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Sexual behavior and PrEP use among sexual minorities during COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil

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INTRODUCTION

- Social distancing measures implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic may affect the HIV prevention continuum, with reduced access to HIV testing, linkage to services and PrEP initiation.
- In this context, it is critical to understand the impact of these measures on sexual behavior and PrEP use among sexual minorities in Brazil.

METHODS

- **Study design**: Cross-sectional web-based study among Brazilian residents, age≥18y, self-identifying as cisgender men who have sex with men (MSM) or transgender/non-binary (TGNB) and who self-reported HIV negative/unknown status.
- **Recruitment**: Hornet, Facebook and WhatsApp during April-May, 2020.
- **Measure**: Sociodemographic, gender, sexual orientation, HIV self-reported status, sexual behavior during social distancing/COVID-19 pandemic and PrEP.
- **PrEP elegibility criteria**: Defined as one of the following: condomless receptive anal sex, HIV-positive partner, and transactional sex.
- **Statistical analysis**: We compared sexual behavior between respondents on PrEP during social distancing period and those not on PrEP (chi-square test).

RESULTS

- Of 3,486 who completed the questionnaire, 2,672 reported HIV negative or unknown status and were included in this analysis (Figure 1).
- Median age was 32(IQR:26-39) years. Most were cismen, high schooling (completed secondary school or higher) and middle/high income. Almost half were white (Table 1).
- A total of 30% (n=733) were using daily oral PrEP before social distancing period initiated. Among them, 69% (n=502) maintained daily oral PrEP, 28% (n=204) stopped PrEP, 1.5% (n=11) used event-driven PrEP and 2.2% (n=16) used different PrEP regimens. Main reasons for stopping PrEP were: impediments to pick up PrEP refill at the health service (47%) and sexual abstinence (40%). Main reasons for continuing PrEP were: fear of HIV infection (62%), sex with casual partners (17%), HIV-positive partner (12%), and belief that PrEP protected against COVID-19 (9%).
- Respondents who maintained PrEP during social distancing period (n=529) reported more condomless receptive anal sex and casual partners than those not on PrEP (Table 2).
- Among those who stopped PrEP during this period (n=204), 33% maintained PrEP eligibility and could have continued its use.
- Considering those not on PrEP prior to this period, 86% were aware of PrEP, and 22.9% had PrEP eligibility, among whom 48% reported willingness to use PrEP.

CONCLUSIONS

- Almost half of PrEP users engaged in higher risk behaviors, indicating that health services in Brazil should continue PrEP provision for sexual minorities.
- In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges for PrEP access will demand the implementation of innovative solutions such as teleconsultation (1) to avoid the expansion of the HIV epidemic.

Table 1. Characteristics of study population.

	N=2,672 (%)
Age (years)	
18-24	446 (16.7)
25-35	1258 (47.1)
>35	968 (36.2)
Recruitment	
Hornet	1586 (59.4)
WhatsApp	872 (32.6)
Facebook	214 (8.0)
Gender	
Cisgender men	2605 (97.5)
Transgender men	12 (0.4)
Transgender women	18 (0.7)
Non binary/ gender fluid	37 (1.4)
Sexual orientation	
Gay	2234 (83.6)
Bisexual	368 (13.8)
Heterosexual	12 (0.4)
Other	58 (2.2)
Race	
White	1497 (56.0)
Black	371 (13.9)
Pardo/Mixed-black	759 (28.4)
Native	24 (0.9)
Asian	21 (0.8)
Schooling	
Low	921 (34.5)
High	1751 (65.5)
Family Monthly Income	
Low	999 (37.4)
Middle	1058 (39.6)
High	615 (23.0)
Region	
Southeast	2129 (80.2)
South	234 (8.8)
Central-west	140 (5.3)
Northeast	124 (4.7)
North	28 (1.1)
Resident of metro area	
Yes	1976 (74.4)
No	679 (25.6)

Figure 1. Study flow-chart. Brazil, 2020.

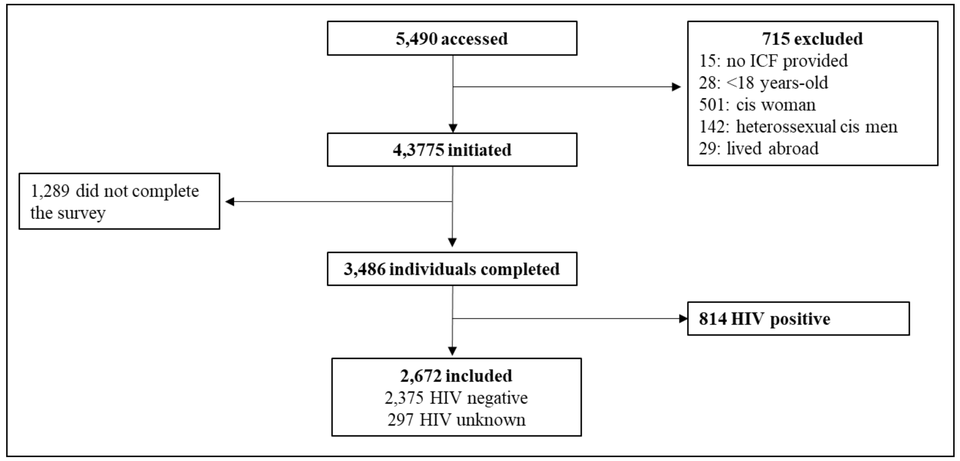

Table 2. Sexual behavior and PrEP eligibility criteria according to PrEP use during social distancing period.

	Total N=2,672	Not on PrEP N=2,143 (80.2%)	On PrEP N=529 (19.8%)	p-value
Sex during social distancing period				
Yes, with any partner	1012 (37.9)	739 (34.5)	273 (51.6)	< 0.001
Yes, only with steady partners	447 (16.7)	326 (15.2)	121 (22.9)	
No sex	1213 (45.4)	1078 (50.3)	135 (25.5)	
Number of casual partners				< 0.001
No	1673 (62.6)	1415 (66.0)	258 (48.8)	
1	381 (14.3)	302 (14.1)	79 (14.9)	
2 to 5	505 (18.9)	357 (16.7)	148 (28)	
>5	113 (4.2)	69 (3.2)	44 (8.3)	
Condomless receptive anal sex with casual partner				< 0.001
No	2292 (85.8)	1918 (89.5)	374 (70.7)	
Yes	380 (14.2)	225 (10.5)	155 (29.3)	
Change in number of sexual partners				0.086
Increased	91 (3.4)	75 (3.5)	16 (3.0)	
Same	837 (31.3)	691 (32.2)	146 (27.6)	
Decreased	1744 (65.3)	1377 (64.3)	367 (69.4)	
Transactional sex				0.003
No	2594 (97.1)	1895 (97.7)	699 (95.5)	
Yes	78 (2.9)	45 (2.3)	33 (4.5)	
PrEP eligibility criteria				< 0.001
No	1857 (69.5)	1630 (76.1)	227 (42.9)	
Yes	815 (30.5)	513 (23.9)	302 (57.1)	

REFERENCE

(1) Hoagland B, Torres TS, Bezerra DRB, Geraldo K, Pimenta C, Veloso VG, et al. Telemedicine as a tool for PrEP delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic in a large HIV prevention service in Rio de Janeiro-Brazil. The Brazilian Journal of Infectious Diseases. May 31:S1413-8670(20)30065-9

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