

# **Intuition, Secrecy & Denial Among MSM in SEE: Risk for HIV/AIDS & STIs**

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# Presentation

## 3 Objectives:

Explain research methodology

- Appropriate for other studies with this target
- Discuss key findings
- Present key recommendations

# Background

## PSI:

- Social marketer of health products
- Behavior change specialists

## RiskNet:

- 5-country USAID HIV prevention project
- Works with local NGOs serving vulnerable populations

# Purpose of Study

## Collect Data to:

- Create appropriate interventions for MSM in SEE
  - \* Kosovo
  - \* Romania
  - \* Bulgaria
  - \* Macedonia
  
- Build capacity among local NGOs to conduct research & design interventions

# Data Collection

## Explored:

- Knowledge of STI/HIV/AIDS
- Personal risk perception
- Patterns of sexual networking
- Risk behaviors
- Factors that influence-risk taking

# Justification

## Other Studies Show Need:

- Low knowledge levels
- High risk behavior
- Attitudinal barriers

## Most Importantly:

- No such study conducted in SEE

# Peer Ethnographic Research

## Qualitative & Peer Led:

- Series of in-depth interviews
- With peer network of interviewer

## Recommended For:

- Sensitive issues
- Hard to reach targets

# Peer Ethnographic Research

## ADVANTAGES:

- Captures nuances that quantitative studies cannot
- Avoids “group think” problems with focus groups

## UNIQUE FEATURE:

- Target asked to describe “people like them”

# Peer Ethnographic Research

## Limitations:

- Samples are limited to networks of interviewer
  - PSI PER used interviewers from NGOs
- Interviewees can underreport risk behavior or exaggerate sexual exploits

# PSI PER Study

## June '03 Workshop:

- 2 PSI social scientists (SSs)
- 2 PSI field supervisors (FSs)
- 3 Peer Researchers (PRs) each from 4 countries (12 total)

# Initial PER Workshop

## Participants:

- Trained on PER
- Practiced interviewing techniques
- Identified study topics
- Drafted, pre-tested and finalized discussion guides

# PER Fieldwork

## Jun – Aug '03:

- 3 separate interviews per target
  - Sexual behavior
  - Condom use
  - STI/HIV awareness
  
- Total 51 MSM with 151 interviews
- English translation by PRs

# PER Fieldwork

## Jun – Aug '03:

- Debriefs of each interview by FSs
- SSs interviewed select PRs to clarify findings & identify themes

## SSs Meta Analyzed:

- PR notes
- FS debriefs
- SS interviews

# Summary Findings

## Risk Factors Present for MSM Epidemic:

- Low levels of knowledge
- Low levels of risk perception
- High rates of partner change
- Inconsistent condom usage
- Small, closed sexual networks

# Knowledge Findings

## HIV/AIDS:

- Awareness is high
- Misconceptions persist about transmission and prevention

## STIs:

- Not taken seriously – “easily cured”

# Attitude Findings

## Barriers to Healthy Behavior:

- “Intuition” can discern healthy partners
  - “Clean” men are safe
  - “Trusted partners” are safe
    - Boyfriends
    - F-Buddies
    - Friends

# Behavior Findings

## Relationships:

- One night stands & F-buddies most common
  - >50% reported changing partners 4 or more times / month
- Boyfriend relationships short & marked with sexual openness or infidelity

# Behavior Findings

## Sex:

- Few distinctions by age, financial stability or “out-ness”
- 3-somes & group sex common
- Exchanging sex for gifts or money common
  - Formal prostitution is rare.

# Behavior Findings

## “Condom Policies”:

- Either fairly consistently or not at all
- Even consistent users discriminate by partner type –
  - “trusted”
  - “not trusted”

# Behavior Findings

## Obstacles to Testing/Treatment:

- Shame of STIs
- Stigma of MSM
- Fears for confidentiality

# Behavior Findings

## Treatment:

- None / hope
- Self-medication
- Failure to notify partners

# Other Findings

- Internet plays key role as a meeting place
- “Lubricant crisis” in SEE
  - Limited distribution
  - High price
  - Remedies are not latex friendly

# Recommendations

## Further Research:

- Sub-segments of MSM community
  - E.G., Roma, SWs
- Role of alcohol & drugs
- Meanings of relationship categories

# Intervention Recos

## Knowledge/Attitudes:

- Explain consequences of STIs
- Dispel misconceptions about HIV/AIDS
- Address dangers of oil-based lube
- Challenge the myth of “intuition”
- Tackle “trusted partner” barrier

# Intervention Recos

## “Calls to Action”:

- Wear a condom for anal sex
- Test regularly
- Inform past/current partners

# Intervention Recos

## Structural:

- Improve distribution of water-based lube
- Educate health professionals
- Explore internet-based outreach

**THANK  
YOU**