

Estimates of men having sex with men in Thailand and their implications for HIV transmission

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Abstract

A survey of risk behavior and HIV prevalence among the population of men who have sex with men (MSM) in Bangkok found 17% HIV prevalence in 2003 and 28% in 2005, which is much higher than the general population prevalence. However, little data is currently available about the size of the MSM population and prevalence rates in the overall population of MSM, which is important to determining their contribution to HIV transmission in Thailand.

This research review aims to explore the population size of men who have sex with men by examining the proportion of men reporting same sex experience and the definitions of same sex experience used in various surveys, coupled with inputs from experts and MSM stakeholder organizations.

This study has found that although the MSM group is receiving substantial attention today, few data are available to provide a clear understanding of this population in Thailand. While there is data about high HIV prevalence and risk behavior among MSM in cruising areas in Bangkok, there is still no precise estimation of the population of MSM who do not frequent these areas or of their behaviors. Available data on the larger population are from surveys on sexual behavior among male groups, obtained from questions relating to male-to-male sexual experiences. Those questions differ widely in terms of definition and scope of same sex experiences captured. The populations surveyed also differ from one survey to another. This introduces variation in the proportion of men reporting same-sex experiences from the various surveys. Across all surveys, the proportions reporting same-sex experiences in the past year are between 2 and 8% while the proportions vary from 2 to 15% for life time same sex experiences. Unfortunately, the very limited details on male to male sex collected from these surveys do not allow the exploration of the frequency of these behaviors or the role of same-sex behavior in the population at large.

The estimated population size for men who have sex with men varies depending on the definitions used and the objectives for which this proportion is to be used, e.g., for evaluating sexual

orientation, behaviors, and/or HIV-related risk. Additional studies with more accurate definitions, more specific questions on same-sex behavior and sexual orientation, and more in-depth exploration of the factors influencing same-sex behaviors are needed to understand the magnitude and impact of HIV on this population.