

Street-Connected Youth: A Priority for Global HIV Prevention

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Abstract : Globally, adolescents and young people experience high levels of HIV vulnerability and risk. Estimates suggest that AIDS-related deaths among young people are increasing, suggesting poor prioritization of adolescents in national plans for HIV testing and treatment services. HIV/AIDS is currently the sixth leading cause of death in people aged 10-24 years. Among young people, street connected youth are clearly distinguished as being among the most at risk for HIV infection. The present study recognizes the urgent need to scale up effective HIV responses that are tailored to the unique needs of street connected youth for the global HIV agenda and especially, the former Soviet country - Georgia, where 'street kids' are a new phenomenon and estimated to be about 2,500. During two months trained interviewers conducted individual semi-structured qualitative interviews with 22 key informants from the local governmental and nongovernmental service organizations, including psychologists, social workers, peer educators, mobile health workers, and managers. Informants discussed social network characteristics influencing street connected youth's sexual risk behaviors. Data were analyzed using Dedoose. It was revealed that there are three types of homogeneous networks of street-connected youth aged 10-19 based on ethnical background: (1) Georgians; (2) migrant kids of Azeri-Kurdish origin, and (3) local Roma-Moldavian kids. These networks are distinguished with various HIV risk through both risky sexual and drug-related behaviors. In addition, there are several cases of HIV infection identified through reactive social services. Street connected youth do not have basic information about the HIV related sexual, alcohol and drug behaviors nor there are any systematic programs providing HIV testing and consultation for reducing the vulnerability of HIV infection. There is a need to systematically examine street-connected youth risk-taking behaviors by applying an integrated, multilevel framework to a population at great risk of HIV. Acknowledgment: This work was supported by Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (SRNSFG) [#FR 17_31], Ilia State University.

Keywords : street connected youth, social networks, HIV/AIDS, HIV testing

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