

**“High Risk” Partnering Patterns among Rural South African Youth:  
Prevalence, Correlates and Social Context**

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**Introduction**

Of the approximately 1.3 million new HIV infections globally in 2005, more than half occurred among youth aged 15-24 (UNAIDS, 2006). In South Africa, a country with a severe HIV/AIDS epidemic, 10 - 14 percent of youth are HIV infected (Pettifor et al., 2005; UNAIDS, 2006). With only 1 percent of the global population of 15-24 year olds, the country has 15 percent of the HIV-infected population in this age group (Hallman, 2004). HIV prevalence also differs greatly between men and women: 15.5 percent in women aged 15-24, compared to 4.8 percent of men (Pettifor et al., 2005).

The study of partnerships and sexual risk behavior has been central to an emerging understanding of patterns of HIV infection. Early epidemiological studies hypothesized that multiple, casual, and short-term partnerships would be the main risk factors for HIV infection, particularly among men, and that more stable partnerships, such as marital relationships, would be protective (Carael, Cleland and Adeokun, 1991). In fact, some population-based studies in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate marriage to be a risk factor for HIV among women (Ferry et al., 2001; Clark, 2004). Recent evidence points to the importance of early marriage as a risk factor for HIV, noting the extreme vulnerability of young, inexperienced women in relationships they cannot leave (Clark, 2004). In general, women in stable partnerships, whether married or not, are at greatest risk of acquiring HIV from their primary partners, who often have other partners, and where gender and power dynamics make the negotiation of condom use or other protection difficult (Worth, 1989; Heise and Elias, 1993).

While partner *type* is important, it is the underlying patterns of *sexual mixing and networking* that contribute most substantially to HIV risk. Several studies have shown a greater likelihood of HIV infection among young women with partners five or more years older, a common partnering pattern throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa (Gregson et al., 2001; MacPhail, Williams and Campbell, 2000; Kelly et al., 2000). In South Africa, such age-discrepant partnerships are one of the main factors contributing to an HIV prevalence of 24.5 percent among young adult women (Pettifor et al., 2005). In addition, much attention has been paid to the role of concurrent partnerships in the spread of HIV (Morris et al., 1996). Some research suggests that concurrency plays an enhanced role in African settings, where there is a lower prevalence of one-time casual encounters and the average duration of relationships is relatively long, a situation that produces tightly linked, overlapping networks which may facilitate HIV transmission (Halperin and Epstein, 2004).

In spite of this attention to sexual partnerships as a context of risk, there have been few studies, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, that explore the *mechanisms* underlying young people's participation in "high risk" partnerships, their *dynamics*, or young people's own explanations about what types of partnerships are important and why.

## **Methods**

The study employed both survey and ethnographic data collection techniques in rural KwaZulu/Natal, South Africa among youth aged 15-24. Using household survey data (N=1144), we examined the prevalence, characteristics and correlates of high risk partnerships, defined as: 1) having three or more partners in the past three years (men); 2) having a partner more than five years older (women), and 3) having a partner who has other regular partners (women).

Data on partnerships was collected via a "partnership matrix", designed to collect data within the context of specific sexual partnerships, and in relation to a designated partner. Respondents were asked to name their two most recent partners within the timeframe of the past three years, and then to reply to a set of questions pertaining to each partner. Partnerships could be ongoing or concluded, and any combination of these categories was allowed. For example, respondents could report on two ongoing partnerships. The partnership matrix yielded information about the main characteristics of partnerships that could be associated with sexual risk, including partnership type, number of partners, duration of relationships, age differences between partners and frequency of sexual activity within a relationship. Type of partner was classified according to the following pre-coded categories: spouse or permanent partner, regular boyfriend or girlfriend, or casual partner.

Ethnographic data were collected through peer group discussions, which are serial focus groups with the same participants, and in-depth interviews.

## **Results**

Table 1 shows partnership characteristics for men and women, according to their two most recent partners (Partner One and Partner Two). Very few men (7.3%) or women (12.6%) described either partner as a permanent partner, such as a spouse (Table 1). This fits with low levels of marriage found in South Africa. Although marriage levels increase with age, only 25 percent of men and women in the larger survey of adults aged 15-49 described themselves as married (not shown). In addition, cohabitation outside of marriage was rare, with only 1.8 percent in the under 25 age group reporting this (not shown). Among men, 17.6 percent of all partnerships were casual. Reports of casual partnerships were rare among women, amounting to only 1.6% of all partnerships.

Survey findings indicated stark gender differences in partnership characteristics (Table 2). Most young men and women had "regular" partners, but over half of men reported two or more partners during the past three years. About one-third of men were in concurrent partnerships. Women's relationships were of longer duration than men's, although men had much more frequent partner contact. Partner's relative age difference and the perception that a primary partner had other partners also differed by gender (Table 2). Respondents were asked whether their current partner had other partners besides

themselves. 40.2 percent of women responded affirmatively, and another 44.2 percent said they “did not know”. Only 3.6 percent of men thought their current partner had other partners, and two-thirds (65.3%) responded “no” (Table 2). The fluidity of partnerships was hinted at in both men’s and women’s accounts of how often they saw their partners, although gender differences were apparent. 56.4 percent of women reported that it had been more than one month since the last sexual contact with their primary partner, while 46.1% of men had seen their primary partner within the last week (Table 1). These findings hint at the high level of mobility among young people, which contributes to a pattern of longer-lasting but fluid and overlapping relationships.

Tables 3 and 4 present results of the bivariate and multivariate analyses for the outcomes related to high risk partnerships for men and women. The results of the multivariate analyses are presented as odds ratios. Women not attending school or not participating in any community group were more likely to have a partner five or more years older (Table 3). Religious affiliation was significantly associated with the perception that a partner had other partners: women belonging to Zionist Christian denominations were less likely to perceive that their primary partner had other partners, while living with both parents was positively associated with this outcome (Table 3). For men, having experienced sexual debut prior to age 15 was the only factor significantly associated with the main outcome, having three or more partners in the past three years.

In the ethnographic research, young people described two main partnership types: *ukuqoma* (a committed relationship) and *ukujola* (a relationship for fun). *Ukuqoma* relationships were socially acceptable in the eyes of the community, and were preferred by young women. Participation in those relationships was strongly influenced by sociocultural norms and also by religious and family influences. Other dimensions of partnerships deemed important were affective ideas such as romance and love, future aspirations such as marriage or childbearing, and material aspects of relationships.

### **Conclusion**

These findings provide a descriptive overview of young people’s partnerships in the context of high HIV prevalence in rural South Africa, as well as insight into the social and contextual factors associated with high risk partnerships for young men and women. The findings are notable for the picture that they paint of high levels of mobility and fluidity in young South Africans’ lives, factors that are reflected in their sexual partnerships. In spite of this, partnerships are relatively long – and seemingly stable – although part of more dynamic sexual networks.

Overall, these findings highlight the importance of social and contextual factors as determinants of sexual risk. For women, social marginalization appears to be an important mediator of sexual risk, and one that can possibly be countered by participation in social institutions such as schooling, community activities and to some extent, churches. In contrast, for men, early socialization and sexual experiences appear to play a major role in multiple partnering, stressing the potential importance of psychosocial as opposed to social and contextual factors. Perhaps most importantly, these findings highlight the importance of learning more about the details of young people’s sexual networks and how they develop and change over time.

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**Table 1. Percent Distribution of Sexually Active Women and Men according to Characteristics of Two Most Recent Partners (Partner One and Partner Two)**

	Partner One		Partner Two	
	Women %	Men %	Women %	Men %
<b>Type of Relationship</b>				
Spouse or Other Permanent Partner	12.6*	7.3	--	2.7
Regular Boyfriend/Girlfriend	86.6	78.2	84.1	66.4
Casual Partner	0.8	14.5	15.9	30.9
<b>Duration of Relationship (Years)</b>				
< 1	8.1	25.6	29.5	28.6
1	12.7	20.2	29.5	27.7
2	22.2	18.6	18.2	15.2
3	20.8	14.6	9.1	8.0
4	13.9	5.5	9.1	10.7
5-9	20.4	9.5	4.6	6.3
10+	1.9	6.0	--	3.5
<b>Relationship Still Continuing (% saying yes)</b>	93.8*	85.6	18.6*	65.2
<b>Partner's Age</b>				
Younger	1.9*	89.7	2.3*	91.1
About the Same Age	4.5	7.7	27.9	6.3
Older	93.6	2.6	69.8+	2.7
<b>Last Intercourse with Partner</b>				
Within Last Week	18.2*	46.1	2.5*	29.5
>One Week but ≤ Last Month	25.4	26.7	5.0	24.1
> One Month Ago	55.2	20.5	72.5	33.9
> One Year	1.2	6.7	20.0	12.5
<b>N</b>	<b>519</b>	<b>199</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>53</b>

\*Significant difference between distribution of men and women within that age group, based on chi-square test for comparison of proportions,  $p \leq 0.05$ .

**Table 2. Percent Distribution of Sexually Active Men and Women according to Main Categories of High Risk Partnerships**

	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
	%	%
Number of Partners in last 3 years		
0	2.6*	--
1	88.7	42.6
2	7.9	23.1
3	0.6	17.4
4	0.2	5.6
5+	--	11.3
N	530	195
Does partner have other partners?		
Yes	40.2*	2.3
No	15.6	65.3
Don't Know	44.2	32.4
N	493	173
Age Difference	(% Older)	(% Younger)
≤ One Year	15.7	1.2
2-3 Years	16.7	28.7
4-5 Years	40.7	28.7
6-10 Years	22.3	36.0
> 10 Years	4.5	5.5
N	484	164

\*Significant difference between distribution of men and women within that age group, based on chi-square test for comparison of proportions,  $p \leq 0.05$ .

**Table 3. Percentage of Sexually Active Women in High Risk Partnerships, according to Selected Characteristics, and Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Analysis**

	Partner > 5 Years Older			Perception that Partner has Other Partners		
	%	N	Odds Ratio	%	N	Odds Ratio
<b>Age</b>						
Younger Teen (15-16)++	15.6	45	1.0	36.4	33	1.0
Older Teen (17-19)++	25.4	177		43.4	159	
Young Adults (20-24)	27.9	301	0.79	38.9	301	1.06
<b>Education</b>						
In School	15.6	199	1.0	43.4	168	1.49
Out of School	32.5+	323	2.41***	38.3	324	1.0
<b>Age at First Sex<sup>1</sup></b>						
≤ 15	27.5	131	1.09	41.8	134	1.0
≥ 16	26.8	351	1.0	45.4	357	1.72
<b>Religion</b>						
Zionist/Traditionalist	26.4	348	0.95	38.8	330	0.31***
Protestant/Roman Catholic++	25.3	162	1.0	43.9	148	1.0
No Church++	23.1	13		33.3	15	
<b>Household Wealth<sup>2</sup></b>						
High ++	23.3	90	1.0	39.8	83	1.0
Medium++	22.2	203		36.2	188	
Low	32.6	138	1.17	42.5	134	1.33
<b>Female Headed Household<sup>2</sup></b>						
Yes	22.0	141	1.0	35.6	135	1.29
No	27.1	299	1.28	41.8	280	1.0
<b>Community Participation</b>						
High (Membership in ≥ One Group)	12.6	95	1.0	42.3	78	1.0
Low (No Group Membership)	28.9+	428	2.2*	39.8	415	1.03
<b>Parental Residence<sup>2</sup></b>						
Both	26.5	220	1.1	45.1+	204	2.49**
One++	26.2	145	1.09	37.9	140	1.0
None++	22.2	76		27.8	72	
<b>Information and Exposure</b>						
Weekly TV	22.4	232	1.0	42.2	218	1.19
No Weekly TV	28.9	291	1.43	38.5	275	1.0

+Significant difference within categories (bivariate analysis), based on chi-square test,  $p < 0.05$ . \*\*These categories were combined in the multivariate analysis.

<sup>1</sup>The N for this variable differs due to a lower response rate for this question.

<sup>2</sup>The N's for these variables differ as they are taken from the household schedule, in which values for some households were missing.

\*\*\*Significant difference,  $p < 0.01$  \*\*Significant difference,  $p \leq 0.05$  \*Result of borderline significance,  $p = 0.07$ .

**Table 4. Percentage of Sexually Active Men having more than Three Partners in Last Three Years, according to Selected Characteristics: Bivariate Analysis**

	%	N
<b>Age</b>		
Young Teens (15-16)	41.1	17
Older Teens (17-19)	36.3	80
Young Adults (20-24)	32.3	99
<b>Education</b>		
In School	35.3	116
Out of School	33.8	80
<b>Age at First Sex</b>		
≤ 14	50.0*	40
≥ 15	31.0	155
<b>Religion</b>		
Zionist/Traditionalist	71.0	100
Protestant and Roman Catholic	60.4	48
All Others	58.3	48
<b>Household Wealth<sup>++</sup></b>		
High	37.0	27
Medium	32.5	77
Low	33.7	42
<b>Female Headed Household<sup>++</sup></b>		
Yes	30.9	55
No	35.4	99
<b>Community Participation</b>		
High (Membership in ≥ One Group)	31.5	54
Low (No Group Membership)	35.9	142
<b>Parental Residence<sup>++</sup></b>		
Both	39.7	73
One	26.6	64
None	35.3	17
<b>Information and Exposure</b>		
Weekly TV	34.5	110
No Weekly TV	35.3	85

\*Significant difference within categories (bivariate analysis), based on chi-square test,  $p < 0.05$ . ++The N's for these variables differ as they are taken from the household schedule, in which values for some households were missing.