

OR SUMMARIES

Cameroon Youth

Peer Education and Youth-Friendly Media Reduce Risky Sexual Behavior

OR Summary 37 *Urban youth in Cameroon are knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS and the risks of early pregnancy, but their behavior often fails to reflect their knowledge. Peer education programs targeting youth through one-on-one counseling, theatrical performances, youth magazines, and sporting events increased abstinence and fidelity and improved consistent and correct condom use. Educators and service providers should actively involve youth in program development, empowering them to be advocates for safe sexual behavior.*

Background

To assess strategies to encourage abstinence, increase contraceptive use, and reduce sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates among sexually active youth, Cameroonian researchers at the Institute of Behavioral Studies and Research (IRESCO), with support from FRONTIERS, conducted an operations research project between July 2000 and February 2002. The intervention combined peer education strategies with a series of media campaigns to promote healthy behavior among youth in the Mokolo neighborhood of Yaoundé.

IRESCO trained 49 male and female peer educators aged 19-25 in reproductive health communication strategies. These youth coordinated formal and informal educational talks, one-on-one counseling sessions, conferences, and cultural and athletic events. Each educator organized at least one discussion or event per week in schools or public venues frequented by youth.

The team also produced comic books, brochures, and sold six French and English editions of *Among Youth* magazine, featuring celebrity interviews and information on



reproductive health issues affecting youth including dating, contraception, and safe behaviors to prevent unwanted pregnancy and STI transmission. IRESCO evaluated the intervention's impact through baseline and endline surveys of about 2,500 randomly selected youth aged 12-24 in Mokolo and the control site, New Bell, located in Douala.

Findings

◆ In total, approximately 200,000 adolescents received reproductive health information directly through IRESCO's *Among Youth*

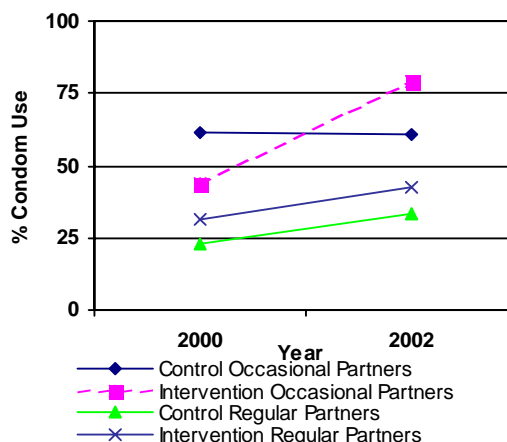
campaign. After the intervention, 44 percent of youth surveyed had read at least one issue of the magazine.

◆ Abstinence increased in the intervention site and decreased in the control site. After the campaign, 62 percent of intervention site youth reported abstaining, compared to 50 percent before. In the control site, 56 percent reported abstaining after the project, down from 60 percent before.

◆ Fidelity also increased, with fewer youth reporting multiple sexual partners. Prior to the intervention, 37 percent of youth surveyed in Mokolo had more than one sexual partner per year. After the intervention the percentage fell to 30 percent. Boys continued to have more sexual partners than girls (38 percent of boys reported more than one sexual partner per year compared to 21 percent of girls).

◆ Communication improved between couples, and more youth were able to discuss condom use with their partners. Condom use during last intercourse with a regular partner increased in the intervention site from 42 to 62 percent among boys and 31 to 42 percent among girls. Condom use with the last occasional partner remained the same among control group girls (about 61%), but increased significantly among girls exposed to the intervention from 44 to 79 percent. Similar changes occurred among youth with regular partners in the control group (see Figure).

Girls' Condom Use at Last Sexual Encounter with Regular or Occasional Partners



n ≈ 355 for regular partners n ≈ 100 for occasional partners

Policy Implications

◆ Peer education programs, which emphasize interpersonal communication and reinforce reproductive health messages from mass media, can help youth translate knowledge into healthy lifestyles, including abstinence, fidelity, and condoms.

◆ Reproductive health messages should be integrated into popular youth activities, such as cultural and sports events, to create safe and comfortable environments where youth feel empowered to discuss sensitive issues affecting their lives.

◆ IRESCO is scaling-up the intervention with support from the World AIDS Foundation and GTZ. They hope to sustain the program through commercial advertising revenue generated by the *Among Youth* magazine.

September 2003

Institut de Recherche et des Etudes des Comportements (IRESCO). 2002. "Peer Education as a Strategy to Increase Contraceptive Prevalence and Reduce the Rate of STIs/HIV Among Adolescents in Cameroon," FRONTIERS Final Report. Washington, D.C.: Population Council. For more information, contact: Population Council, 4301 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 280, Washington, D.C. 20008 USA. Tel: 202-237-9400; Fax: 202-237-8410; E-mail: frontiers@pcdc.org

This project was conducted with support from the U.S. AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT under Cooperative Agreement Number HRN-A-00-98-00012-00.



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