

GAY MALE SEX CAUSES 15% OF HIV IN KENYA

FROM PAGE 1

national prevalence increased from 6.7% in 2003 to 7.4% in 2007. Prevalence is higher among women and in urban areas.

Nyanza is the hardest hit area with prevalence of 11% closely followed by Nairobi with prevalence of 10%. The lowest area is North East with prevalence below 1%.

The primary route of HIV transmission in Kenya remains Casual Heterosexual Sex (CHS). While 16 per cent of new infections come through CHS itself, another 24 per cent come when those infections are passed on to CHS partners.

Couples (Steady Partner Heterosexual) with low risk behaviour where one partner still passes on the virus to the other account for another 10 per cent of new HIV infections annually.

The surprising revelation of the UNAIDS data is that around 15 per cent of all HIV infections come directly or indirectly through MSM.

Around 9 per cent of all new HIV infections in Kenya comes directly from MSM but to this must be added the around 2 per cent of the consequent infection of female partners of Kenyan gays (most of whom are married). In addition male sex in the prison population leads to another 4 per cent of infections annually.

Research shows that many African men who have sex with men also have female sexual partners and do not necessarily identify themselves as gay.

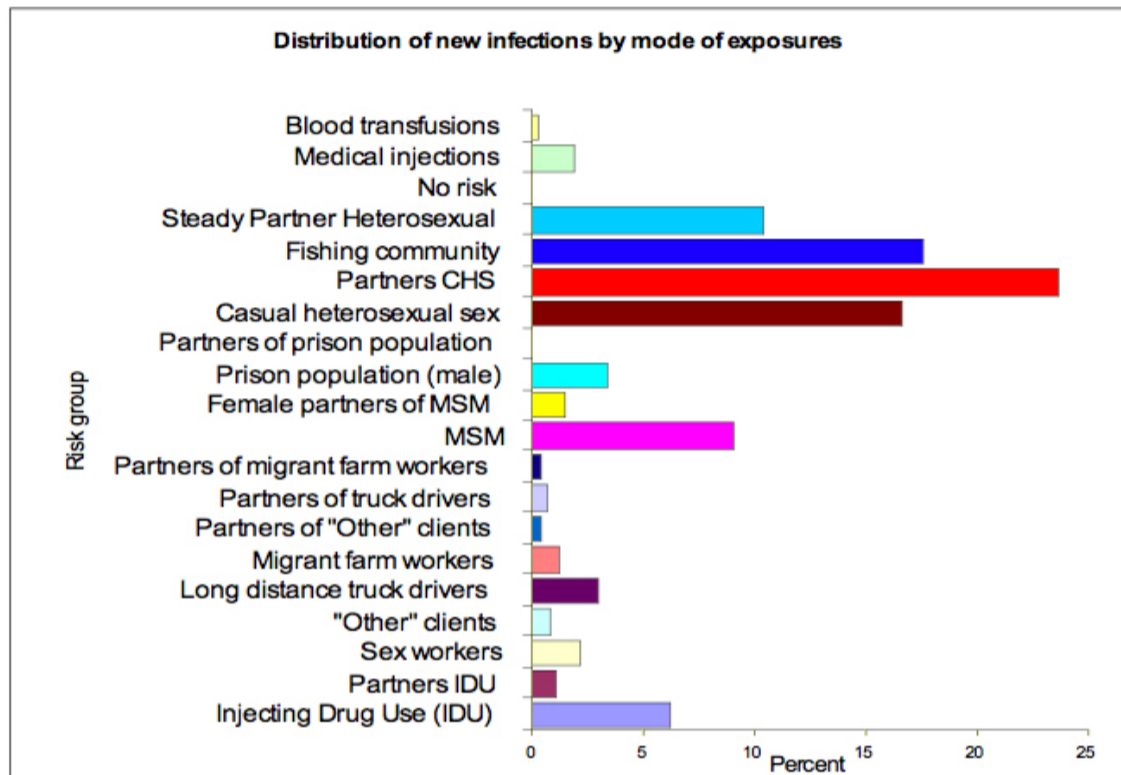
The rapid spread of HIV through the gay population is assisted by the high risk of anal intercourse.

A research programme in Mombasa last year found that three-quarters of gay males (82%) reported at least one episode of anal intercourse without a condom in the last three months.

Gay males in Kenya urgently need targeted, HIV risk-reduction prevention information, concluded the study.

The UNAIDS data reveals that fishermen are another high risk group responsible for 17 per cent of all HIV infection in Kenya annually. The other high risk group is Kenyans who inject drugs who, with their partners, are responsible for 7% of infections.

THE NATIONAL INCIDENCE MODEL 2008



Sex workers are responsible for just 2 per cent of infections and truck drivers 3 per cent.

The regional breakdown shows some interesting elements. MSM incidence is higher in Nairobi (11%) and the Coast (13%) and lowest in Nyanza (6%)

Casual Heterosexual Sex incidence is higher in Nairobi (22%) and Nyanza (27%) but lower at the Coast (13%).

Intravenous drug use is highest in Nairobi (16%) and the Coast (17%) and lowest in Nyanza (4%).

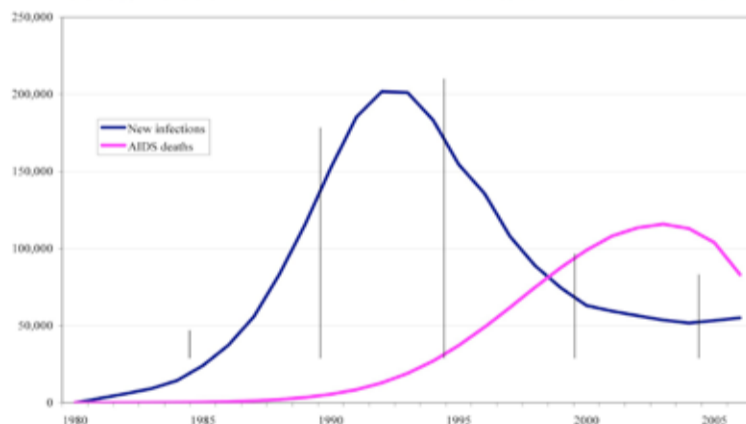
Only a quarter of Kenyans over 15 years know their sero-status.

There are no national level intervention programmes in Kenya for male gays, sex workers, or intravenous drug users.

UNAIDS is recommending that HIV prevention campaigns are concentrated on highest risk groups such as male gays, high risk heterosexual partners, intravenous drug users, sex workers, and fishing communities.

The global risk posed by gay male sex was one of the top issues in last month's World Aids Conference attended by 25,000 experts from all around the world.

STATUS OF THE KENYA EPIDEMIC



•New trend: UNAIDS estimates close to 90,000 new infections in 2007

"This epidemic never ceases to surprise us. In every major city in Asia we have looked at, there are now epidemics of HIV among men who have sex with men (MSM) – epidemics that remind me of what we saw in the USA and Europe in the 1980s. HIV is now rising as fast in those men as it was then", Peter Piot, retiring Director of UNAIDS, told a special conference meeting.

David Wilson, head epidemi-

ologist at the World Bank's Global HIV/AIDS section, told the conference that in four countries so far surveyed in Africa (Kenya, Senegal, Sudan and South Africa) gay men were 3.8 times more likely to have HIV than the general population.

Around the world, very few governments or agencies have been willing to confront MSM. Even the UN only started special programmes for MSM this year.

Bishop supports homosexual HIV advice

BY STAR TEAM

RELIGIOUS leaders expressed concern about the growing infection rate among gays and lesbians even as they condemned the community for their sexual preference.

The head of the Anglican Church in Kenya, Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi, said the church should be at the forefront of educating the people about the HIV/Aids spread.

"Church leaders should tell people about the situation among gays and lesbians and even teach them on the cause and preventive measures," he said.

Such education should include homosexuals and those of a different sexual orientation.

His church, however, did not have any special programmes to reach out to the gay and lesbian community, but expected them to take advantage of the church's HIV/Aids programme.

The chairman of Kenya's Council of Imams and Preachers, Sheikh Ali Shee, said they continued to create awareness and preach against the practice.

He said the number of people who were gay was "very high, but we hope they plan to change".

"I can't deny or accept the fact that it is happening, but, as Muslims, we are going to sensitize on the issue against it and we hope that they will change their lifestyle."

The Action Aid regional head of the HIV/Aids programme, Leonard Okello, said stigma and fear had made it difficult for men who have sex with men (MSM) to come out in the open for treatment.

"This is because they lead a double life. And when they contract the disease, they take it to their wives and girlfriends," said Okello.

Many of them were vulnerable because they had no access to condoms and used marriage to cover up their encounters.

"It is hardly talked about. It is considered taboo. It is the way people do not talk about commercial sex workers, that is the challenge we in the field face," said James Kamau, coordinator of the Kenya Treatment Access Movement (KETAM) yesterday.

The Prisons Department public relations officer, Dixon Mwakazi, said homosexual encounters were not more prevalent in prison despite the UNAIDS data.

"Gays are everywhere — even in the prisons. But the rate of infection as indicated in the report is unbelievably high," Mwakazi said.

'I am gay , married but I practise safe sex'

"LIKE many gay men in Kenya, I am married," said Peter (not his real name), a taxi driver in Nairobi who was busy ferrying party goers to and from the third party attended by several hundred gay-identifying men and their friends to be held in the Kenyan capital in the last six months.

"We have to hide our sexuality from the rest of society. It's not

like in Europe. But I have a good life, good family, and good friends and, really, I cannot complain."

Peter, who has two young children and has always lived in Nairobi, decided to work rather than attend the party held just outside the city centre: "I would have liked to be at the party, but we have had fewer visitors to Kenya this year and I need

the money. It is fun to be in an environment where you can relax, knowing that everyone is the same. There is no way that people can be themselves like that in the bars in town".

He went on: "Sometimes a bar does become popular with a gay crowd, but then a point will come that the bar owner will ask them not to come back because

he is afraid of the law and afraid that people might think he is also gay."

The party on the fledgling Nairobi gay scene provided an opportunity for support groups to distribute HIV-prevention information and safer-sex packs, including condoms and lubricants.

— UNAIDS