

Abstract

Limited research is available describing the HIV/STD-related risk behavior of incarcerated youth in the US. Available data suggest that incarcerated youth may engage in significant risk behavior. Data from 547 juvenile respondents were collected during anonymous HIV testing and counseling sessions provided by an AIDS service organization within a juvenile detention center over a three year period. HIV relevant risk behaviors were reported by a small but notable percentage of the sample: 6% reported a history of injection drug use, 3.1% reported a history of sexual relations with an injection drug user, 3.8% reported a history of exchange of sex for drugs or money, 3.5% reported a history of STD diagnosis, and 5.7% reported a history of sexual assault. In addition, there were gender differences and racial/ethnic differences in risk behavior. Data from this study suggest that a small but noteworthy number of incarcerated youth engage in behaviors that constitute serious risk for HIV and STD transmission.

Introduction

The CDC estimates that at least half of all new HIV infections are acquired prior to age 25, with the majority (approximately 50%) attributed to sexual transmission (2002). A number of sexual behavior markers have been found to be significant predictors of HIV serostatus among both male and female adolescents, including unprotected sex with male partners, survival sex, sex with injection drug using partners, and a history of STD. While general substance use was not a significant predictor for either male or female adolescents, injection drug use was a significant predictor for male adolescents but not for female adolescents (Huba et al, 2000). On the other hand, some studies have found that general substance use was related to unprotected sex, which appeared to be mediated by impulsivity (Deviex et al., 2002).

It has been suggested that incarcerated adolescents may be more likely than non-incarcerated adolescents to engage in high risk sexual behaviors (Canterbury et al., 1998). For example, Peres et al. (2002) found that 98% of 275 incarcerated male adolescents in their Brazilian sample were sexually active and 35% have already had more than 15 partners since becoming sexually active. Furthermore, exchange of sex for drugs or money was reported by 12% and injection drug use was reported by over 5%. In a U.S. sample of 847 sexually active incarcerated adolescents, Canterbury et al. found that 36% had experienced first intercourse by the age of 12 and 81% reported three or more lifetime partners, with a mean of 10 lifetime partners overall (1998). These data suggest that incarcerated adolescents are at significant risk for HIV and other STDs. However, there are still limited data regarding the risk behavior of incarcerated adolescents in the U.S.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted 547 incarcerated juvenile respondents between the ages of 13 and 19, with an average age of 16.7 years ($SD = 1.3$). Male respondents represented 95.6% of the sample and these male respondents were largely heterosexual (96.1%). The sample was racially/ethnically diverse: 49.4% were Caucasian and 39.1% were African American/Black.

Procedure

Data were collected during anonymous HIV testing and counseling sessions following informed consent for HIV testing. HIV testing and counseling was provided by an AIDS service organization within a juvenile detention center over a three year period. Structured interviews were completed during pre-test counseling sessions and included risk behavior assessments followed by specimen collection.

Measures

Risk behavior assessment interviews were completed in the structured interview format used by the State of Florida. Lifetime assessment of sex with male partners, sex with female partners, sex with injection drug using or other high risk partners, injection drug use, exchange of sex for drugs or money, sexual assault, and STD diagnosis were included in the interview, as well as number of sexual partners in the previous year and recency of last unprotected intercourse.

Results

Prevalence of Risk Behaviors

The prevalence of high risk sexual and injection drug use behaviors are reported separately for male and female adolescents, respectively, in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Prevalence of Risk Factors Among Incarcerated Male Adolescents (N = 523)

Risk factor	n	%
Sex with female	494	94.4
Sex with male	20	3.8
Injection drug use	29	5.5
Victim of sexual assault	18	3.4
Exchanged sex for drugs or money	16	3.0
Injection drug using partner	13	2.4
History of STD diagnosis	10	1.9

Table 2: Prevalence of Risk Factors Among Incarcerated Female Adolescents (N = 24)

Risk factor	n	%
Sex with male	21	87.5
Sex with female	4	16.6
Injection drug use	4	16.6
Victim of sexual assault	13	54.1
Exchanged sex for drugs or money	5	20.8
Injection drug using partner	4	16.6
History of STD diagnosis	9	37.5

Results (Continued)

Male adolescents reported a mean of 4.4 ($SD = 0.2$) sexual partners in the previous year while female adolescents reported a mean of 5.4 ($SD = 1.2$) sexual partners in the previous year.

Differences in Prevalence of Risk Factors by Race and Gender

Chi square analyses were performed to examine differences in the prevalence of risk factors as a function of gender and racial/ethnic group. Gender differences were found for all five risk factors analyzed. A higher proportion of females than males reported a history of these risk factors. A higher proportion of white adolescents reported injection drug use and injection drug using partners than non-white adolescents. Tables 3 and 4 display the prevalence of risk factors for these analyses.

Table 3: Differences in Prevalence of Risk Factors by Gender

Risk Factor	Males (n = 523)	Females (n = 24)	χ^2	p
Injection drug use	5.5%	16.6%	5.01	0.05
Injection drug using partner	2.4%	16.6%	15.32	0.001
Victim of sexual assault	3.4%	54.1%	110.44	0.001
Exchange of sex for drugs or money	3.0%	20.8%	19.64	0.001
History of STD diagnosis	1.9%	37.5%	86.68	0.001

Table 4: Differences in Prevalence of Risk Factors by Race/Ethnicity

Risk Factor	White (n = 270)	Non-white (n = 277)	χ^2	p
Injection drug use	9.3%	2.9%	9.79	0.01
Injection drug using partner	4.8%	1.4%	5.16	0.025
Victim of sexual assault	6.3%	5.1%	0.39	n.s.
Exchange of sex for drugs or money	3.0%	4.7%	1.11	n.s.
History of STD diagnosis	2.6%	4.3%	1.23	n.s.

Differences in Number of Sexual Partners in Past Year

One way analysis of variance revealed significant racial/ethnic group differences ($F(2, 539) = 6.78, p = .001$). White adolescents reported fewer sexual partners in the past year ($M = 3.2$) than both Black adolescents ($M = 4.6$) and adolescents of other racial/ethnic backgrounds ($M = 4.7$). There was not a significant difference between Black adolescents and adolescents of other racial/ethnic backgrounds. No difference was found in the mean number of sexual partners by gender. T-tests were performed to examine differences in number of sexual partners as a function of whether or not another risk factor was endorsed. Adolescents who reported exchange of sex for drugs or money reported a significantly greater number of sexual partners ($M = 6.7$) in the past year than adolescents who did not exchange sex ($M = 3.8$). No significant differences were found in number of sexual partners as a function of injection drug use, sex with an injection drug using partner, history of sexual assault, or history of STD diagnosis.

Discussion

A small but noteworthy number of incarcerated youth reported a history of behaviors that constitute serious risk for HIV and STD transmission. Not surprisingly, female adolescents reported significantly higher prevalence of sexual victimization and exchange of sex for drugs or money than male adolescents. A higher proportion of female adolescents reported injection drug use (16.6%) and injection drug using sex partners (16.6%) than male adolescents (5.5% and 2.4% respectively). Similarly, there were also racial differences noted in the prevalence of injection drug use and sexual contact with injection drug using partners. White adolescents reported a higher prevalence of injection drug use (9.3%) and injection drug using sex partners (4.8%) as compared to adolescents of color (2.9% and 1.4% respectively).

Incarcerated female adolescents reported frighteningly high prevalence of serious risk factors for HIV. It should be noted, however, that conclusions are limited regarding incarcerated female adolescents because of the small number of females in the sample. Given the large number of male adolescent respondents, we have greater confidence in the results regarding male adolescents. Although the prevalence of risk factors was lower for incarcerated male adolescents than incarcerated female adolescents, there is still reason for concern for the safety of these young men. These findings suggest that prevention efforts are needed among at-risk youth beginning at a young age. The major limitation of this study was the use of self-report measures. Self-report is limited due to social desirability, reactivity, accuracy, and honesty. However, investigations of HIV risk behaviors often rely on this type of measurement.

References

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