

“Start with the Youth”

Evaluation of a Community-Based Pilot Program to Educate Boston Youth on HIV/AIDS

about the program

Youth in Boston continue to become infected with HIV at higher rates than youth in the rest of Massachusetts. This program aimed to address this issue by combining HIV education and prevention with media and messaging. Seven students, ranging from 16 to 22 years old, were recruited with the help of community-based, partner organizations of the Harvard University Center for AIDS Research.

The students met for three hours approximately every week from February to May 2015. Meetings featured guest speakers, site visits, and group training activities. The students also attended three all-day, one-on-one workshops at the Global Health Education and Learning Incubator at Harvard University. They were given media training before creating the final HIV-related messaging campaign that debuted on Boston Neighborhood Network. By the end of the program, each student had earned the title of “Peer Educator.”

Five adults, who were parents and academic mentors, joined the students at some sessions.

about the program evaluation

Members of the research team conducted qualitative interviews with six students and five adults. The interviewers were unable to contact the seventh student, who had withdrawn from the program. The interviews aimed to explore participants’ perceptions and experiences related to community, program feedback, program impact, and ideas for addressing issues in their communities.

This two-page document provides an overview of the program and findings emerging from the exit interviews.

community identification + issues

Communities identified:

- occupational
- religious
- residential
- school-based
- race-related
- Harvard

Some, but not all, participants viewed HIV as an issue that affects their communities.

“It’s affected my family, so yes. I have buried people that had the virus.” - Adult

Other issues identified:

- substance misuse, particularly intravenous drug use
- equal access to resources such as healthcare
- racism and discrimination
- poor health due to chronic disease or stress
- lack of motivation and close-mindedness
- interpersonal conflicts at home and school

Some participants related HIV to these other issues via an **additive effect**, when a different issue makes living with HIV more difficult.

“If one’s living with the virus, then that probably has an extreme effect on how they operate daily.” - Student

Other similarities between HIV and other issues included:

- mode of transmission
- lack of knowledge
- risky behavior
- lack of resources
- presence of stigma
- lack of self-esteem

“People go into hiding about who they are. And once people are in hiding about who they are sexually, it starts to turn into people taking risky behaviors a lot more often.” - Student

Primary differences between HIV and other issues included:

- role of sexual contact
- environmental impact
- awareness
- treatment options

program feedback

Most participants expressed **positive feedback** regarding the program. They particularly liked:

- listening to guest speakers
- learning from the wealth of information presented
- creating the final media message
- working with peers

“It was made real to him when he met the people. He knew some—a little bit about it—but meeting the people was the most important and having experience with people to tell their story. That makes it really important for young people or any person to hear.” - Adult

“The three young men (from East Boston High School) that did the project, coming from their type of background, it was huge for them. It was something that helped build their confidence. It also motivated them, and it also assisted them with positive thinking, which is something that they didn’t have very much of beforehand.” - Adult

Recommendations for next steps:

- smoother logistics, specifically less travel
- greater focus on other community issues
- more engagement in activities
- longer time
- greater rigor, including more homework and introducing the program into school curriculum

“Less people are probably thinking about this now versus, you know, what’s going on in the news in regards to Black Lives Matter and police brutality. So it changes every so often, what the main focus is, but (HIV) is not the main focus.” - Student

program impact

The program had a **personal impact** on many students, particularly affecting:

- future plans
- community involvement
- sense of responsibility
- ability to work with peers

"Especially for those young men, I definitely think it's changed them. I mean, it's definitely made them think about pursuing a higher education, which is my number one goal for any of them." - Adult

For some students, the program also changed their sense of **connectedness** to Boston and other communities.

"It feels different. I feel like I've done more. Like, I've put a message out there, to the community, to let them know about HIV/AIDS. So I feel like I contributed something." - Student

"Everybody wants to be a doctor or a lawyer, but sometimes we just really have to step back and look at how people are struggling in your community and focus on how you can help other people instead of helping yourself." - Student

The biggest direct impact of the program was on the students' **knowledge of HIV**, including:

- history
- transmission
- prevention
- resources

"I felt like while we were doing the songs and meeting every day, I think a part of me kind of grew a little bit, and I was sharing something with some of my friends." - Student

"I found, like, how fun it was to make a message and get it out there. So, just a little part of me says I want to go into the community and send another message about HIV/AIDS or anything else, if possible." - Student

"For me, it was the way it can be transmitted. I found that kind of interesting 'cause now I can look out for myself in a way and make sure I take the proper precautions." - Student

"Your life isn't over just because you have HIV. You can still live on with your life. There's just things you have to do, the ways you have to accept it and stuff like that. And you aren't alone. Other people are here to help you." - Student

ideas for change + solutions

Many students felt **empowered** after participating in the program. Some were daunted by the issues they identified.

"I feel like now I'm a lot more stronger. I can do a lot more things. Not really afraid to talk about HIV in public anymore." - Student

"We learned that you can pretty much change the world, and you don't even have to be the smartest person in the room." - Student

Both adults and students recognized the unique **role of media** as an outlet amongst youth and as a vehicle for change.

"Social media is a really big thing, and a lot of people are always on it. And if one thing gets on it, then the whole world will know." - Student

"Social media and music would be good for my community 'cause that's all they do. Listen to music or make music and just be on social media." - Student

Adults recognized the importance of **educating youth** and expressed confidence in the **potential of youth**.

"It comes with the youth. You need to start with the youth, educate the youth. It's really important to educate the youth before they become adults." - Adult

"Young people have more power than they realize that they do because it's 2015. Social media is, like, the newest thing, and if they're talking about it in person, then they're talking about in on Facebook, on Twitter, or whatever, and then it just continues to spread from there." - Adult

With regards to **fixing community issues**, solutions included:

- education
- increased awareness
- honest dialogue
- financial support
- access to resources
- change to environment

"Education is such an important thing. If we don't know about HIV as much as I know about it, somebody could make a mistake." - Student

"I saw purpose in this. There's a goal, and then we worked to that goal, and we achieved it. I feel like that's a beautiful thing." - Student

Two students have remained involved with this pilot program through the Harvard Global Health Education and Learning Incubator.

authors

Melinda Song, Valerie Earnshaw, Laura Bogart, Sue Goldie, Alexa Kutler, Sergio Segrera, Tsega Tamene, Wanda Allen

