

# Low Prevalence of Unsuppressed Viral Load among Gay and Bisexual Men Living with HIV in Vancouver: BC-CfE Momentum Study

**93% of gay and bisexual men living with HIV are accessing HIV treatment, but additional strategies are needed to engage low-income and non-white men.**

## What is the BC-CfE Momentum Health Study?

Evidence from British Columbia and elsewhere has demonstrated the expansion of access to antiretroviral HIV treatment (ART) can result in population-level reductions in HIV incidence. This is the concept behind the made-in-BC Treatment as Prevention<sup>®</sup> strategy, or TasP<sup>®</sup>, which aims to expand early HIV testing and treatment to improve patients' health and curb the spread of HIV. Gay, bisexual and other men (gbMSM) who have sex with men (MSM) represent the most affected HIV risk group, both in BC and Canada. The BC-CfE Momentum Health Study is designed to measure changes in HIV risk behaviour, attitudes toward TasP<sup>®</sup> and the proportion of HIV-positive gbMSM with unsuppressed viral load over time in the Vancouver region. The study uses respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to obtain a more representative sample reflecting the diversity of the gbMSM community in Vancouver.

## FACT BOX

The number of new HIV diagnoses among gbMSM in the province of BC has remained relatively stable during the past decade (between 150 and 180 per year).

## What are the key study findings?

- Despite a high prevalence of HIV among gbMSM (23.4%), a small proportion of HIV-positive study participants (18.6%) had unsuppressed viral load ( $\geq 200$  copies/ml), which is indicative of risk of onward transmission.
- Only 2% of the HIV-positive participants were not aware of their HIV infection (meaning they were undiagnosed).
- 81.4% of HIV-positive men achieved virological suppression—exceeding the UNAIDS target of 90-90-90, which would result 73% of HIV-positive people having suppressed viral loads by 2020.
- HIV-positive men with unsuppressed viral loads are more likely to report risky sexual behaviour and to use gamma hydroxybutyrate (GHB) and/or crystal methamphetamine than HIV-positive men with suppressed viral loads. These factors have been shown to increase risk of HIV transmission.
- Men with unsuppressed viral load are more likely to have low incomes and identify as being from an ethnic minority group, indicating the importance of continued work to address health inequity and social determinants of health.



### What do these findings mean?

- The TasP<sup>®</sup> initiative in BC, pioneered by the BC-CfE, has resulted in excellent uptake of HIV testing, and engagement in care and sustainment in care among gbMSM in the province, as well as declines in HIV transmission.
- Further improvements are needed for engaging non-white, low-income men in HIV prevention and treatment.
- The Momentum Health study findings call for substance use counselling, education and risk reduction programs for gbMSM in Vancouver.
- There is enormous potential in further curbing the transmission of HIV through a comprehensive approach, which addresses overall health and health inequities.

Citation: Moore, David M., Zishan Cui, Nathan Lachowsky, Henry F. Raymond, Eric Roth, Ashleigh Rich, Paul Sereda, Terry Howard, Willi McFarland, Allan Lal, Julio Montaner, Trevor Corneil, and Robert S. Hogg. "HIV Community Viral Load and Factors Associated With Elevated Viremia Among a Community-Based Sample of Men Who Have Sex With Men in Vancouver, Canada." *JAIDS Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes* 72.1 (2016): 87-95.

