

Sector Summary Report:

Scene but unseen: migrant gay men

Migrant gay men are as diverse a group of people as the countries and cultures they come from. It is often not their lack of knowledge around HIV and sexual health that can result in an increased risk of infection, but their economic and social circumstances in the UK that leave them vulnerable to exposure.

This report highlights priorities for the gay men's health sector to focus on to help meet the sexual health needs of migrant men. Priority areas emerging out of research and focus groups include:

- exploring the needs of men who have recently arrived in the UK
- supporting men around their experiences of family life and moving from countries where attitudes to homosexuality are predominantly conservative and hostile
- supporting men whose English language skills are poor
- supporting men around their migrant status and how this can play out on the gay scene
- supporting men around a range of health concerns, education and employment opportunities, benefits and welfare advice, and negotiation of the immigration and asylum system.

The sexual health needs of migrant gay men are influenced, like all men, by a range of factors. We should put an emphasis on funding more research into this area, examining the extent to which men's social and economic vulnerability as migrants affects their sexual health choices and their proximity to HIV. This report is an update from the 2006 report *Migrant Gay Men* highlighting the ongoing issues that migrant men face, and the lack of support in dealing with pressing and complex social, health and economic needs.

First steps to a new life?

Gay Men's Sex Survey data from *On the Move*¹ shows that migrant men are a diverse group. Some have higher educational qualifications and good English language skills, and many highly qualified migrants have few problems fitting into UK society. This report will focus on men with lower educational qualifications and a limited command of English, as the research suggests that this group have more pressing needs in a range of areas.

Sigma's 2004 report *Migrant gay men*² focused primarily on this group and is one of the few studies that have helped shed light on the lives of migrant gay men in the UK. The report is based on in-depth interviews conducted with 18 men from 11 different countries, including countries from the Caribbean, Europe, South America and Africa.

A common reason why these men migrated to the UK in the first place is that for many the UK was seen as a place of tolerance, somewhere they could go in order to be 'out' about their sexuality as gay men, and a place that was safer than in their home countries.

The men themselves tell of how important it was for them to leave their home countries because they felt they could lead more meaningful, fulfilled lives as gay men in the UK. Many shared stories of persecution around their sexual orientation and generally poor attitudes from families and communities they lived in around the way in which gay men were perceived.

However the reality facing men when they find themselves in the UK can be very different from the hopes and dreams they had before leaving their home countries. Poor language skills and a lack of the necessary social structures can render men vulnerable, unaware of where to go for support or indeed what they are entitled to.

Lack of planning before migration and lack of support on arrival

Frequently men described their opportunities to migrate to the UK as being based on chance. Many left with little planning or long term social support or contacts in the UK. The first priority for men was how they would feed and clothe themselves once they arrived. For others, if they were claiming asylum, this meant earlier contact with the UK authorities and access to support sooner.

However, there is a huge diversity around whether men are able to claim asylum or refugee status, or for example, when coming from other EU countries, whether they are able to negotiate the UK benefits and employment system.

According to Sigma's report, there are predominantly two types of migrants to the UK; those whom soon seek refuge within existing expatriate communities, have strong links to existing communities in the UK and feel comfortable accessing support with people from their home communities. This support tends to be very important for men who have lower

educational qualifications and low command of English. The other group fall into categories of people who have higher educational qualifications and good English. These people tend to fit into more mainstream UK society more quickly and easily.

But a significant proportion of the men in Sigma's report fell between these two norms around migration. Many fitted into the first category, with lower educational qualifications, and therefore needing most support. But they felt excluded by these expatriate communities because of conservative views around differences in sexual orientation. These men, because of their lack of education and poor English, did not have the ability to fit in that well with existing more generalised UK communities either. Nor were their experiences of the gay scene proving particularly productive or helpful.

The gay 'scene': doing more harm than good?

Despite coming to the UK in search of a new way of life, men are often faced with strong social exclusion from the gay community they were hoping to be part of. Some found it racist and not as welcoming as they thought it would be. Contrary to being an open and welcoming place to new arrivals, and a source of supportive social contacts and friendships, the gay scene is perceived by men to be over-sexualised and commodified.

Men would relate stories around the gay scene being very shallow and that they were only valued by other men if they agreed to have sex. Others talked of being 'exoticised' by men because of their difference, either culturally or ethnically, creating power dynamics that were not necessarily equal or helpful for the migrant men. Men would talk about their experiences of needing a place to stay for the night, and of agreeing to have sex

because this need for a place to stay would be met.

The structure of gay community life did not provide any meaningful support to migrant men in terms of non-sexualised friendship, help with language problems, or advice around access to employment or benefits, which were top of the list of what migrant gay men reported problems with.

In fact a lack of social and economic power meant that having contact with the gay scene caused more problems than it solved for many men. There was a pattern of men relating to the over-sexualised nature of the scene, and finding themselves losing control of the sex they were having, often falling into sexual compulsion, and as a result a higher degree of risk taking around sex and higher degree of risk of either acquiring or passing on HIV.

Mental health

The men in Sigma's study repeatedly found that their language skills were not adequate for finding jobs and found it difficult to develop employment skills. A third of the sample relied on benefits or sex-work. It was common for men to be dependant on sexual partners to provide accommodation and food, especially after first arrival. This lack of social capital meant men could suffer from poor mental health as a result of the situations they found themselves in.

Many men reported feelings of lack of control over their lives and choices, lack of help with practical problems, feelings of isolation and depression. Many men reported they had sex because it provided temporary relief from the problems in their lives. Although they knew the sex was not necessarily as fulfilling as they would have liked, for them it was preferable than sitting alone with their loneliness and growing problems.

Are migrant gay men at increased risk of acquiring HIV?

According to the Sigma report *Ethnic minority gay men*³ there is evidence suggesting gay men from certain ethnic minorities are at heightened risk of HIV infection. However, according to Sigma no particular trends have conclusively emerged. Also this report did not look at the specific needs of migrant gay men who were from ethnic minorities.

The impact of HIV

From reports such as *What do you need*⁴, a survey of the health needs of men with HIV, we know that for migrant men with HIV, mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, as well as coming to terms with living with HIV, may well mean they have quite complex needs around sex and relationships. In addition, HIV positive migrant gay men are often vulnerable socially and economically because of their migrant status, as well as their HIV status.

For some, finding out they had HIV also meant they could then access health and social services, including benefits. Some commented that this had helped them out particularly because they had struggled for some time around maintaining employment before they acquired HIV or tested HIV positive.

For others it was very important that they were able to work, whether or not they had HIV, and so negotiating employment and training opportunities remained a central focus.

Falling in between two communities

Instances of homophobic abuse and even violence from their home countries can result in men disassociating from expatriate communities and the support

they can offer. Men who do engage with these communities can find that cultural and faith elements within these groups mean they are still denied the open life they envisaged when migrating.

Anti-homophobia campaigns, developed in partnership with community advocates, are essential to lower the rate that men are shunned by their expatriate communities, and to increase the numbers of gay migrants who feel able to turn to such communities for support.

There are number of ways in which gay community organisations could better help the needs of migrant gay men who are not getting their needs met from their expatriate communities. Work should centre around the needs of men who have poorer command of English, who come from more economically disadvantaged countries, from countries where homophobia is rife, and who have lower educational qualifications.

The recommendations below on targeting and serving migrant gay men come after discussions held in April 2008 with members of various organisations in both migrant and gay / HIV sectors and following a focus group of gay men who had been in the UK for less than three years. Interventions should aim to address the following points:

- improve men's language skills
- to increase men's knowledge of their entitlements and the services available to them
- to help men better understand gay culture within the UK, including the laws and rights concerning men who have sex with men
- to improve men's knowledge, access and journey through the welfare system (for those entitled), including housing, education or training and employment.

Migrant organisations

There are many organisations set up to help migrants, but only a small few dedicated to LGBT migrants. However, work mainly focuses on those seeking asylum, such as The UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group⁵ or The Lesbian and Gay Asylum team, part of Refugee Action.⁶

Existing migrant services need to be aware of the possible needs of the men they are coming into contact with. Guidelines and an audit tool for migrant organisations on creating inclusive environments and highlighting key areas for them to work on are available from Terrence Higgins Trust. Helping organisations to understand how their services might or might not be welcoming to gay men is key. The guidelines and audit tool are available on a THT website www.chapsonline.org.uk/gaybritain

Local assessment

The respondents to the GMSS 2003¹ came from 114 different countries of origin and it is understandable that men from such diverse countries, communities and ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds will have different intervention needs. Before interventions are developed scoping work should be carried out by gay and HIV agencies to establish what populations and communities are based in their area, to enable them to target and develop their resources appropriately and effectively.

By utilising the 'Scene but unseen' resource pack developed by CHAPS in the migrant gay men programme of work, agencies will have a template for pulling together the resources in their area.

Working at a community level

Peer-led initiatives are likely to prove more successful if encouraged and supported by workers in both gay organisations and expatriate organisations. Building links and educating workers from both sets of organisations might mean that we are able to provide more holistic services or sign-posting between services.

Sexual health and HIV outreach work

There is scope to adapt existing interventions to meet the needs of gay migrants. Outreach workers, ideally who speak appropriate languages, can be trained to be alert to the issues facing migrant men they are coming into contact with and to be knowledgeable of the services that they can signpost men to.

Outreach workers could go to places that migrant gay men socialise in, for instance clubs, bars, saunas and other venues frequented by particular communities. An example of this would be the work Naz Project London⁷ do in conjunction with Exilio, a nightclub in London, predominantly frequented by Latino men. Naz Project is an organisation providing sexual health and HIV prevention and support services to BME communities in London.

Further outreach work could be done at less 'gay' orientated gatherings, such as community events, festivals and other culturally specific events and celebrations.

Places of work where there is a high prevalence of migrant workers could also be somewhere for messages to be targeted.

Resources for gay migrants

Very few resources have been specifically developed for migrant gay men. Evaluation of CHAPS national interventions by Sigma⁸ showed that gay migrants considered a leaflet giving general information about living as a gay man in the UK as possibly the most valuable resource to migrants, and that they wanted more than just information on sexual health.

This year CHAPS will aim to address some of these issues with resources it is developing aimed directly at gay men new to the UK. A 'Gay Britain' small booklet, produced in six languages, will contain sexual health and HIV-related information, as well as broader information surrounding rights, entitlements, how to survive the scene and so forth.

The guide will also be available online and backed up with a website www.chapsonline.org.uk/gaybritain, which will host links to other websites that collectively can help meet the needs of migrant gay men, both in terms of HIV and sexual health, but also other aspects of life in the UK.

Immigration status

Of course the 'illegal' or 'irregular' status of some migrants will mean interventions aimed at increasing their social capital will have little or no impact on addressing their situation. Not having the legal right to stay in the UK can have implications on migrants' rights to healthcare, and access to free treatment for those living with HIV, as well as the possibility of being deported back to the homophobic countries they have escaped from.

Although this does not mean 'irregular' migrant men should be excluded from initiatives, lobbying to pursue policy changes seems an influential route that both gay and migrant organisations should also follow.

Before departure to the UK

Whilst such interventions and resources are beneficial to men who are already in the UK, getting information to men before they decide to migrate would have a substantial impact. Web resources in various languages would help to increase access to such information, but where homophobia prevails in some countries, and men possibly put themselves at serious risk by accessing such information, agencies must be prepared for men entering the country who are ill-prepared for the challenges the UK will present them.

- 1 Reid D et al (2004) *On the Move: findings from the United Kingdom Gay Men's Sex Survey 2003*. London, Sigma Research
- 2 Keogh P, Dodds C, Henderson L (2004) *Migrant gay men: Redefining community, restoring identity*. London, Sigma Research
- 3 Keogh P, Henderson L, Dodds C (2004) *Ethnic minority gay men*. London, Sigma Research
- 4 Weatherburn P et al (2002) *What do you need: Findings from a national survey of people living with HIV*. London, Sigma Research
- 5 www.uklgig.org.uk
- 6 www.refugee-action.org.uk
- 7 www.naz.org.uk
- 8 Weatherburn P, Dodds C, Branigan P et al (2007) *Form and focus: Evaluation of CHAPS national interventions, 2003 to 2006*. London, Sigma Research

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The following resources are available at www.chapsonline.org.uk/gaybritain

- Gay Britain – a 'how to survive' small leaflet for migrant gay men. In French, Italian, Portuguese, Polish, Spanish and English
- Scene but unseen – a resource pack for gay men's health workers supporting migrants
- Guidelines and audit tool for specialist migrant organisations to help make their services as inclusive and welcoming as possible for gay and bisexual men.

The HIV and sexual health charity for life

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