

Challenging HIV through social networking

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Tapping into young people's use of online social networks presents health agencies with a powerful opportunity to help control the rise in HIV and other sexually transmitted infections in homeless youth in Los Angeles. According to new research¹ by Sean Young from UCLA and Eric Rice from USC in the US, online social networking - and the topics discussed on these networks - have the potential to affect sexual risk behaviors. Targeting homeless youths with sexual health messages, by exploiting their use of these networks, is likely to be an effective way to reach and influence them to reduce sexual risk behaviors. The study is published online in Springer's journal *AIDS and Behavior*.

The rise in usage of online social networks among young people makes it easier for them to find sex partners online. Homeless youths are at higher risk of HIV than other adolescents in the US. In order to promote healthy sexual behaviors and prevent the spread of HIV and other [sexually transmitted infections](#) (STIs), it is important to understand the role that online [social networking](#) technologies play in the lives of these young people who face disproportionate risk.

A total of 201 youths, recruited at a drop-in agency serving homeless youth in Los Angeles, California, took part in the survey. The young people were asked about their use of the Internet and online social networks – including their topics of conversation online, their [sexual risk behaviors](#), their lifetime history of testing for STIs, and their knowledge about HIV and STIs.

The majority (79 percent) of participants used online social networks

almost every week and they were particularly likely to use MySpace and/or Facebook. When using these networks, young people frequently talked to others about videos, drinking, drugs and parties, sex, love and relationships, being homeless, and school experiences. Almost 80 percent had previously tested for STIs.

The findings tell two stories. On the one hand, the use of online social networks for partner seeking is associated with an increase in sexual risk behaviors. On the other hand, the use of social networks is associated with increased knowledge and HIV/STI prevention behaviors among homeless youth.

Young and Rice conclude: "Our findings suggest that online social networks are popular among homeless youth, and that they can be used as a tool for [sexual health](#) interventions. 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. They could also potentially decrease homeless youths' sexual risk behaviors if the networks are used as effective sexual health communication and information portals by health researchers and agencies, to inform users about their risks and offer information on how they can protect themselves."

More information: Young SC & Rice E (2010). Online social networking technologies, HIV knowledge, and sexual risk and testing behaviors among homeless youth. *AIDS and Behavior*; [DOI:10.1007/s10461-010-9810-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-010-9810-0)

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