

Study looks at how homeless kids' use of online social networks can affect sexual behavior

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A new UCLA AIDS Institute study suggests that the use of social networking websites by homeless youth can lead to an increase in risky sexual behaviors. But interestingly, homeless kids who used these sites were also more likely to have been tested for sexually transmitted infections and to be better informed about preventing such infections and HIV.

Researchers were particularly surprised to find that nearly eight out of 10 homeless youth they surveyed actually used online social networking media.

The study appears in the February issue of the journal *AIDS and Behavior*.

"The study suggests that online social networking and the topics discussed on these networks can potentially increase and decrease [sexual risk behaviors](#), depending on how the networks are used," said lead investigator Sean Young, a visiting assistant professor of family medicine at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA and a member of the UCLA AIDS Institute. "This is one of the first studies demonstrating that homeless youth use online social networking technologies, and it is the first to document the influence of these technologies on their sexual risk behaviors."

Young and co-investigator Eric Rice, an assistant professor at the University of Southern California's School of Social Work, surveyed 201 youths between the ages 13 to 24 who were recruited in June 2009 at a Los Angeles drop-in agency that assists homeless kids.

In a self-administered, hour-long computer survey, the youth participants answered questions about their use of social networking technology, demographics, their sex and drug risk-taking, their living situations, their utilization of the agency's services, and their mental health.

The researchers sought to learn whether these youth used social networking technologies and, if so, how such use might affect their sexual risk behaviors, their knowledge of HIV and AIDS, and how likely they were to seek testing for sexually transmitted diseases.

They found that 79 percent of all participants used social networking technologies every week and that most of the participants had previously been tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), whether they used social networks or not.

In addition, more than 20 percent of sexually active participants reported having found a sex partner online over the previous three months, and more than 10 percent of sexually active participants reported engaging in what is called "exchange sex" — exchanging sex for food, drugs or a place to stay. Both these behaviors have been shown to be associated with an increased risk of contracting STIs and HIV.

The topics the participants discussed online also had a bearing on their sexual activity. Researchers found that those who used social networks to discuss safe sex were more likely to have recently met a sex partner online than those who hadn't discussed safe sex. And those who had found online sex partners and discussed drugs and partying were more likely to have engaged in exchange sex than those who hadn't discussed

drugs and partying.

But the results also indicate that the use of these networks helped educate homeless youth about HIV and STI prevention. This happened, for example, when they discussed love and safe sex. Also, if they discussed love online, they were less likely to engage in exchange sex.

And significantly, homeless youth were more likely to have been tested for HIV and STIs if they were simply a member of an online social network.

The authors noted that these findings may not apply to other online social network users and that the survey sample or method of data collection do not allow for causal inference because the at-risk youth may be finding other ways to engage in risky behaviors. More research is needed to learn if youths who seek sex partners online are at greater risk than those who seek sex offline, and if they are using other venues to engage in risky behavior, they said.

Still, these findings suggest that online social networking sites are popular among [homeless youth](#) and can be used for sexual health interventions, the researchers concluded.

"As online social networks continue to increase, these networks could potentially increase sexual risk behaviors by facilitating an easy way to meet new sex partners," the authors write. "They could also potentially decrease homeless youths' sexual risk behaviors if the networks are used as effective sexual health communication and information portals."

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