

Developing Effective HIV Interventions for High-Risk Populations in South Africa



At RTI International, we apply research and practical experience to design effective prevention interventions to reduce substance use, HIV risk behaviors, and sex-related violence. Our goal is to ensure that the interventions we design are gender-specific and culturally appropriate for South African women and men.

Enhancing South Africa's Health

HIV/AIDS continues to have a devastating effect on the lives of many South Africans. UNAIDS estimated that 350,000 HIV/AIDS-related deaths occurred in South Africa in 2007. South African women are disproportionately infected with HIV; the potential impact of HIV on future generations through neonatal transmission is alarming. HIV prevalence among pregnant women remains high, and surveillance continues to show that the highest HIV rates are among women aged 25 to 34, with women between 15 and 24 years of age showing significantly higher prevalence than men in this age range.

Although there has been substantial focus on the HIV epidemic in South Africa, less research attention has been given to understanding how the increasing problems of substance abuse and widespread violence against women contribute to the spread of HIV.

Translating Evidence-Based HIV Interventions for High-Risk Populations

With sponsorship from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), Wendee Wechsberg, PhD, has developed, implemented, and evaluated innovative interventions that target hard-to-reach populations such as crack-using African-American women in the United States. The woman-focused intervention, known as the Women's CoOp, was identified as a "best-evidence" HIV behavioral prevention intervention by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and has been adapted for substance-abusing South African women in two regions with funding from NIDA, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), and the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

South Africa Estimated HIV/AIDS Indicators at a Glance for 2007 (UNAIDS, 2008)	
Total South Africa population	48,577,000
People living with HIV	5,700,000
Women aged 15 and over living with HIV/AIDS	3,200,000
Children aged 0 to 14 living with HIV	280,000

Dr. Wechsberg has worked with South African stakeholders to address social problems in less affluent Black/African and Coloured communities by

- reaching out to affected populations in community-based settings
- adapting and evaluating appropriate interventions with community involvement
- disseminating findings to the community.

Our woman-focused interventions are organized on the principles of developing personal power by reducing substance abuse, strengthening negotiation skills for sexual protection, and increasing skills to prevent sexual violence and HIV. Participants are provided with culturally relevant prevention strategies.

Project Highlights

Sunnyside/Pretoria Women's CoOp—Pretoria

The purpose of this NIDA-funded study (2001–2003) was to determine whether an HIV prevention intervention designed for African-American women in the United States could be adapted and translated for use with Black/African female sex workers in South

Africa who abuse crack cocaine. Results showed that the woman-focused prevention program encouraged safer behaviors among the participants, including more frequent use of the female condom and a reduction in daily use of alcohol and crack cocaine.



Women's Health CoOp (WHC)–Pretoria

WHC–Pretoria is a community-based study (2003–2010) funded by NIAAA. The overall objective of this study was to understand the relationship between alcohol and other drug use, violence against women, and HIV risk. WHC–Pretoria also examined whether a woman-focused intervention could help women not only reduce risks associated with HIV but also address personal goals that could change the course of their lives. Study outcomes indicated that the woman-focused intervention may lead to greater skills in sustained HIV risk reduction, particularly with main partners. In 2009, USAID published *Integrating Multiple Gender Strategies to Improve HIV and AIDS Interventions: A Compendium of Programs in Africa*, in which the WHC–Pretoria is cited as a successful project in Africa.

Cape Town Women's Health CoOp (Cape Town WHC)

With funding from NIDA and a collaborative partnership with the Medical Research Council (MRC) of South Africa, Dr. Wechsberg adapted the woman-focused HIV-prevention intervention to Black/African and Coloured high-risk substance-using women in the Western Cape region of South Africa. Cape Town WHC (2004–2006) also evaluated the feasibility of abbreviating the original four-session intervention to a two-session individual intervention or a two-session group intervention. Study outcomes demonstrated positive changes in sexual risk behavior, substance use, and experiences with victimization. Findings also indicated comparable levels of intervention efficacy in the group and individual formats.

Cape Town Youth Study/Cape Town Methamphetamine Supplement

To examine the prevalence of methamphetamine use in poor Black/African and Coloured communities in the Western Cape, RTI completed a survey among females aged 13 to 20 who had dropped out of school. The study (2005–2007), conducted in collaboration with the MRC and with sponsorship from NIDA, also identified other drug use and sexual risk behaviors. This research was a necessary step in adapting an effective prevention intervention for at-risk young women.



Woman-Focused HIV Prevention in the Western Cape

This community-based effectiveness study (2007–2012) is funded by NICHD and will build on findings from the Cape Town WHC study. In collaboration with the MRC, this randomized trial is designed to reach a larger sample of women via a full-scale study by adding a woman-focused intervention after voluntary counseling and testing.

Western Cape Couples' Health CoOp

This NIAAA-funded community-randomized trial (2008–2013) will recruit men in drinking establishments and their main sexual partners to reduce drug use, violence, and sexual risk behaviors among couples and to promote healthy behavior changes.

More Information

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