

CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE & HIV AMONG LATINO GAY MEN

A brief guide to understanding the HIV-related concerns of Latino Gay Men who experienced childhood sexual abuse for agencies planning and implementing HIV prevention programs



Why is it Important?

Childhood sexual abuse (CSA) is strongly associated with higher risk of HIV-infection. Latino gay/bisexual men are twice as likely to have a history of CSA compared to non-Latino gay/bisexual men. CSA may contribute to why Latino MSM have disproportionately high rates of HIV in the United States. Knowing more about the effects of CSA can help reduce HIV transmission, especially among Latino gay men.

This guide will help agencies understand why Latino gay men who have experienced CSA are at greater risk for HIV. This guide also offers insights into how Latino gay men can draw upon their strengths to deal with the consequences of their childhood sexual experiences. With this understanding, providers will be better able to offer appropriate prevention services to help Latino gay men address the effects of CSA with regard to HIV transmission. Providers can and should “break the silence” with regard to CSA!

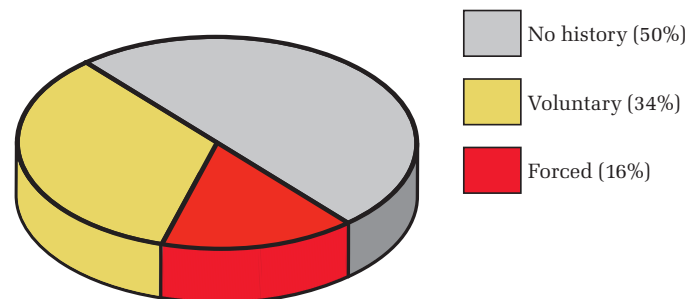
(Note: Information contained in this guide may be unsettling. Please refer to the “Additional Resources” section at the end of this guide for information and immediate assistance.)

» DOES MSM MEAN GAY/BISEXUAL?

In the early 1980s, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention created the term “men who have sex with men,” or “MSM,” to refer to an AIDS risk group. However, given differences in attitudes and behavior between MSM who identify as gay or bisexual and MSM who do not, it is important that research and prevention efforts take these into account. Additionally, childhood sexual abuse has been found to be higher among gay identified men than among non-gay identified men, suggesting that there may be important differences in childhood experiences of sexual abuse as well as its impact on adult sexuality. For example, Latino gay men who have experienced childhood sexual abuse have reported a belief that they were targets of childhood sexual abuse because of their gayness.

What do we know?

Compared to non-Latino men (gay or straight), Latinos are more likely to have been sexually abused by an extended family member, such as a cousin or uncle. Research also shows that Latino boys experience more genital fondling, are exposed to more sexually abusive behaviors, and experience more anal abuse than non-Latino boys. Not only is there a greater prevalence of CSA (16% of Latino gay men reported being forced as a child to have sex with someone older) but the abuse has been found to be more severe. (Ways to overcome the effects of CSA are addressed later in this guide.)



Studies have found that gay/bisexual men with a history of CSA were significantly more likely to engage in unprotected anal intercourse with a non-primary partner or a partner with a different HIV status than those who had not been sexually abused as

children. The higher the level of coercion during CSA, the greater the risk of HIV infection.

This pattern holds for Latino gay and bisexual men as well. In a study specifically focused on Latino MSM, a history of sexual abuse was significantly related to an increased likelihood of engaging in receptive anal sex without protection (i.e. the sexual activity with the highest risk of HIV transmission).

How is Childhood Sexual Abuse Different from Childhood Sexuality?

Sex in childhood or adolescence with an older individual is assumed to be abusive, because of the implied difference in power and experience. In terms of health outcomes, research shows that men who report voluntary early sexual experiences are similar to those who reported no sex during childhood. These men do not appear to be at greater risk for HIV.

A large quantitative study found no differences in high-HIV-risk sexual behaviors between Latino gay and bisexual men who reported voluntary sex before age 16 with someone 5 or more years older, and those who reported no sex before age 16. In contrast, those who had been forced to have sex were significantly more likely to engage in high-HIV-risk sexual behavior.

Age also makes a difference. Another study found that individuals who were younger when they had childhood sexual experiences with older partners were more likely to consider their experiences abusive and were more likely to have been physically forced, physically hurt, threatened, and emotionally hurt.

Future research and prevention efforts must begin to explore and consider differences between voluntary and forced sex, at least for boys and particularly during adolescence. Specifically, in order to:

- ➔ **Gain a better understanding of age appropriate sexual development to help distinguish consensual (voluntary) sexual development from CSA**
- ➔ **Uncover histories of CSA that have occurred in order to better and more specifically provide support and services**
- ➔ **Identify and prevent unwanted sexual advances before they occur**

With a greater understanding in these areas, service providers will be better able to offer appropriate services and interventions for Latino gay men and Latino communities in general.

VOLUNTARY SEX at age 13 with “a much older man”

“I was biking and I saw this very handsome man and we started talking. Next day I said oh my God, I’m in love I think. The next day I went to see him again... it was so obvious that when I saw him, I got a hard on and he noticed. So the next day he invites me to bike around. He took me to this outdoor area and we had the great sex. It was first time I was penetrated. I know he was much older... and he was very careful and he probably knew it was my first time. I didn’t feel much pain. He was very tender and careful. It was great... how he treated me I think probably influenced the way I had sex from there on. I think it was a good experience, therefore, I see sex as positive.”

FORCED SEX at age 8 with older man

“He would just put his arm and leg over me just to kind of hug me like an uncle. I would feel his erection and then I would feel his penis pulsate. And then he would say, ‘volteate’ like turn around and then he would turn me around. Then he pulled down my pants. I have shaking; I was nervous. Then he would pull down my underwear and he would spit on his hand and then lubricate me back there. Then he would lubricate his own and he would do me. So he, he penetrated me all the way. No protection.”

Why does **Childhood Sexual Abuse** put Latino Gay Men at Risk for HIV?

There are a number of factors related to CSA that increase Latino gay men's risk for HIV.

Some of which are

Homophobia

Dissociation

Sexual Silence

These important factors and how they put Latino gay men at risk will be discussed in more detail below

Homophobia

Homophobia is the fear, hatred, and intolerance of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Both homophobia and CSA have a profound impact on gay men's self image, sexuality, and HIV risk. If a gay man's first sexual experience with another man is abusive, homosexuality may be viewed as something profoundly shameful and dirty, something that needs to be hidden.

Homophobic social attitudes may serve to increase feelings of inadequacy and guilt associated with the CSA. Negative associations with sexuality make it particularly hard for gay men who have experienced CSA to feel comfortable with themselves, their bodies, their sexuality, and their sexual relationships. Discomfort with self image and sexuality can cloud conscious awareness in sexual situations and make safer sex choices even more difficult.

"The idea of keeping it a secret and feelings of guilt and shame around it are still really present when I start having sex as an adult. Never talked to anybody about it (sex) and it's something that I did in secret—kind of separate from my—my sexuality with men was separate from how—my individuality. It was like another persona."

» INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA

Gay men who were abused in childhood may have a hard time separating their feelings of being abused from their sexuality. Research indicates that some Latino gay men may have conflicting thoughts that they deserved to be forced into having sex at such young ages given that they would eventually get pleasure from it. However, when asked directly, the men stated they did not deserve it.

Homophobia may perpetuate the myth that men or boys cannot be sexually victimized because they would necessarily "like it," perhaps resulting in under reporting of CSA among boys. Homophobia results in a perception that gay men are more likely to be childhood sexual abusers themselves even though the research to date all points to there being no significant relationship. Nonetheless, this perception adds to the stigmatization of both gayness and CSA.

Dissociation

One of the ways Latino gay men cope with conflicting feelings related to CSA is to dissociate during sexual encounters. By dissociate we mean the detachment of the mind from an emotional state or sexual behavior. This can be accomplished through use of drugs, alcohol, or by "not thinking about it." Clinicians have long noticed that individuals who have survived traumatic experiences have the ability to view their experiences as if they belonged to someone else.

Interviews with Latino gay men who had experienced CSA show that they are able to dramatically distance themselves from their experiences, as if they had happened to other people. This ability to dissociate may have helped individuals cope with conflicting impulses during childhood.

However, maintaining this split in adulthood makes it difficult to integrate intended behaviors, such as safer sex, with actual practice. Keeping these early traumatic experiences secret (especially from themselves) makes the internalized feelings associated with the CSA unavailable to conscious-

“Then there was a moment the next day in the afternoon. He caught me by myself and then he grabbed me. He just kind of pulled me towards him and he’s like—he spanked my ass and he’s like this is my ass and this is our little secret. ‘Don’t tell anybody that we’re doing this. Don’t tell your mom; don’t tell your brothers and sisters. This is our little secret. You are mine...’ How can you talk about sex in a (Latino) family, in the traditional (Latino) family? How often do you talk about gay sex for that matter? How often do you talk about rape? Did I know what to do at that age? I kept it a secret.”

ness during sexual encounters. To the extent that the unwanted thoughts and feelings from the past are mingled with sexual desire in the present, sexual impulses are acted upon without the benefit of creative mindful choosing.

Sexual Silence

Sexual silence is not being able to talk openly about important sexual experiences. Sexual silence is detrimental to healthy sexual development, particularly in the context of CSA. Research suggests that sexual silence, especially around homosexuality, may increase both the guilt and shame associated with CSA.

Self-disclosure by victims of CSA has been found to be an important part of legal and therapeutic interventions. Disclosure is a critical step in receiving parental or therapeutic support in childhood or in adulthood. Since the response to disclosure will determine whether it will be beneficial or detrimental, the disclosure process must be considered in the context of the individual’s circumstances including his support network, maturity and self-perceptions about his own sexuality, and cultural and work environment. For Latino gay men who have experienced CSA, disclosure of the abuse in appropriate and safe contexts may transform the confusing and shameful feelings into a healthier sexuality overall. Breaking the silence is a step toward negotiated safety and reduced HIV risk.

Negotiated safety is one of the cornerstones of HIV prevention, including condom use. However, for those Latino gay men who have kept their sexuality silent and separate from themselves, prevention efforts must also focus on:

- ➔ **Reducing feelings of shame**
- ➔ **Normalizing acknowledgement and discussion of homosexuality**
- ➔ **Helping Latino gay men integrate their sexual selves as positively and lovingly as possible**

Factors in Overcoming Effects of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Although **resiliency factors** that may moderate the impact of CSA among Latino gay and bisexual men have yet to be fully examined, it appears that the effects of CSA on psychological and behavioral outcomes are influenced by various factors. For example, the effects of CSA can be partly determined by:

- ➔ **Response of close adults to disclosure of CSA episode(s)**
- ➔ **Therapy directed at addressing effects of CSA**
- ➔ **Loving and accepting personal relationships in adulthood**

TIPS For Reducing Negative Impacts of CSA

- ➔ Acknowledge and validate the experience = **break the silence**
- ➔ Give assurance that children are not at fault = **challenge the shame**
- ➔ Support and celebrate sexuality = **challenge the homophobia**
- ➔ Foster safe and healthy environments for practicing intended sexual behavior = **support safer sex practices**
- ➔ Promote community involvement = **create opportunities for growth**

Approaches to Treatment

There are several approaches to treatment for individuals who have experienced CSA. One of these, *individual psychotherapy*, attempts to overcome the helplessness and dissociation that result from the trauma of CSA. Feelings and attitudes that belong to the CSA event(s) are gradually separated from the new feelings and attitudes related to actual current sexual encounters. In this way, the individual develops emotional resources for increased awareness and choice.

Group therapy is another important resource for Latino gay men who have experienced CSA. In a safe environment, it provides an opportunity to publicly break the silence about their experiences, compare and contrast experiences and coping strategies with others in the group, as well as break the isolation that often accompanies feelings of shame associated with CSA.

Individual psychotherapy and group therapy are examples of a comprehensive approach to treatment that integrates the findings presented above. However, not all Latino gay men who have experienced CSA will have access to this level of care. Even for those who do, a supportive environment is critical in order to be able to make these changes.

It is clear that agencies must play a role in improving HIV prevention efforts for Latino gay men who have experienced CSA. Agencies can and should focus on breaking the silence.

TIPS For Staffing & Training

- ➔ Teach staff to be able to talk openly and appropriately about sexuality and CSA
- ➔ Learn the difference between sexual development and CSA
- ➔ Increase awareness of CSA generally and specifically for Latino gay men who seek services
- ➔ Tailor prevention plans by incorporating individuals' sexual development histories
- ➔ Consider hiring mental health clinicians or therapists (full or part time)
- ➔ Educate parents about how to teach their children to identify and prevent unwanted sexual advances before they occur
- ➔ Create referral systems and update them on a regular basis
- ➔ Be prepared to make appropriate referrals for counseling, crisis intervention, and other services

How Can Providers Help?

Given the social norms of sexual silence in Latino culture regarding CSA, it is no wonder that Latino gay men find no space in which to openly explore their experiences. Service providers can help challenge this silence by creating safe environments for Latino gay men to discuss their experiences and share coping strategies, resources, and referrals for appropriate interventions.

Providers can help Latino gay men begin to acknowledge and discuss their childhood sexual experiences with special attention to those that were forced. One way to approach this kind of discussion would be to invite the individual to describe his sexual initiation, leaving him open to explore both the sexual experience itself and the feelings associated with it.

Clinical and research findings suggest that the majority of CSA experiences will involve some level of coercion and trigger feelings of shame, guilt and a distancing from the events. Interventions to prevent HIV transmission must attend to these feelings if they are to be integrated fully by men who have experienced CSA.

Acknowledgments:

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Additional Resources:

- Cassese J. Gay men and childhood sexual trauma: Integrating the shattered self. Binghamton, NY, US: Harrington Park Press/The Haworth Press 2000; 199.
- Judith Herman: Trauma and Recovery, Basic Books, 1997.
- Child Abuse Statistics, Research and Resources by Jim Hopper Ph.D. www.jimhopper.com/trauma_and_recovery
- Generation 5: <http://generation5.accountsupport.com> Comprehensive source of information and referrals on childhood sexual abuse.
- Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-422-4453 (1-800-4ACHILD)
Childhelp is a non-profit organization "dedicated to meeting the physical, emotional, educational, and spiritual needs of abused and neglected children." Its programs and services include this hotline, which children and adults can call with complete anonymity and confidentiality.
- MaleSurvivor: National Organization against Male Sexual Victimization- <http://www.malesurvivor.org>
"Committed to preventing, healing, and eliminating all forms of sexual victimization of boys and men through treatment, research, education, advocacy, and activism." Site has many helpful resources, including A Consumers Guide to Therapist Shopping.

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