

Sexual Orientation & HIV Risk



British Columbia,
Canada

During adolescence, when sexual orientation usually unfolds, research shows high schools in most Western countries have tended to be unsupportive, and even unsafe, environments for gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) teens. This may be manifested as harassment or discrimination or more subtly as indifference. The stress GLB teens face as they cope with sexual orientation stigma may help explain higher rates of risky sexual behaviors and injected drug use. Very little research has focused on Asian youth, especially GLB teens.

The results presented here compare behaviours that can increase risk for HIV infection between Asian GLB and heterosexual students of the same gender. Among Asian high school students in BC, 2% of boys and 4% of girls identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual: this is about 500 male and 1,000 female students across the province.

HIV and Asian teens

The proportion of HIV-infected Asian people in Canada is still very low: 3% of HIV-positive cases reported between 1998 and 2005 were among East and Southeast Asian Canadians. However, Asian teens may be at higher risk of HIV infection than those from other ethnic groups because some research has shown that Asian youth tend to be less knowledgeable about preventing sexually transmitted diseases than non-Asian youth. Young people in Canada generally do not get tested for HIV, but because of the long delay from first infection to actually showing symptoms, many young people who test positive for HIV in their twenties may have become infected during their teen years.

Asian Youth

SURVEY DATA:

Data used in this fact sheet were collected in 2003 through the BC Adolescent Health Survey III, conducted by the McCreary Centre Society. The BC AHS was administered to students in Grades 7-12 across British Columbia, and responses were weighted to represent the 290,000 students enrolled in public schools. The results shown here are for the estimated 48,000 students who, when asked "What is your background?" marked "East Asian (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, etc.)" or "Southeast Asian (e.g. Cambodian, Filipino, Indonesian, Vietnamese, etc.)" and also identified as either GLB or heterosexual.

More information about the BC AHS and McCreary Centre Society can be found at www.mcs.bc.ca

In BC, do Asian GLB youth have higher HIV risk behaviours than their Asian heterosexual peers?

The survey asks a number of questions about behaviours that can increase a teen's risk for HIV:

- Ever having sexual intercourse
- Sex before age 14
- Multiple sexual partners
- Not using a condom at last intercourse
- Drinking or drug use at last intercourse
- Ever being pregnant (unprotected intercourse)
- Ever having a sexually transmitted disease (STD)
- Ever being forced to have sexual intercourse
- Ever injecting drugs

**Although an overall HIV infection rate in Canada is low,
some young people are at risk.**

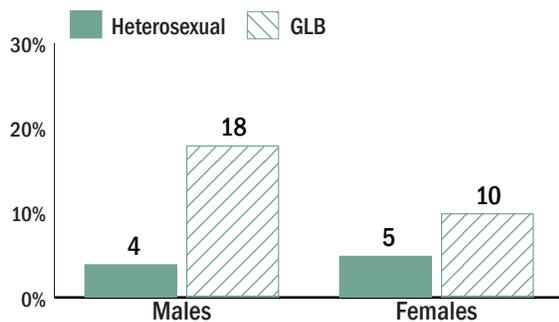
Findings—Individual risk behaviours

Most Asian teens in school have never had sexual intercourse. In fact, more than 85% of Asian teens in school reported they never had in sexual intercourse.

Compared to Asian heterosexual teens, Asian GLB teens were more likely to:

- Have 2 or more sexual partners during their life:
 - » 14% GLB males vs. 7% Heterosexual males
 - » 14% GLB females vs. 3% Heterosexual females
- Not use a condom at last sex:
 - » 18% GLB males vs. 4% Heterosexual males
 - » 10% GLB females vs. 5% Heterosexual females
- Have been forced to have sexual intercourse:
 - » 6% GLB males vs. 1% Heterosexual males
 - » 9% GLB females vs. 4% Heterosexual females

Did not use a condom at last sex (among sexually active Asian teens)



Adding up the Risk: How do they compare on total HIV Risk Score?

An “HIV risk score” was created by adding up the number of various risky sexual behaviours and injected drug use reported by youth. The score ranges from 0 (no risk) to 7 (highest risk of HIV infection).

Asian GLB males and females had higher HIV risk scores on average than heterosexual students of the same age and gender:

Average HIV Risk Scores		
	Heterosexual	GLB
Asian Males	0.24	0.47
Asian Females	0.17	0.36

Most Asian youth in school have never had sexual intercourse.

What do the research results suggest?

Gay, lesbian, and bisexual Asian youth are at higher risk for HIV than their fellow heterosexual Asian students, in part because of risky sexual practices.

In most Asian cultures, it is taboo to discuss sexual practices and sexual orientation. Protecting Asian youth, particularly gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth, from HIV infection requires sexual education programs culturally relevant to this group.

This fact sheet is one in a series reporting results from the study, *Stigma, Risk and Protective Factors for Vulnerable Youth*, an international study to explore how stigma links to health disparities, and ways we can enhance protective environments to promote healthy development of all youth. The study includes school-based survey data from Canada, New Zealand, and the USA. The study focuses on Indigenous, Asian, and European-heritage youth in school in all 3 countries; the project team includes Indigenous, Asian, and European-heritage researchers, of whom some identify as GLB, or who work with GLB youth. Researchers are from the University of British Columbia & McCreary Centre Society, Canada; the University of Auckland, New Zealand; and the University of Minnesota, USA.

The results for youth from these three ethnic groups in BC are reported in separate fact sheets. Because the samples are overlapping, results should not be compared across different ethnic groups.

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Further information about the study, and fact sheets from the other countries, are available at: www.mcs.bc.ca/partners/