

HOW TECHNOLOGY REDUCES THE RISK-TAKING OF HOMELESS YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND Homeless youth are at extreme risk for HIV/AIDS. Their risk taking behaviors have consistently been linked to their engagement with risk-taking peer networks. Modern communication technologies such as social media, cell phones, and email have changed what it means to be homeless. Youth today are not limited to connecting only with other high-risk youth, in person on the streets. Now, technology-using youth are able to connect to pro-social networks comprised of family and friends who are not involved in the high-risk activities of street life.

METHODS Results from two different NIMH-funded studies of homeless youth in Los Angeles are presented (social network survey n = 136; survey of technology using patterns n = 201).

RESULTS 83.5% of homeless youth report using the internet at least once per week and 62% of youth own a cell phone. Youth who connect with family via the internet are 3.1 times less likely to report trading sex for food, money, drugs or a place to stay. And youth who connect to family are 2.5 times more likely to report getting tested for HIV in the previous six months. 22% of youth report having a home-based, condom-using peer who they communicate with via internet or phone and having such a peer is associated with a 3.5 times increase in safer sex behavior. Youth who connect with friends from home via the internet are 2.0 times more likely to report recent HIV testing.

CONCLUSIONS Modern communication technologies, particularly social media platforms, email and cell phones provide new avenues for interventions with homeless youth. Social media-based and smart phone-based apps which help connect youth to HIV prevention services could reach the vast majority of homeless youth. Moreover, using these platforms to help youth reconnect to home-based peers and family seems a particularly promising route for reducing HIV/AIDS related risk behaviors.