects these men by increasing a sense of individualism and self-determination.

For Latino gay men, it is also important to understand the notion of "**gay acculturation**." Meaning, the way in which guys take on the norms, values, beliefs and customs of their local gay community. Research shows that men with two or more minority identities (e.g., ethnoracial and sexual) have a need to "manage" these diverse identities. For Latino gay men, this means having to connect to cultures from both Latino community AND gay community. Combined, adopted customs from Latino, gay and American value systems create unique cross-cultural identities. Understanding and describing the way that these identities conflict or complement each other helps understand challenges to address the health and well-being of Latino gay and bisexual men.

What did we learn and where do we go from here?

Well, we learned a lot actually. From stories of men in this study, we found that Latino gay men shift learned cultural values (from both Latino and gay community) in different environments, depending on the context of a given situation – whether it be at a quinceañera, bar or bath house. The consequence of this cultural script shifting contributes to influences of sexual-risk, including: low self-esteem, loneliness, internalized oppression, skewed views of sexual desirability, imbalances in relationship power dynamics, tensions within social networks, and conflict between beliefs associated with Latino and gay cultures. Stressors noted in this study, such as the objectification of Latino men in the gay community, alcohol and substance use, HIV-related stigma, domestic violence, sexual abuse, and religiosity, can also increase sexual-risk through macro-contextual, community, social and individual levels of life (as shown in the picture below). Public health officials and social service agencies can use this information to create programs and interventions that reduce current, and prevent future, HIV health disparities among Latino gay men. For example, interventions that tackle low levels of body-image and sexual desirability as a result of objectification of Latino men on a community-level will benefit a person's self-esteem on an individual-level. Or, building community networks on a social-level by reducing HIV-stigma, will increase levels of self-esteem and decrease loneliness on an individual-level. Future work with Latino gay men should use this understanding to look at influences of culture and sexual-risk across different levels of a person's life.

What men in the study said...

... about being gay and Latino

"...having the added layer of having to sort of define something; I think that's so part of who you are that you keep hidden is really tough to wrestle with." —28 years old

... about Latino norms

"I was very repressed and I had internalized all of those negative messages that I received growing up. I was very obedient as a kid and so I took without question everything that my mom said." —23 years old

... about peer influences and hooking up

"It's a lot easier for me to go up to someone and talk to them, because you've got your friends like, "Go, go, talk to him, talk to him." I'm like, "No, no," "Talk to him." I'm like, "All right, fine." But yeah, guys do come up to me and talk to me. I'd consider myself attractive." —29 years old

... about drugs and family

"...my therapist said, "You can use all the drugs that you want to as long as you don't do-- as long as you don't put your mom at risk." So I do them outside the house." —40 years old

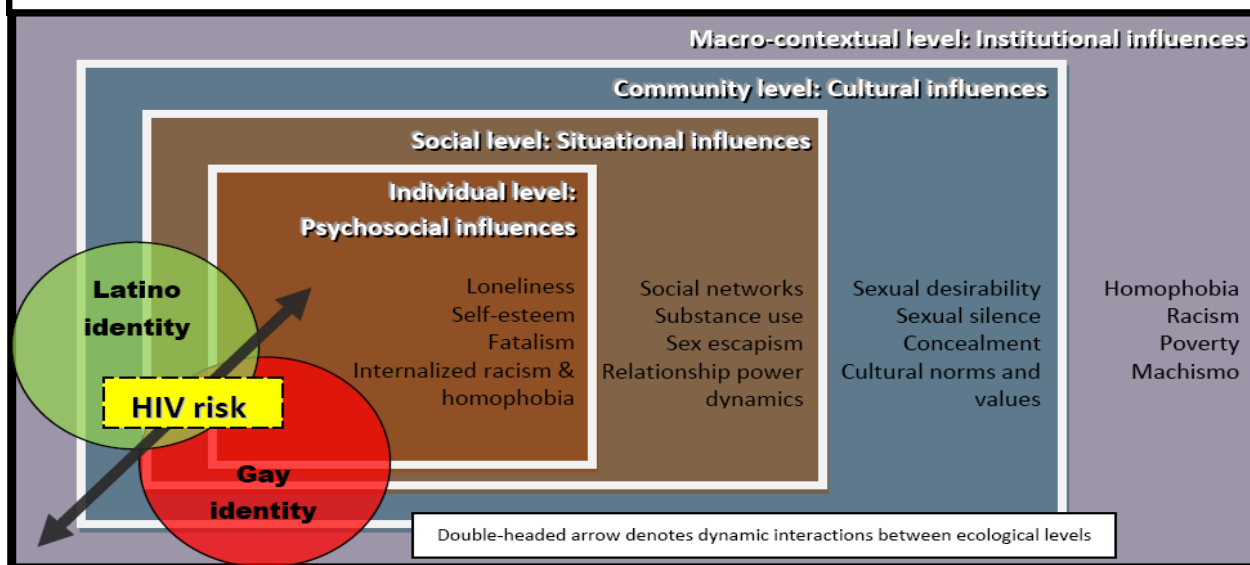
... about the interview itself

"Everything I said was extremely genuine and very true and straight to the point... So, you know, I hope that I could be of some type of benefit to somebody... I really appreciated being invited to the study. It felt good to talk about things I normally don't talk about" —33 years old

... about gay norms

"It's hard to find a gay couple who's never cheated on someone else, or it's – I mean, if you look at a straight couple, are you gonna find someone that's in an open relationship? Very rare... in the gay culture it's accepted to be in an open relationship." —32 years old

Model of Sexual-risk based on a Dynamic Ecological Framework



In this model spheres of identity are the result of learned behaviors and beliefs associated with Latino and gay cultures. When these identities collide, sexual-risk increases. When the identities complement each other, sexual resiliency emerges – it all depends on the environment (level) that the person is in.