

# ANET's Gay Men's Relationships Survey: Quantitative Analysis

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## Executive summary

- Younger men in regular relationships may be at increased risk of HIV infection mainly due to a higher probability of short-term regular relationships and a higher prevalence of relationships with much older partners (from the highest HIV risk group)
- Older men in regular relationships may be at higher risk of HIV infection due to the increasing proportions of such men having sex outside the relationship and due to the breaking of agreements.
- Poor communication between partners, particularly about sex outside relationships, may reduce the preventive effect of risk reduction strategies.

### **To be effective in HIV prevention, educational campaigns and health promotion efforts should focus on:**

- The role of 'concurrent' (short-term consecutive) regular relationships in HIV transmission
- The role of agreements (and adherence to agreements) as safer sex practices
- Communication skills of gay men regarding sexual practices within and outside regular relationships

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## 1. About the study

### *Introduction*

The Online Survey of Relationships is a cross-sectional survey of gay and other homosexually active men. It was developed by the Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO) and conducted online during a one year-period of time (July 2007- April 2008). The major aim of the survey was to provide a snapshot of gay men's relationship patterns and age mixing and inform the development of a national education campaign on relationship agreements. The survey was widely advertised through the Australian Gaydar and Manhunt, AFAO's and other websites and email lists of AFAO member organisations and attracted 1521 participants from across the country.

### *Methods*

#### **Study design and sample**

The survey used a short, self-administered questionnaire which included qualitative and quantitative questions. It collected information on socio-demographic characteristics of the men and their relationships, communication between partners about sex and adherence to agreements.

Recruitment started in July 2007 and lasted till the end of April 2008. In total, 1,521 participants completed the survey. The most efficient time of recruitment was during month 2 and 3 of the study (August and September 2007), when 973 and 264 participants were recruited (64% and 17% of the sample, respectively – see Figure 1).

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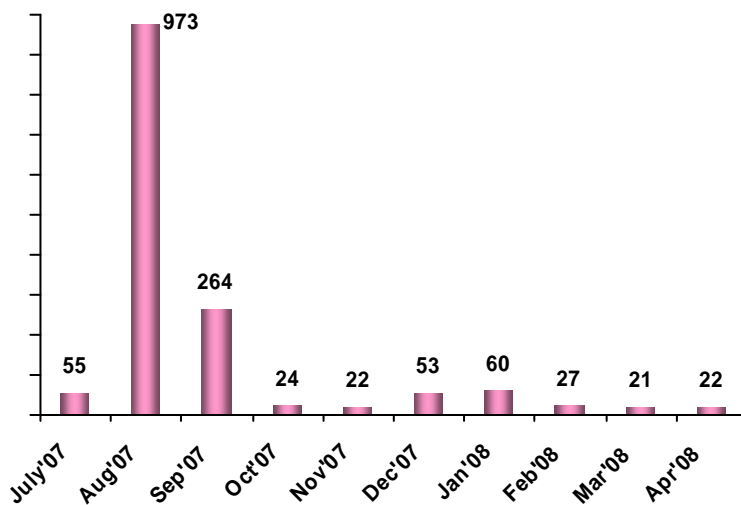


Figure 1: Recruitment rate

605 men reported being in a regular relationship with another man at the time of the survey, and an additional 119 men were in a regular relationship in the previous 6 months. This subset of 724 men was used for the analyses of regular relationships presented in this report.

This report outlines the findings of the quantitative analyses. Except where indicated, data are provided for all men in regular relationships at the time of or close to the survey (N=724).

## 2. Sample characteristics

A total of the 1,521 men responded to the survey. Their socio-demographic characteristics are presented below.

### ***Residential location***

The survey was accessible to all men across Australia. Apart from 29% of the men who did not provide their residential location, 23% of the respondents were from NSW, 16% from Victoria, 12% from Queensland, 6% from outside Australia and the rest from other states and territories of Australia. This distribution approximately represents the estimated proportional distribution of gay men across Australian states and territories (Prestage et al., 2007).

### ***Age***

This survey attracted a significant proportion of young men: 62.5% of the total sample were 35 years old or younger. Such an age distribution significantly differs from the convenience samples recruited by 'paper-and-pencil' approach in gay-friendly venues. For example, only about 40% of the participants in the Sydney Gay Community Periodic Survey (SGCPS) 2007 were aged 35 or younger (Zablotska et al., 2007). However, similarly young samples were recruited through other online surveys, such as an Online E-Male Survey where men up to age 35 constituted 56% of the sample (Rawstorne & Holt, 2008).

**Ethnicity**

75% of the respondents were of Anglo-Australian origin and the rest reported different ethnic backgrounds.

**3. Regular relationships and sex with casual partners**

**Age mixing with regular partners**

The open-ended age groups (men younger than 18 and older than 65) were very small for quantitative analyses. However, the analysis of age mixing with regular partners among men from 18 to 65 years old has revealed interesting patterns (see Figure 2). A substantial proportion of men in the age group of 18 to 25 (16%) reported having much older partners (10 or more years older), and an additional 36% had partners who were 2 to 10 years older. This proportion gradually declined with the age of respondents. Meanwhile, in the older age groups, the proportion of much younger partners steadily increased.

Such age mixing patterns, particularly among young respondents may put them at increased risk of HIV infection, because their partners belong to the age groups of men who contribute most of new HIV infections in Australia (Guy et al., 2007).

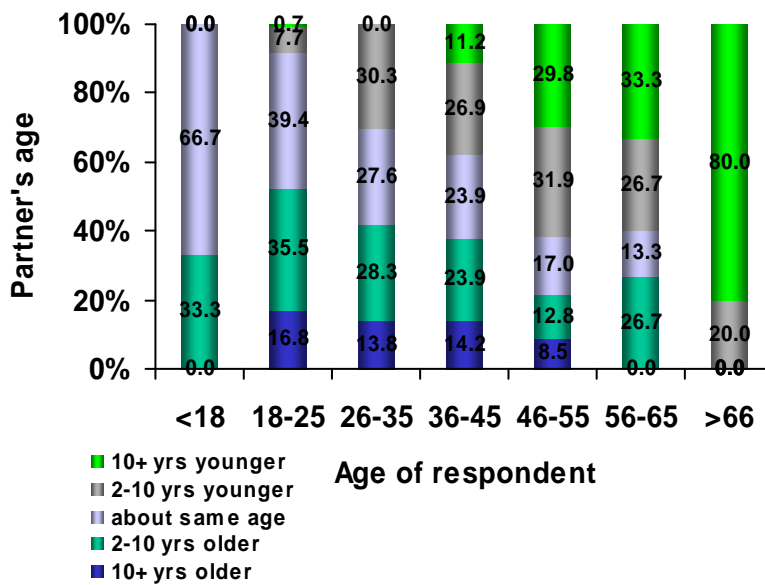
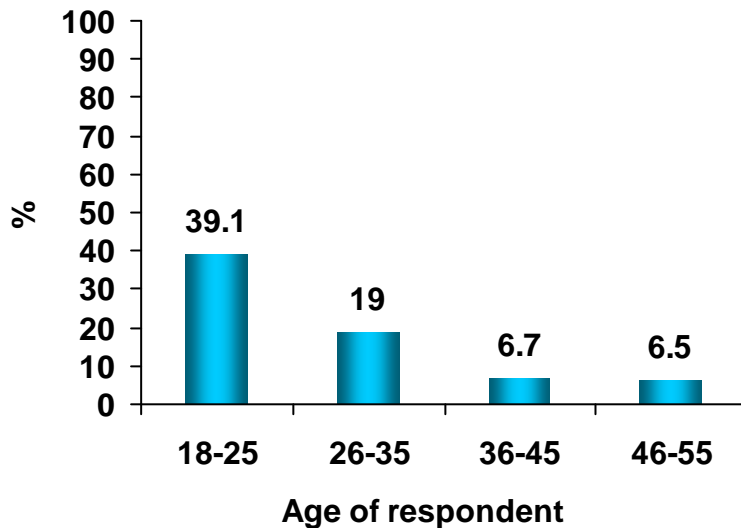


Figure 2: Age mixing

## Length of relationships

Similarly to other studies (e.g., SGCPS), the length of a current relationship was associated with the age of the respondents (see Figure 3). A high proportion of younger men (39% among 18-25 year-olds) reported such a relationship, and the proportion declined with the age of the respondent. This finding is in agreement with other studies which suggest that younger men tend to engage in short-term consecutive monogamous relationships (Prestage et al., 2008).



■ proportion who reported relationship <6mo

Figure 3: Proportion of respondents who reported being in a relationship of less than 6 months

## Sex outside relationships

Slightly more than a half of all men in relationships (363 of 724 men, 51.3%) reported that they had also had sex with casual partners. Only half of these men (51.8%) said their partners knew about it, while in other cases partners clearly did not know (17.9%) or respondents were not sure.

307 men (43.1%) reported that their partners had casual sex, but 26.1% of these 307 men suspected it rather than knew it from their partners. 73 men (10.3% of the sample) did not know if their partners had any sex outside the relationship. Thus, in total 21% of the men did not know/were not sure about their partners' casual sex contacts.

In summary, it can be assumed that only half of the men were in a monogamous relationship, 35% reported both themselves and their partners having had casual sex and in the the rest of the cases either respondents or their partners had had casual sex (see Figure 4). About half of all men (49%) reported having group sex (three or more partners including their regular partner).

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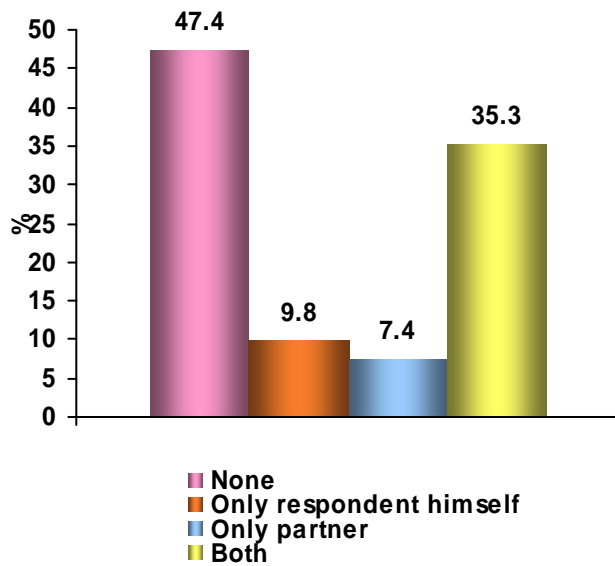


Figure 4: Sex outside relationship

The prevalence of causal sex by both respondents and their regular partners gradually increased and, conversely, the prevalence of monogamous relationships declined with the length of relationship. (see Figure 4).

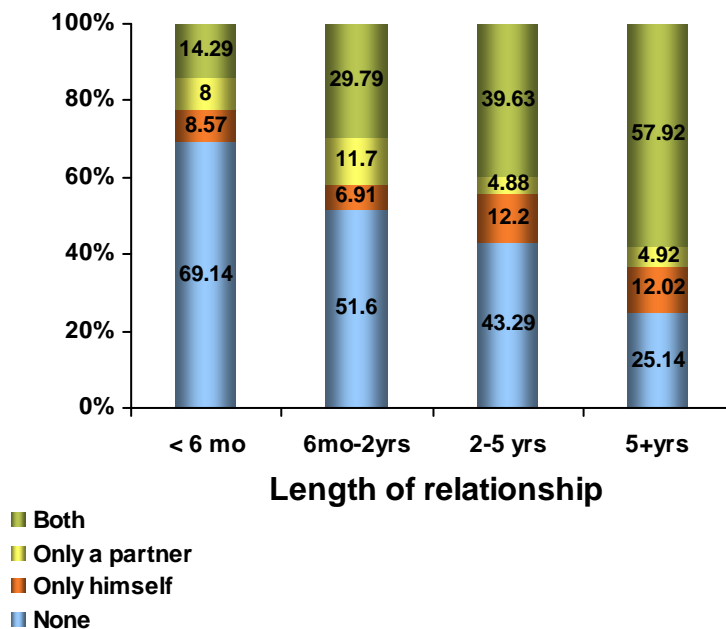
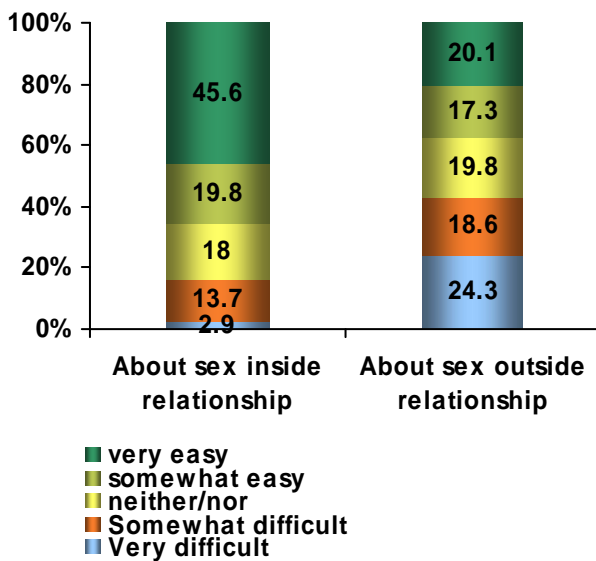


Figure 5: Prevalence of causal sex by the length of regular relationship

**4. Communication within relationships and agreements about sex**

***Difficulty talking with partners about sex***

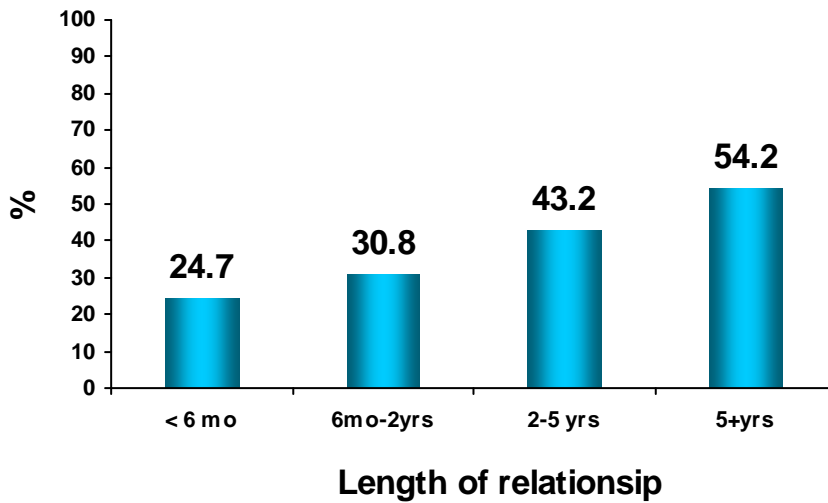
Discussion with partners about sex appeared to be much easier when it was about their own relationship rather than about casual sex (see Figure 6). Only 3% of all men found it 'very difficult' and 13% 'somewhat difficult' to talk with partners about sex within relationship, while 24% and 19%, respectively, felt the same when asked about talking with their partners about casual sex. As expected, men who had difficulty discussing sex within the relationship, were twice as likely to have difficulty discussing sex outside the relationship as those who did not have problems talking about sex with their regular partners (OR=2.3, 95% CI: 1.71-3.16).



*Figure 6: Difficulty talking with partners about sex*

***Agreements with regular partners***

The predominant majority of men in relationships (91%) reported having agreements with their regular partners about sex. With respect to adherence to these agreements, a substantial proportion of these men reported breaking them: 11.4% by themselves, 9.4% by partners and 18.5% by both, while 5.4% were not sure. The prevalence of reporting broken agreements increased with the length of relationship (see Figure 7), and this was in agreement with the previous finding that the prevalence of casual sex increased with the length of relationship as well. Dissatisfaction with the relationship also often resulted in broken agreements (see Figure 8); however, this association may be bidirectional: men whose partners had broken agreements could be dissatisfied with the relationship and dissatisfaction may cause some men to look for partners outside the relationship.



■ proportion who reported breaking agreements

Figure 7: Proportion of men who reported breaking agreements (by themselves, their regular partners or both)

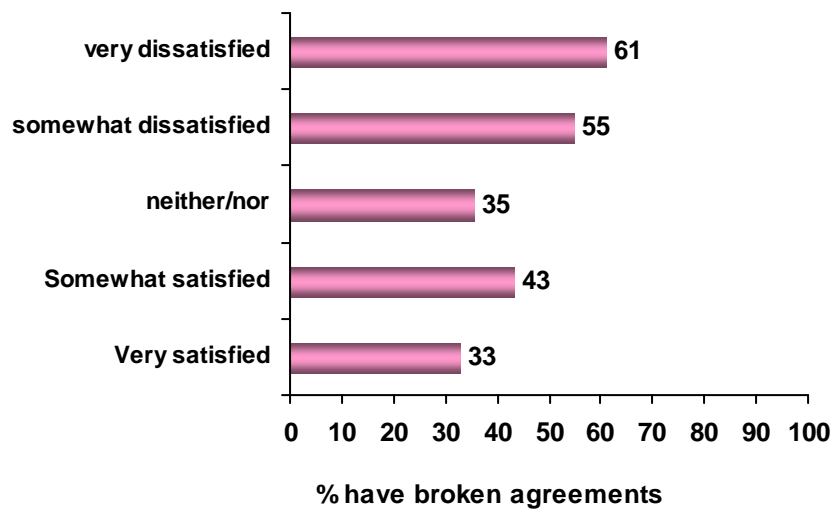


Figure 8: Satisfaction with the relationship and broken agreements

The proportion of men reporting broken agreements about sex with regular partners did not differ by age or age difference with their partner, but it was significantly higher among men who had difficulty talking with their partners about casual sex, compared with those who did not have difficulty talking about it (PRR=2.1; 95%CI: 1.6-2.8).

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