

A study of MSM sexual behaviours in London during COVID-19 restrictions



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Background

The [GMI Partnership \(GMI\)](#) and the [Love Tank \(TLT\)](#) were commissioned together to deliver pan-London HIV prevention services for Men who have sex with men (MSM) in London. GMI and TLT were forced to suspend almost all face-to-face activities including core outreach and HIV testing services in the financial year 2020-2021.

Between August and October 2020, the national COVID-19 control measures were relaxed slightly. Compensational behaviours such as social gatherings were reported frequently. Therefore, in November 2020 GMI and TLT conducted an online survey to examine sexual behaviours of MSM in London during this time and how these behaviours were adapted to the pandemic.

Method

An anonymous online survey was conducted mid-November to early December 2020, asking respondents about their sexual activities 3 months prior to the survey. It targeted all MSM living in London aged 16 and over. Participants were recruited through Scruff, agency mailing lists, online outreach via gay apps and agencies' social media platforms.

There were fewer than 20 questions for each respondent based on the pre-set logical pathways. Information was collected in three areas:

1. Demographic information
2. Sex activities¹ in the last 3 months
3. Sexual health & wellbeing

1. For the purpose of the survey, sex activity was defined as any activity - solitary, between two persons, or in a group - that induces sexual arousal, including penetrative and non-penetrative sex, masturbation. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-sexual-activity/Sociosexual-activity>
 2. Including but not limited to trans men and women, agender, non-binary, queer and gender-fluid people.

Results

Overview

- 918 valid responses were collected and analysed. 93.6% were cis men and 5.4% were trans and non-binary identified², 19.6% were HIV positive. 82% respondents were white, 3.9% Asian, 3.7% Black, 4.8% mixed and 5.5% other/unknown.
- The age range is 18 to 77, with an average age of 44. 65.3% were single and 20.2% were in open relationships. 43.5% were living alone.

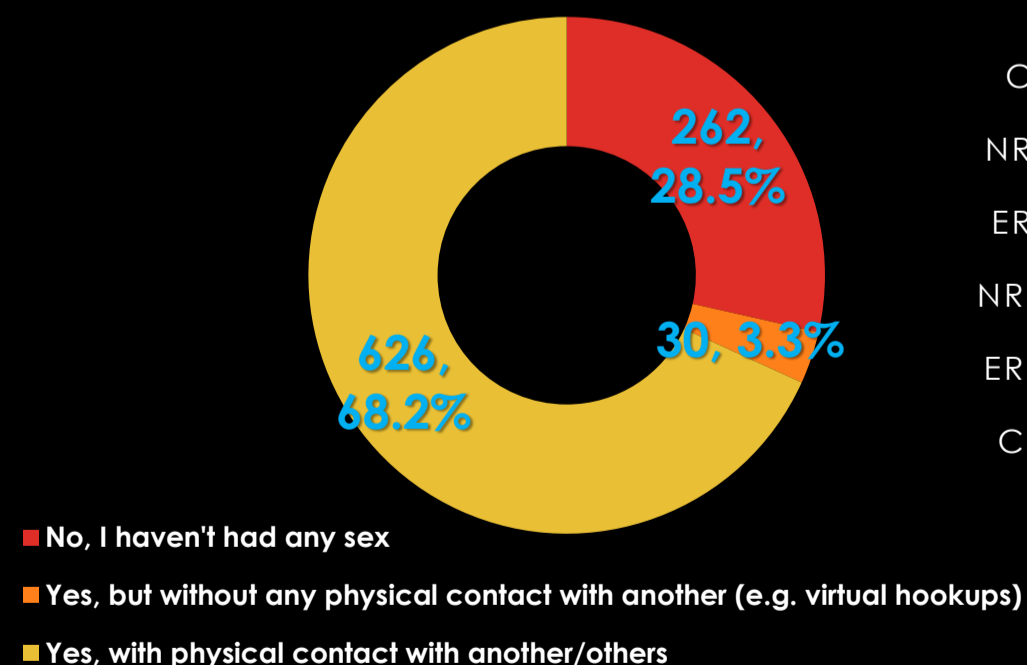
Physical sex with partners

- 626 (68.2%) respondents had physical sexual contact with other people, of which 70.8% (48% of total, 95% CI [45%, 51%]) had sex with casual partners from different households.
- Those aged under 40 were significantly more likely to have sex with casual sex partners that they don't live with than those aged 40 and above ($p < 0.01$). People living with HIV were more likely to have sex with casual partners ($p < 0.01$).
- The venues where sex activities most frequently took place were at where either partner(s) lived (both >70%) and outdoors (29.8%).

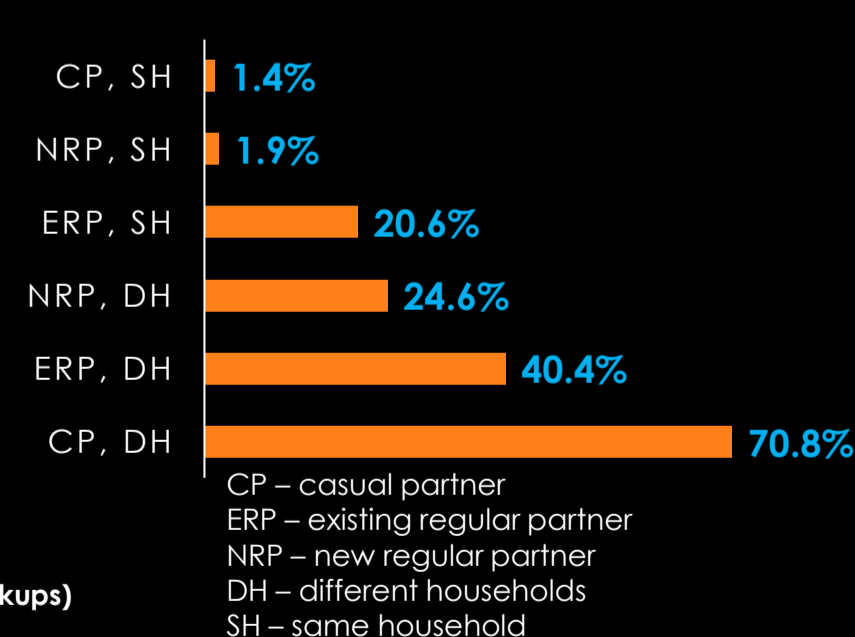
COVID prevention measures for casual dating

- 58.6% of those who were having casual sex (n=447) reported taking extra measures for COVID prevention.
- 51.5% used hygiene techniques such as handwashing or showering before and/or after sex. Other measures included reduced mouth-to-mouth contact; increased use of condoms for penetrative sex; wearing a face covering during sex; and changing type of sex to include physical distancing.
- 36.2% reported not taking any additional precautions.

OVERALL SEX ACTIVITY



PARTNERS OF PHYSICAL SEX



Conclusion

During the period of loosened national COVID-19 control measures, a considerable number of London MSM remained sexually active and engaged in physical sex with casual partners from other households. This was higher in MSM under 40 years. Some took extra precautions to prevent COVID-19 transmission. Recommendations include increased education regarding safer sex and COVID-19 risk among key groups of MSM.

COVID Measure	% (n=447)
N/A, I haven't taken any additional COVID19 precautions.	36.2%
I've used hygiene techniques such as hand-washing or showering before and/or after sex	51.5%
I've had sex with reduced mouth to mouth contact such as kissing	23.5%
I've avoided sex that might expose me or my partner/s to faeces (poop) (e.g. not rimmed or been rimmed; been extra careful during or after fingering)	6.9%
I've used condoms for penetrative sex more frequently than I usually would	6.0%
I've had sex with a face covering on	5.8%
I've changed the type of sex I have during hook-ups	5.8%
I've had sex that involved physical distance (e.g. watching each other in the same room without touching)	5.6%
I've changed where sex takes place	5.4%
I've used condoms for oral sex more frequently than I usually would	0.9%

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Limitations

- This survey was launched in November 2020. The changes in COVID prevention measures during survey recruitment could affect people's behavioural patterns which the survey tried to capture in the 3 months prior to the survey.
- The majority of responses were recruited via the dating app Scruff. This could introduce sampling bias into the survey where the respondents might not represent MSM in London, or MSM using dating apps in London.