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Overall campus HIV rate is lower than in communities

A survey of more than 23 000 students and staff members at 21 institutions of higher education has established that the national HIV prevalence rate among students is 3.4% and among academic staff the rate is 1.5%.

However, there are wide variations in HIV prevalence from region to region and among institutions within some regions.

The survey found that administrative staff on campuses had an HIV prevalence rate of 4.4% and that the most affected group comprises service workers, among whom 9.9% were HIV+. In comparison, the prevalence of HIV in the general population aged 15 - 49 years is 16.9%, according to the Human Sciences Research Council household survey of 2008.

The higher education survey was undertaken by the Higher Education HIV and AIDS Programme (HEAIDS), an initiative of the Department of Higher Education & Training (DoHET) that is implemented through Higher Education South Africa (HESA) and has been funded for the last four years by the European Union. It was released in Johannesburg on Sunday at the start of a two-day conference on HIV and AIDS in the higher education sector.

“To some extent it is reassuring that HIV among students and staff at higher education institutions is less common than in the general population. But the survey results are more complex than the average prevalence rate and certain trends raise concerns,” said Dr Gail Andrews, HEAIDS programme director. “The figures tell us very clearly that some regions and some institutions face more serious challenges than others. This means that the response needs to be tailored to local needs and an inflexible national approach will not be effective.

“But it does not mean that any institution can afford to be complacent. Both the survey and qualitative research undertaken indicate that the sexual and social behaviour of sections of university communities puts them at risk of infection.”

She noted that the survey highlighted the persistence of stigma in relation to HIV. Across the board, only a minority of individuals surveyed felt they could count on their friends to support them if they became infected. “In this climate of insecurity, we need to take note of the fact that students and staff feel institutional management and student leaders should take HIV and AIDS a lot more seriously.”

Selected findings from higher education HIV and AIDS survey

The survey analyses the results on a regional basis, clustering the findings for institutions into five regions. The Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal emerge consistently as the regions with the highest prevalence, while Western Cape has the lowest figures and Gauteng/North West/Limpopo and the Free State occupy the middle ground.

Although the average prevalence rate for the higher education sector is considerably lower than prevalence in the general population, the patterns are very similar in terms of the most affected regions, women usually being more infected than men, and the steep increases in infection rates in early adulthood.

Campus communities are also similar to the general population in terms of the distribution of HIV across population groups. Among administrative staff, national HIV prevalence is highest among African personnel (11.5%) and in KwaZulu-Natal the rate among African staff is 18.2%; while among African service staff on campuses nationwide HIV prevalence is 17.2%. In KwaZulu-Natal, the HIV rate among African service staff is 30.1%.

Additional findings of the survey include the following:

- HIV prevalence among students increases quite sharply with age. While 18 and 19-year-old students had a prevalence rate of 0.7%, this increased to 2.3% in the 20-25 year age group, and rose steeply to 8.3% in the 25+ age group.
- Female students were more than twice as likely to be infected as male students

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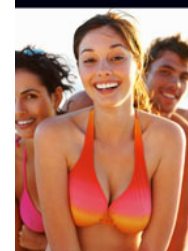
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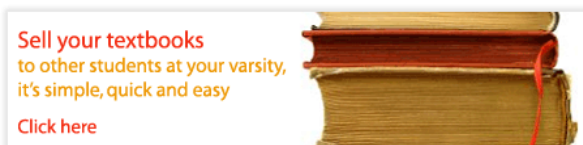


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(4.7% compared to 2.0%).

- Male students were, however, much more likely to have had more than one sexual partner in the month prior to the survey (19% for men as against 7% for women).
- Male and female students were equally likely to have had a sexual partner more than 10 years older than them (and perhaps by implication more sexually experienced). The rates were 6% and 7% respectively.
- Among all categories of staff HIV prevalence was substantially higher among unmarried staff.
- While 60% of sexually active students said they had ever undergone an HIV test, only 20% of academic staff, 28% of administrative staff and 39% of support staff had done so.
- One out of 20 HIV+ students and one out of 10 HIV+ service workers had not used a condom the last time they had sex.

Article courtesy of Stellenbosch University, visit: <http://www.sun.ac.za/>



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