PROJECT REPORT

Listening to African-American Women on HIV/AIDS
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The goal of the project was to capture the perspective of which factors play a significant role in motivating African American women to be tested for HIV. An instrument was developed to assess the following content areas:

- Perceptions about HIV/AIDS
- Knowledge about the transmission of HIV/AIDS
- Barriers to testing
- Awareness about local resources
- Health service utilization
- Awareness of risk factors
- Awareness of protective factors

Items were selected on the basis of literature review and were refined on the basis of input from individuals in the catchment area. A pilot test was conducted with African American women to evaluate the instrument’s language, sensitivity to the sample population, the length of time to complete the survey, and its readability. The instrument was self-administered.

The sample population consisted of African American women between the ages of 18 through 44 from two counties of southern Illinois. Considering that the counties sampled have similar socio-economic characteristics and are sparsely populated, the sample population was combined into one, yielding a total of 1007 individuals. Approximately 300 respondent sample size would be required to have sample population within plus/minus .05 of the population proportion P with a 95 percent confidence level.

Respondents were selected purposively to create a snowball effect in sampling. Potential subjects were approached by data collectors at various sites.

Data Collectors (DC) were trained in ethical guidelines, confidentiality, the recruitment of participants and the importance of informed consent. The team was recruited locally.

Out of 321 surveys, 23 were not included in the database because of incomplete information, thus yielding a total N of 298. The findings from data analysis (univariate and bivariate) showed that 57.7% of study participants were single, vast majority had children (72.1%), 37.8% had some college education (without a degree), and 48.3% had full-time work. The majority of the sample were comparatively young, between the ages of 18 through 32.

Study participants opined that women in their community were exposed to the potential risk for acquiring HIV, and that they knew where to avail resources and HIV testing services. This finding was supported by the fact that over the last two years respondents had visited the local health department (66.8%), local health center (73.8%), and doctor’s office (60.7%). This trend of high utilization of health services by the respondents supported Illinois County Behavioral Risk Factor Surveys (ICBRFS, 2003) data from the two counties. Regarding ‘naming services provided by the county health department,’ 38% and 33.2% from the counties identified ‘communicable disease’ as one of the services provided.

There were identified gaps in knowledge of HIV/AIDS in the study sample. The majority of the respondents (76.5%) seemed to be aware that STD increased the risk of HIV and vasectomy (86.9%) and use of diaphragms (84.6%) was not an effective protective measure against HIV transmission. However, 38.9% considered ‘open mouth/tongue kissing’ as a risky act and their knowledge about anal sex as the most risky mode of HIV transmission was lacking. In general, the majority of respondents accessed information on HIV/AIDS from health centers (76.5%), television (76.2%) and newspapers (71.1%), and very few relied on ‘informal’ sources of information such as the family (33.9%) and church (19.1%).

Seven-tenths of the participants (71.1%) felt that there was a need for HIV testing even if the women were married. Some participants believed that since they were in good health and had sex with only one person, the need for HIV testing was not important for them. Yet, close to half (46.6%) of the respondents did not know about the HIV status of the husband/partners. Regarding the use of condom as a protective measure for practicing safe sex, two-fifths (40.6%) of the participants mentioned that they did not like the feel of condoms and about 31.2% perceived that it would be difficult to convince their partners to use condoms.

Respondents identified multiple barriers to testing for HIV. Concerns about stigma (56.4%) and confidentiality (32.9%), socio-cultural and normative belief such as ‘embarrassment’ upon sharing sexual concerns with outsiders (27.5%), and not being able to get health insurance (12.1%) were cited as barriers.

Several recommendations are suggested:
- increase the number of African-American women who know where to obtain testing
- increase the awareness of the need to be tested
- develop assertion skills for self-protection
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