

HIV Prevention in Mobile Population

principles of strategy –

Purposes

1. The purposes of this paper are to define the target population and the scope of the problem, examine the local situation, and determine the core principles for the development of HIV prevention strategies in this population.

Definitions and risks of HIV infection

2. Human mobility has been incriminated as contributing to the geographical spread of the AIDS epidemic, at least in its early phase, across countries in Africa. There were four hypotheses postulated, each self-explained by its names: (1) truck-town hypothesis; (2) international traveler hypothesis; (3) migrant worker hypothesis; and (4) international prostitution hypothesis .

3. Vulnerability in people who move away from original country of residence may differ in cultural, educational, and socio-economic conditions. Change in social support network may result in boredom and loneliness or sense of liberty and hence facilitate undertaking of high risk behaviours . On a micro-level, each subgroup may have an unique situation to be addressed for effective prevention to occur.

4. More recent efforts in European, African or other Asian countries have been using mobile population as a collective term to refer to migrant workers, ethnic minorities, and travelers according to each of the local situations. Mobile population has been subclassified according to the relative length of stay of the individuals in the original country of residence and the place they work.

5. In order to develop practical strategies in the local context, we consider four distinct subgroups, each may need separate attention. These are: (1) migrant workers from other places, especially labourers, with distinct cultural, language, or even literacy barriers; (2) truckers/truck drivers, who travel long distance and may visit commercial sex establishments along the roads; (3) frequent travelers; including those who travel between Hong Kong and Mainland China, and (4) migrant commercial sex workers (CSW). The last group, while less visible, may present to the judiciary as illegal immigrants.

Mobile population and HIV situation in Hong Kong

6. Migrant workers and travelers are not registered risk factors in the existing HIV reporting system nor sero-surveillance mechanisms. There is, therefore, a paucity of such data. There is also a lack of administrative database as the prevailing health care financing policy does not discriminate between migrant workers and local residents.

7. There are, however, selected researches that provide insight into this problem. In a study conducted in March 1997 at the border on train passengers returning from Mainland to Hong Kong, it was reported that 18.3% of the male respondents had had intercourse with a commercial sex worker and/or a non-wife partner. For those who visited CSW, one third did not use condoms. In addition, 20% reported a history of sexually transmitted disease .

8. Another local group had interviewed 438 travelers, with 77% non-Chinese, in the departure lounge of the Kai Tak International Airport between May and June 1996 . Forty-four percent of those who traveled within the previous one year (87% non-Chinese) reported having had sex with a local person, a CSW, or another

tourist. Sixty-five percent of them reported having had used condoms.

9. The vulnerability of long distant truck drivers have also been recognised by the local AIDS programme planners. In a qualitative study conducted through interviews with key informants and selected truck drivers in 1995, the researchers reported pattern of work of these drivers and the types of sex establishments located along the truck routes . It was estimated that a significant proportion of these cross-border drivers had used CSWs at variable frequencies, ranging from a few times per week to a couple of times throughout their career. Facilitating factors identified include the long working hours, boredom, low cost and group pressure.

10. AIDS awareness and sexual behaviours of long distant truck drivers were further investigated in a study conducted in May to June 1996 . A total of 1267 male truck drivers were interviewed at border points. Factors contributing to their vulnerability were identified: relatively high income, masculine culture which is permissive to extra-marital sex, common commercial sex establishment across the border, boredom and loneliness associated with their work nature. While knowledgeable about AIDS, one quarter reported that they had engaged in commercial sex and 90% reported having used condoms, yet considered condom use unnecessary with regular sex partners including the so-called "second wives". Twelve percent reported having had STDs.

11. Presence of STD is regarded as a marker of recent high risk sexual behaviours. In Hong Kong, rising incidence of STDs has been reported by the Department of Health Social Hygiene Services. Total STDs have doubled from 10457 cases in 1990 to 14848 in 1994 to 20731 in 1997 . The pattern has been similar yet the rate of rise in syphilis has been the highest among all (19.6% as compared to 3.8% of all STDs). Using information volunteered by the male clients attending the Service, there has been increasing proportion of STDs contracted from outside Hong Kong, rising from 39% in 1990 to 65% in 1994 and 67% in 1997 .

12. The size of these population subgroups is not easy to define. According to the Immigration Department, a total of 105.5 million passengers travelled to and from the HKSAR in 1997, and movements to and from the Mainland was 75 million, rising by 15% as compared to 1996 (65 million). As for foreign workers, 16561 expatriate professionals, and technical, administrative and managerial people have been admitted for employment. Another 2893 visas were approved in 1997 under the two labour importation schemes. As for the population of foreign domestic helpers, there were 170,971 such helpers by the end of 1997, with 81% of them from the Philippines. Concerning Vietnamese population, by the end of 1997, there were 687 migrants and 1213 refugees yet to be repatriated. There has not been any published information on foreign CSW.

13. In summary, available data have confirmed the vulnerability of those who traveled frequently between Hong Kong and Mainland either as travelers or long distant truck drivers. High risk sex behaviours have been shown to be present in frequent travelers but the impacts on the local community is less certain. Situations in migrant workers and foreign CSW have yet to be investigated.

Core principles for HIV prevention in mobile population

14. The goals of HIV prevention in mobile population are to minimize their vulnerability and ensure access to care and support when necessary. While the specific programmes could be innovative and diverse in nature, a common ground on strategy development is useful while prioritisation is essential for effective prevention. .

15. Population based safer sex promotion would be necessary to set the agenda and raise the awareness. More specifically for travellers, population based travel safe programmes could incorporate preventive measures for other communicable diseases and health conditions.

16. Specific subgroups may benefit from targeted intervention. Examples taken from overseas experience include border-point programmes for truckers and frequent travelers and skill building projects for migrant

workers.

17. Access to health services of those who move in, especially the migrant workers, needs to be ensured.

18. Participatory approach, such as involvement of migrant mediators, has the theoretical advantages of effective communication, customization of relevant programmes and maintenance of sustainability.

19. Research would help to enrich the understanding the heterogeneous composition of this population. Intervention trials should be encouraged to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice.

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