



# Black gay and bisexual men in Toronto

A snapshot of results from the MaBwana Black Men's Study

## BACKGROUND

From 2006 to 2008, a team from the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT), the African and Caribbean Council on HIV/AIDS in Ontario (ACCHO), and other institutions implemented the MaBwana Black Men's Study in Toronto.<sup>1</sup> The idea for the study originated among members of ACCHO, who identified the need for research to inform HIV prevention efforts among African, Caribbean and Black (ACB) gay and bisexual men and other Black men who have sex with men (MSM) in Ontario. MaBwana is the first Canadian study to examine the vulnerability to HIV/AIDS among ACB gay and bisexual men in Toronto.

This fact sheet summarizes the research and its implications.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH INVOLVED

MaBwana aimed to enhance HIV prevention services for Black<sup>2</sup> gay and bisexual men by

looking at the issues and factors that influenced their health and well-being, particularly the factors that may be associated with HIV risk and vulnerability.

The study included interviews with key informants about issues related to the health and well-being of Black gay men, the MaBwana survey, and one-on-one interviews with Black gay and bisexual men.

A Community Advisory Committee (CAC) helped to ensure that community interests were appropriately reflected throughout the study. The CAC members advised the research team on all aspects of the study implementation.<sup>3</sup>

## A SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS FROM MABWANA

### Interviews with Key Informants

The nine key informants were knowledgeable about Black gay communities in Toronto through their community activism and/or professional involvement.<sup>4</sup> The key informants noted the lack of services for Black lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people, and how organizations and communities marginalized and silenced Black LGBT people. The key informants recommended three main issues that the study should examine: (1) how Black gay and bisexual men understood their sexual orientation and sexual behaviours, (2) sexual risk behaviours in relation to HIV, and (3) community affiliation and involvement, and relationships with communities and institutions. They also suggested that the study should be promoted to ensure that Black gay and bisexual men felt safe to participate.

### The MaBwana Survey

The survey was launched at Toronto Pride in June 2007. Of the 168 men who participated in the survey, more than half were recruited at Toronto Pride and over one-fifth were recruited at other community and social events organized by or

for Black gay men in Toronto. Recruitment of participants ended in January 2008. The survey was open to African, Caribbean and Black men who (1) identified as gay, bisexual, or transmen or straight men who have sex with other men, (2) were aged 18 or older, and (3) resided or frequently socialized in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

The MaBwana survey included questions about

socio-demographic background (age, income, housing, etc.), ethno-racial background, health status, drug use, dating and sexual behaviours, HIV testing, community involvement and affiliation, and their assessments of HIV prevention campaigns for gay men and MSM in Toronto. The survey was anonymous, in that participants were not required to give any information that would identify them personally.

A snapshot of the survey results shows the following:

### Sexual orientation

- 58.4% identified as gay or homosexual,
- 27.9% identified as bisexual.

### Region or place of birth

- 33.7% were born in the Caribbean, followed by Canada (30.1%) and Africa (24.5%).
- African-born participants were also more likely to have recently settled in Canada or the GTA - 22.5% had been living in the GTA for 10 years or longer, compared to 50.9% of Caribbean-born and 67.4% of Canadian-born survey participants.

### Age, education and income

- The average age of all participants was 33 years:
  - Caribbean-born participants were older (average age of 37 years),
  - Canadian-born participants were younger (average age of 29 years);
- 39.1% had graduated from college or university, and an additional 35.2% had some university or college education (i.e., had not graduated at the time of the survey);
- 47.9% were working full time, and 19% part time; 11.7% were unemployed;
- 40.1% were earning less than \$20,000 a year.

### HIV testing

- 88.2% reported that they had tested for HIV at some time (i.e., had ever tested) and,
- 49.7% of those had tested within the last six months.

### Sex with men

- 79.8% reported that they were sexually active (i.e., had sex with another man in the last 12 months). Among those who were sexually active:
  - 50% - 60% reported always using condoms for anal sex\*\*,
  - another 10% - 15% reported using condoms most of the time\*\*.
  - 56% used the Internet to meet their sexual partners.

### Community attachment and involvement

- 30% of all participants were members of gay social, cultural, religious or recreational groups;
- Participants tended to spend most of their free time with other Black people:
  - 79% of African-born participants spent most of their free time with other Black people, versus 69% of Caribbean-born and 60% of Canadian-born participants;
- 55% of African-born participants were involved (as a member or volunteer) in an organization for Black people, versus 29% of the Caribbean-born and 12% of the Canadian-born.

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\*\*These percentages vary according to their partners' HIV status and ethno-racial background, and the type of sexual relationship with their partners (i.e., casual or regular)

## One-on-one interviews

The one-on-one interviews were conducted from October 2007 to February 2008. Designed to explore the earlier identified core issues of the survey, the in-depth interviews discussed issues such as identity, sexual relationships and behaviours, HIV testing, relationships with ethno-racial and mainstream gay communities, community involvement, and affiliation with HIV/AIDS issues. Twenty-four men participated in the in-depth interviews, equally divided between those who identified as African or Caribbean and between younger (less than 30 years old) and older (30 years of age or older). Seventeen interviewees had also participated in the MaBwana survey.

All interview participants were sexually active (had sex with at least one other man within the last 12 months) and were screened in the same way as for the survey.

A snapshot of the results from the interviews is presented in another fact sheet (“In our own words: Stories of African, Caribbean and Black gay and bisexual men from the MaBwana Black Men’s Study in Toronto”).

## UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three central themes emerged from the MaBwana survey and interviews. First, participants acknowledged their experiences of social oppression (i.e., homophobia, heterosexism and racism). For instance, key informants and MaBwana participants noted the lack of support for Black LGBT people in Black communities and organizations in Toronto. They also spoke about the discrimination and marginalization that gay men experienced “back home” (i.e., in their countries of origin) because of their sexuality, and the reality of Canadian racism. A second theme was that, despite their commitment to safer sex, some participants struggled to maintain safer sex practices. For example, some participants described situations of unprotected sex in relation to drug or alcohol use, heat-of-the-

moment encounters, or the impulse to show that they trusted their sexual partners. Third, despite experiences of marginalization, on the whole participants cared about their health and the health and well-being of other Black gay men and Black communities in Toronto. This was demonstrated by their stated and practical commitment to HIV testing and safer sex, their familiarity with HIV campaigns and their interest in campaigns that promoted or portrayed community responsibility, their interest in HIV prevention efforts, and their involvement in or recognition of community responses to HIV.

## IMPLICATIONS OF MABWANA

Black gay and bisexual men are diverse, vibrant, and dynamic. Despite social oppression, they have resisted marginalization by creating networks of support, solidarity, advocacy and community development.

The results from MaBwana suggest that Black gay and bisexual men are committed to safer sex, HIV testing and HIV prevention, though their behaviours sometimes fall short of their stated commitment. Closing this gap may require greater focus on education and interventions to equip men with the skills needed to routinely negotiate and practice safer sex. Participants’ keen interest in the well-being of other Black gay men and Black communities should also be a key consideration for how programs are developed, promoted and implemented. This strong interest in community responsibility may be a platform for agencies to design and launch HIV prevention efforts.

The MaBwana results also suggest a need to engage Black community leaders and organizations about our collective obligations to Black LGBT people. Community engagement, led by Black LGBT people and their allies, will help to ensure full participation in Black communities and community-based organizations by Black LGBT people, and that our communities and organizations work with Black LGBT people to promote their health and wellbeing.

MaBwana had a number of limitations. First, the number of men in the survey (168 men) was not large enough to examine some issues in detail. Second, the survey was only implemented in English and excluded men who were less than 18 years old. Lastly, we do not know whether the study was sufficiently accessible to a broad spectrum of Black MSM in Toronto.

Despite MaBwana's limitations, the research drew attention to issues that may inform HIV prevention and sexual health programs. On a whole, there is a need to engage Black gay and bisexual men in further research and program development in Canada to enhance their health and well-being.



<sup>1</sup> MaBwana was a study of vulnerability to HIV among African, Caribbean and Black gay and bisexual men in Toronto. In addition to affiliations with ACT and ACCHO, members of the research team were also affiliated with the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, the University of Windsor, the University of Toronto, the Ontario HIV Treatment Network and the Hospital for Sick Children (Sick Kids Hospital). The full community report – MaBwana: Health, Community and Vulnerability to HIV among African, Caribbean and Black Gay and Bisexual Men in Toronto – is available at [www.accho.ca/pdf/Mabwana\\_Report.pdf](http://www.accho.ca/pdf/Mabwana_Report.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> In this fact sheet, we use the term “Black” to refer to African, Caribbean and Black.

<sup>3</sup> CAC members had a variety of professional affiliations (e.g., university, AIDS service organization, etc.), but all were involved in various community initiatives related to health and community among Black LGBTQ communities.

<sup>4</sup> Among the key informants: all were Black men who were born in Canada, Africa or the Caribbean; two were under 30 years old. Their professional affiliations were in community-based organizations, government and business. The purpose of the key informant interviews was (1) to inform effective implementation of the study, (2) to enhance the team's understanding of community interest in the study, and (3) to help identify potential CAC members.

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