ASSESSING THE KNOWLEDGE OF HIV/AIDS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

Jamilla T. Shepperson
Winston-Salem State University
Anderson Center C104
Winston Salem, NC 27110

Cynthia Williams Brown
Winston-Salem State University
Old Nursing Building Room 02
Winston Salem, NC 27110

ABSTRACT

Many college students have general knowledge about HIV/AIDS, but engage in behaviors that put them at risk for HIV infection. The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between knowledge of HIV/AIDS and behavior among undergraduate students. Participants were drawn from a convenience sample of 375 students enrolled in health classes who attend a Southeastern HBCU. A questionnaire was used to assess the knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors regarding HIV/AIDS. The results confirmed that while students were generally knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS, they continue to engage in risky sexual behaviors.

College students may have general knowledge about human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (Lance, 2001), yet the number of individuals who attend a higher institution of learning who are at risk for HIV has substantially increased. College students often participate in behaviors that put them at risk for HIV infection (Hou, 2004; Prince & Bernard, 1998). Risky behaviors include unprotected sexual activities and sexual contact with multiple partners. These risks are exacerbated by the low incidence of voluntary HIV testing among college students (Hou, 2004; Prince & Bernard, 1998). Several researchers have attempted to examine college students' knowledge and awareness of HIV/AIDS (Lance, 2001). While college students showed general knowledge of HIV/AIDS, there is still a need for education about important concepts related to HIV/AIDS testing (Hou, 2004). Of greatest concern is the lack of correlation between students' knowledge and reduction of risk behaviors (Hou, 2004). This disconnect may contribute to an environment where college students underestimate their need for testing, which is the reason why regular HIV testing is of profound importance for students who are sexually active.

This study has an impact on rehabilitation counseling professionals, health educations and health care providers. These professionals are all charged with linking general knowledge of HIV/AIDS, risk factors, and testing for HIV. Early identification of HIV status is even more important today because persons with HIV/AIDS have a greater likelihood for a medically manageable prognosis and for continuing or returning to work (Hergenrather, Rhodes, & McDanial, 2005). In the event that an individual tests positive for HIV/AIDS, these professionals can play a key role in assisting individuals living with HIV or AIDS in both obtaining and maintaining employment (Glenn, Garcia, Li, & Moore, 1998).

Collectively, these professionals can assist in developing age-appropriate and culturally competent curricula for college-aged students and design programs to inform young adults regarding prevention and testing. Studies have verified that the virus can lay dormant for a number of years before symptoms manifest; therefore, some adults who have AIDS were likely infected while attending college (Mattson, 2002). Providing culturally and contextually appropriate messages is essential in educating persons at risk on how to avoid contracting or transmitting HIV. The purpose of this research is to investigate the knowledge and behavior of HIV/AIDS among college students at an HBCU.

Review of Literature

The Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) published by the Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2005) reported that more than one million persons in the United States are living with HIV/AIDS and an estimated 40,000 new HIV infections are expected to occur this year (Fenton & Valdiserri, 2006). African Americans in the United States account for more persons infected with HIV/AIDS than any other ethic group (Kates, & Carbaugh, 2006). In 2006, the North Carolina HIV/STD Quarterly Surveillance report concluded that, from January 2004 through March 2006, there were 1,420 new cases of individuals living with HIV (Barrie, 2006).

Although AIDS infection rates are declining among the general population, the CDC reported that young people in the United States at an alarming rate (Brown, Jara, & Braxton, 2005). In North Carolina, males and females between the ages of 13-29 make up 25.1% of individuals living with HIV (Barrie, 2006). In 2005, Forsyth County, located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina reported 338 HIV cases among African Americans, which includes newly reported HIV infected individuals (Ademoyero, 2005). Findings included 27 new HIV and seven AIDS cases which were found among persons in the age ranges of 13-29. In the United States is at persistent risk for HIV infection. This risk is especially notable for youth of underrepresented ethnic groups (Barrie, 2006).

The necessity of studying HIV risk behaviors among college students is clear (Powell & Sergin, 2004). Young Americans between the ages of 13-24 are contracting HIV at a rate of two per hour (Fennell, 2004). Half of all new HIV infections are thought to occur in young people under 25 (Fennell, 2004). The delay between HIV infection and the onset of AIDS suggests that most of these young people were infected as teenagers. While the total number of youth in the United States who have been infected with HIV is unknown, it is estimated that 20,000 young people between the ages of 13-24 are infected with HIV every year (Fennell, 2004).

Approximately 16 million people are enrolled in institutions of higher learning, and it is estimated that 41,602 students attend the 11 HBCU's located in North Carolina (Hightow, MacDonald, Pilcher, Kaplan, Foust, & Nguyen, 2005). Assessing the knowledge of HIV/AIDS among African-Americans college students attending an HBCU is significant because HIV infections among individuals under the age of 25 are escalating at alarming rates (Jones, & Abes, 2003).

In 2002, the North Carolina Epidemiologic Profile for HIV/AIDS used the Screening Tracing Active Transmission (STAT) HIV testing program, which identified two male students who were HIV positive and attended an Historically Black College and University (HBCU). This finding prompted researchers to investigate the number of HIV cases that were reported in the North Carolina Research Triangle Park. There were 25 new cases of HIV infections in males in the Research Triangle Park between January 1, 2001 and March 1, 2003 (Barrie, 2005).

Sample

Participants were drawn from of a convenience sample of 375 students selected from health classes at an Historically Black University (HBCU) in the southeastern section of the United States. Students' involvement was voluntary.

Instrument

The HIV/AIDS Awareness modified questionnaire developed to assess the knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors regarding HIV/AIDS among HBCU college students. The questionnaire consist of 23 multiple choice items with 2-9 answer choices each. Questions focused on these areas: knowledge, behavior, and beliefs. Only 9 questions focused on knowledge will be and 3 behavior questions will be assessed. Questions were taken from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) (CDC, 2005); and the Population Council surveys (AIDSQuest, 2005) with a database of questions regarding youth health issues and HIV/AIDS. The construct validity of this survey will be reviewed by a panel of experts in field.

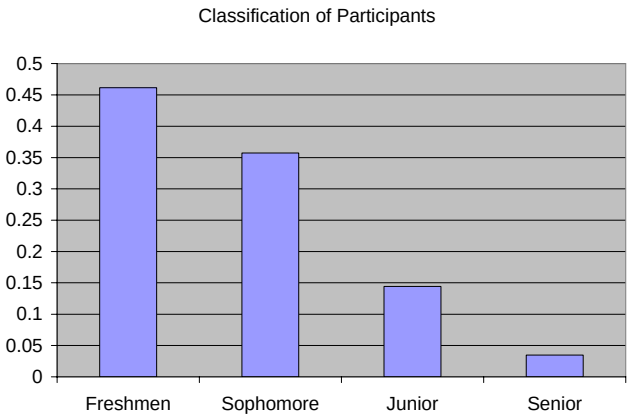
Procedure

The researcher obtained permission to meet with health classes regarding the study. The initial meeting was to recruit and provide relevant information about the study. The second meeting that occurred in the classroom was for students who were interested in the study. Students were asked to remain after class to complete the survey. The survey took 15-20 minutes to administer to students. Data collection consisted of distributing consent forms and surveys were administered anonymously.

Results

Demographic data revealed that 55% (n=209) of participants were female and 44% (n=165) were male. The majority of students were African-American and traditional college students. The majority of the students were freshmen students (47%). Students ranged in age between of 18 to 21. Figure one provides a breakdown of students' classifications.

Figure 1: Classification of Participants



The data revealed that 89% of students have engaged in sexual intercourse. Sixteen percent of the students reported using drugs or alcohol before having sexual intercourse. Over half (56%) of students reported using a condom, while 1/3 or 29.6% reported not using a condom.

Students appeared to be generally knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS. When asked "could a person protect themselves from getting HIV/AIDS", 89% responded yes. Seventy of respondents knew that HIV/AIDS is incurable. The statistics disclosed that 79% of the students reported if a person was HIV positive they would know it. Over two-thirds of the students (72%) answered that they could not tell if someone was HIV positive by looking at the person. Most students (92%) were aware that they can acquire HIV/AIDS the first time they have sex.

A slightly lower percent of students (68%) reported that HIV infection cannot be passed through sharing eating utensils with someone who has AIDS. Students' knowledge decreased when asked about HIV/AIDS transmission through contact with insects. For example, less than half or 49% answered no to the question "you can get AIDS through mosquito, flea, or bedbug bites", and 25% indicated that they did not know the answer. A majority (88%) of the students responded that you could not catch HIV/AIDS from talking to, shaking hands with, or playing sports with people who have HIV/AIDS.

Discussion

This study confirms earlier findings about college students' knowledge and behavior in regards to HIV/AIDS. Various studies regarding sexual practices among college students have indicated that students are generally knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS; however they have misconceptions about the risk of transmission (Lance, 2001; Opt & Leffrodo, 2004). Likewise, students in this study were knowledgeable about certain HIV/AIDS facts and were inconsistent in their knowledge about the transmission of HIV/AIDS. In addition, research indicates that this group often participates in behaviors that put them at risk for HIV infection. In this particular study, 30 percent of students reported having unprotected sex. Sixteen percent reported using drugs and/or alcohol during their last sexual encounter. This inconsistency serves to further confirm the gap between knowledge and behavior. Lance (2001)

explained that while most heterosexual college students know that they are at risk for HIV infection, most do not sense a personal risk.

While this study provides valuable insight, its limitations should be noted. HIV/AIDS and sexual behaviors are very sensitive topics. Thus, students may have been reluctant in their responses even though confidentially was guaranteed. In addition, participants had not completed the unit on HIV/AIDS before participating in the study. Therefore, the true effects HIV/AIDS education cannot be evaluated. Finally, survey questions were compiled from a reliable database; however, the survey was not pre-tested for use with this project. In lieu of its limitations, findings from this study confirm that the knowledge-behavior gap continues to demand further investigation. This study has serious implications for health educators and others that work closely with college age individuals. Health educators suggest that education is the best way to avoid the continued spread of HIV (Lance, 2001). Future research should focus on the impact of HIV/AID education programs. Education programs may need to focus more on helping students to understand the implications of risky sexual behavior, as opposed to the current focus on obtaining knowledge. Because over half of all new HIV infections occur in young people, the need for effective programming for this age group is imperative to insure early prevention and awareness.

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