

Internet, tolerance spark change in urban gay communities

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Gay communities – such as clubs, bars, events and neighborhoods – appear to be changing worldwide in light of several key factors, including Internet dating and achievement of civil rights, according to new University of Minnesota research.

In 2007, about 30 HIV prevention experts, researchers, and gay community leaders from 17 cities spanning 14 different countries completed surveys about changes in their communities. They also participated in a facilitated, structured dialogue asking if gay communities are changing, and if so, how. In all cities, the virtual gay community was identified as currently larger than the offline physical community. Most cities identified that while the gay population in their cities appeared stable or growing, the physical gay community infrastructure appeared in decline.

"With the exception of London and possibly New York, gay bars and culture are changing. On almost all measures, we're seeing the same trend: decreasing number of gay bars/clubs, decreased attendance at gay events, less volunteerism in gay or HIV/AIDS organizations and, less gay media, resulting in an overall decline in gay visibility," said Simon Rosser, Ph.D., principal investigator on the study and professor in the School of Public Health's Division of Epidemiology and Community Health.

"The biggest reason for these changes, we think, is the Internet. Traditional gay communities have become much quieter now that most

gay men are online. It's really a worldwide trend."

The study is published online and will be featured in an upcoming print issue of the journal AIDS Care.

Study participants reported several ways gay communities are transitioning. Societal oppression, lack of rights, and the HIV epidemic were powerful reasons why gay men came together as a community in inner cities, which eventually became gay-identified neighborhoods, Rosser said.

Now, in cities as diverse as San Francisco, Amsterdam, Denmark, Toronto, Sydney, and Cape Town, these historically gay neighborhoods appear to be disappearing, driven by high real estate prices, young gay people remaining in the suburbs, and greater integration of heterosexuals into inner cities. Achievement of civil rights also appears to play a role; young people in cities where they have equal rights may simply not feel the same need for community. Rosser noted that the changes are consistent with theories of social assimilation.

This change in gay communities is also a challenge for HIV/STD prevention. In the past, gay community organizing and HIV/STD prevention for gay men often involved recruitment and education in gay bar/clubs and through gay media. Since many cities gay bars and media are decreasing, it's time to reevaluate how to promote HIV prevention, Rosser said.

Meanwhile, cases of HIV/AIDS are increasing among gay men. Between 2001 and 2005, there was a 13 percent increase in HIV cases among gay men in the United States.

"We have to discover effective ways of doing HIV prevention online and become visible again to the gay community," Rosser said.

In another study, Rosser has led a group of investigators to develop one of the world's first online HIV risk reduction interventions, called "SexPulse." A randomized controlled trial testing the effects of "SexPulse," currently in progress, will be completed later this year.

Source: University of Minnesota

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