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ASTDA Small Project Assistance: Final Report

Project Date: 9/01/2022 – 8/31/2023

Recipient: Jaquetta M. Reeves, PhD, MS, BSN, RN NP-C, The University of Texas at Arlington

Project name: Sexual Health Choices and Perception of STI Risks Among Young Adult Male College Students

Project Goals: This project aligns with the mission of ASTDA and aims to facilitate research in one or more of several domains of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as medical, epidemiological, laboratory, sociological, and behavioral studies. This was a qualitative descriptive design study that explored internal and external environmental factors that positively and negatively influence condom use among young adult male college students. The specific aims are to **1) explore sexual health choices and the perception of STI risks among young adult male college students, 2) identify the barriers and facilitators to consistent condom use, and (3) identify tangible community resources and support.** The purpose of this study design was to provide a comprehensive overview of specific events experienced by participants using their everyday language or words. Our goal was to discover new knowledge that will aid in the development of effective strategies for adopting sex-positive environments in order to improve sexual health services for youth and young adult populations and help to end the STI/HIV epidemic. The project was awarded \$4,450 to cover the costs of compensating participants, providing a monthly stipend for an undergraduate student assistant, paying for transcription services, and purchasing small office equipment.

Project Achievements: We were able to interview 13 participants between the age of 18–21. As a result of this pilot study, we learned from *Aim 1* that individual preferences could vary, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. However, we identified some of the themes that were most important among each participant when considering sexual health: affordability, privacy and confidentiality, clear communication, flexible and convenient scheduling options, particularly evening or weekend appointments, being culturally sensitive, and offering a range of sexual health services (e.g., STI/HIV screening & testing, contraception, counseling, and education). Healthcare providers and public health initiatives should consider these factors to create inclusive and accessible sexual health services for young adult men. There were some general trends and common perceptions of STI risks among the participants, such as: The majority had limited knowledge about STIs and HIV, including how they are transmitted and prevented. This lack of knowledge can contribute to a sense of invulnerability or a belief that they are not at risk. Second, none of the participants used condoms consistently and tend to underestimate their own risk of contracting STIs or HIV, especially those who were not aware of the prevalence of these infections. *Aim 2*, we observed one consistent theme as a "facilitator" to condom use among all participants, was to avoid unwanted pregnancy; and another most common motif was during random hookups. The most common themes identified as "barriers" to condom use were: "condoms cost alot", "messes up the flow", and "don't like how they feel". It is imperative to thoroughly analyze these issues in order to create efficacious educational STI/HIV programs that cater to the distinct needs and hindrances faced by young adult populations. *Aim 3*, we identified a need for more educational campaigns, in-house school programs, and community outreach efforts to help raise awareness about and provide available sexual and reproductive health services for young people, and reduce the stigma associated with seeking help for sexual health concerns.

Dissemination of findings: We are currently in manuscript development for a peer-reviewed journal publication, our abstract has been accepted for a podium presentation at the 2024 Healthy Futures of Texas Symposium, and we plan to submit abstracts to the American Public Health Association 2024 Annual Meeting (national) and to the 25th IUSTI World Congress incorporating the Australasian Sexual and Reproductive Health Conference (international). We will be intentional with acknowledging ASTDA in any report, publication and other outputs of this study.