



LOW HIV KNOWLEDGE SCORES AND LOW PERCEPTIONS OF HIV RISK DESPITE HIGH RATES OF HIV RISK BEHAVIOURS AMONG STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH WHO USE DRUGS

BACKGROUND & METHOD

- Educational programs targeted toward youth to prevent HIV transmission are based on a model that increased knowledge of HIV will reduce HIV risk behaviour.
- This study explored HIV knowledge of street-involved youth who use drugs and their perceptions of risk of getting HIV.
- Between September 2005 and January 2010, 589 street-involved youth who use illicit drugs were recruited into the At-Risk Youth Study (ARYS) in Vancouver.
- The youth completed an 18-item HIV Knowledge Questionnaire and a survey of their HIV risk behaviours. Youth were also asked what they thought their risk of getting HIV was compared to their peers.

QUICK FACT

STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH WHO USE DRUGS HAD LOWER HIV KNOWLEDGE. THE MAJORITY CONSIDERED THEMSELVES TO BE AT LOWER RISK FOR GETTING HIV COMPARED TO THEIR PEERS.

FINDINGS

- HIV knowledge scores among street-involved youth were low.
- The majority of youth (80%) perceived that they were at lower risk of getting HIV compared to their peers; however, HIV risk-taking behaviours was common: 37% of participants reported having multiple sex partners, 73% reported having unprotected sex, and 27% reported injecting drug use in the last six months.
- Unfortunately, youth with higher HIV knowledge scores were not safer when it came to behaviours that put them at risk for HIV infection and were actually more likely to report having sex without a condom, and were just as likely to have had multiple sex partners as youth with lower HIV knowledge scores.
- Believing that it is unlikely that they will get HIV may explain why youth in this study continued to engage in risky behaviours.

IMPLICATIONS

- The study suggests that education programs are not reaching or having the intended impact on street-involved drug using youth.
- Education programs should recognize the unique characteristics and factors that drive risk among street-involved youth.
- Consideration should be given to alternative education methods, which may be more successful in meeting the learning needs of this community.

Johnston CL, Marshall BL, Zonneveld CJ, Qi J, Montaner JSG, Wood E. **HIV knowledge and perceptions of risk in a cohort of young drug users.** *Public Health*, 2011; 125(11): 791-794.

