

Sexual practices and condom use among Northern & Indigenous adolescents in Canada: Implications for tailored STI prevention

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Background: There is an urgent need to address sexually transmitted infections (STI) prevention with youth in the Northwest Territories (NWT), Canada, where STI prevalence is 10-fold the national average. The study objective was to explore prevalence, and factors associated with, sexual activity and consistent condom use among adolescents in the NWT.

Methods: We conducted a cross-sectional survey with youth aged 12-16 years old in 12 communities in the NWT, Canada. Summary statistics were used to compare demographic differences between gender groups. We use poisson regression models with a robust sandwich error variance to produce adjusted relative risks estimates of the likelihood of experiencing primary outcomes (sexually active [vaginal/anal sex]; consistent condom use).

Findings: Participants (n=780; mean age: 13.7; SD: 1.6) included adolescent girls (n=393; 48.7%) and boys (n=387; 47.9%); most were Indigenous (n=559; 71.7%) and 12.1% identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ) (n=94; 72 girls and 22 boys). Among individuals who were sexually active in the past three months (n=115; 14.8%; 69 girls and 46 boys), over half (n=61; 53.04%) reported condomless sex. In adjusted analyses among girls, sexual activity was associated with age, STI knowledge, partner violence, and alcohol/drug use; lower likelihood of consistent condom use was associated with alcohol and drug use. Among boys, sexual activity was associated with age, partner violence, and alcohol/drug use; consistent condom use was higher among Indigenous and sexually diverse boys.

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of adolescents in the Northwest Territories, Canada (n=789)

	Gender		p value
	Female (n=393)	Male (n=387)	
Age in years (mean, sd)	13.7 (1.7)	13.7 (1.6)	0.742
STI knowledge (mean, sd)	3.4 (3.5)	2.7 (2.6)	0.003
Number of sexual partners (mean, sd)	0.4 (1.1)	0.3 (1.0)	0.181
Sexually active (n, %)			
No	324 (82.4)	341 (88.1)	0.026
Yes	69 (17.6)	46 (11.9)	
Consistent condom use (n, %)			
Missing	324 (82.4)	341 (88.1)	0.360
No	39 (9.9)	22 (5.7)	
Yes	30 (7.6)	24 (6.2)	
LGBQ+ (n, %)			
Missing	7 (1.8)	4 (1.0)	<0.001
No	314 (79.9)	361 (93.3)	
Yes	72 (18.3)	22 (5.7)	
Alcohol or drug use (n, %)			
No	261 (66.4)	293 (75.7)	0.004
Yes	132 (33.6)	94 (24.3)	
Violence from partner (n, %)			
No	315 (80.2)	336 (86.8)	0.012
Yes	78 (19.9)	51 (13.2)	

Table 2. Factors associated with sexual activity and consistent condom use among adolescents in the Northwest Territories, Canada (n=789)

	Female		Male	
	aRR	P value	aRR	P value
Sexual activity				
Age	1.18 (1.09, 1.27)	<0.001	1.47 (1.22, 1.78)	<0.001
STI knowledge	1.10 (1.04, 1.16)	0.001	1.06 (0.98, 1.15)	0.122
Indigenous	1.10 (0.62, 1.94)	0.738	1.26 (0.65, 2.45)	0.490
LGBQ+	1.40 (0.93, 2.11)	0.104	1.91 (0.73, 5.02)	0.188
Alcohol and or drugs	4.03 (1.93, 8.45)	<0.001	2.76 (1.36, 5.59)	0.005
Violence from partner	1.63 (1.09, 2.43)	0.018	3.22 (1.73, 6.00)	<0.001
Consistent condom use				
Indigenous	0.66 (0.35, 1.25)	0.204	2.28 (1.23, 4.21)	0.009
LGBQ+	0.47 (0.20, 1.07)	0.071	4.02 (1.94, 8.34)	<0.001
Alcohol and or drugs	0.29 (0.18, 0.49)	<0.001	1.10 (0.61, 1.98)	0.744

Discussion: STI prevention strategies with Northern adolescents should address alcohol/drug use, and build protective factors—particularly regarding condom use among adolescent Indigenous girls. Findings underscore the importance of addressing the syndemic of violence, drug use, and alcohol use to mitigate STI vulnerabilities.