Monitoring Sexual Behavior in the Russian Federation

The Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey 2001

April 2002
The Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey (RLMS) is a series of nationally representative surveys of the Russian Federation between 1992 and 2001. This report is based on the survey conducted in October 2001 (Round 10). Data have been weighted to account for the sampling design.

To date, the RLMS has been carried out in two phases, following different nationally representative samples. All aspects of field work in Phase II (the current phase, consisting of Rounds 5-10) have been handled by the Institute of Sociology, Russian Academy of Sciences, headed by Drs. Polina Kozyreva and Mikhail Kosolapov, along with the late Dr. Michael Swafford of Paragon Research International. The Institute of Nutrition, Russian Academy of Medical Sciences, headed by Drs. Alexander Baturin and Arseni Martinchik, have coordinated, collected, and processed health and diet data.

Data collection for Phase I (Rounds 1-4) was implemented by the Russian State Statistical Bureau (Goskomstat), with Alexander Ivanov and Igor Dmitrichiev as co-directors. Assistance was provided by the Russian Center for Preventive Medicine, led by Drs. Alexander Deev and Svetlana Shalnova. The Russian Institute of Sociology, especially Drs. Kozyreva and Kosolapov, and Dr. Swafford of Paragon Research, also provided detailed assistance in Phase I.

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The University of North Carolina team coordinating all phases of the RLMS includes Barry Popkin, Principal Investigator, and co-investigators Namvar Zohoori, Barbara Entwisle, Thomas Mroz, and Lenore Arab.

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Access to RLMS data is provided, as datasets become available to the public, at http://www.cpc.unc.edu/rlms (the RLMS home page on the World Wide Web).
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Vani Vannappagari and Robin Ryder took the lead in the preparation of this report
Part 1. Overview of Key Findings

- One-third of all 14-20-year-old respondents reported being sexually active during the past year, with a higher proportion of young men than of young women so reporting.

- The average age at coital debut has declined over the years, with 41-49-year-olds reporting first sex at age 19.7, 31-40-year-olds at 18.9, 21-30-year-olds at 17.4, and 14-20-year-olds at 15.9.

- Three-quarters of sexually active respondents in the 14-20-year age group reported a friend or casual acquaintance as their current partner.

- Forty-four percent of all sexually active 14-20-year-olds did not use a condom the last time they had sex.

- Among those who had sex with a casual acquaintance, 48% of 14-20-year-olds, 36.5% of 21-30-year-olds, 61.3% of 31-40-year-olds, and 69% of 41-49-year-olds did not use a condom during the most recent sexual act. Among those who had sex in exchange for money or gifts, 35.6% of the 21-30-year-olds and 43.5% of the 41-49-year-olds had not used a condom.

- In 81.7% of cases, respondents who had used a condom during their most recent sexual episode said they used it to prevent pregnancy, one-third to prevent STDs, and 20% to prevent HIV.

- Thirteen and one-half percent of respondents reported having had a second sexual partner and 5.2% reported having had a third partner during the past 12 months.

- An episode during the past 12 months of a pus-like discharge or sores in the genital area that might indicate STDs was reported by 1.9% of respondents.

- Principal sources of information on HIV/AIDS for respondents were television, print media, and radio.

- Although two-thirds said they would take care of an HIV-infected family member, fewer than one-third believed infected teachers should continue teaching and only 10% said they would patronize a grocery store run by a person infected with HIV.
Part 2. Discussion of Results

Background

The Russian Federation experienced a rapid increase in the number of reported HIV/AIDS cases during the later part of the 1990s. According to UNAIDS, Russia and the countries of Eastern Europe had the highest incidence rates of HIV infection and the fastest growing epidemic in the world. The number of new reported cases in Russia has almost doubled annually since 1998. In 2001, more than 40,000 new HIV-positive cases were reported in the first six months alone. The total number of people in Russia living with HIV is estimated to have been one million at the end of 2001.

RLMS 2001—Sexual Behavior Module

The principal goal of the survey is to provide descriptive information about the knowledge of and attitudes toward HIV/AIDS and the sexual behaviors that might increase the risk of HIV infection in a nationally representative 14-49-year-old population of the Russian Federation.

Results

Throughout this report, we give weighted percentages that take the RLMS sampling design into account.

A total of 5,825 people answered the Sexual Behavior Module. Of these, 49.3% (N = 2,655) were men and 50.7% (N = 3,167) were women. Table 1 shows the proportions of respondents by age group and gender.

Overall, 8.8% of respondents said they knew at least one homosexual man. Among males, 1.7% said they were themselves homosexual. Overall, 38.7% knew someone who used illegal drugs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Male % (N)</th>
<th>Female % (N)</th>
<th>Total % (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14-20</td>
<td>9.4 (464)</td>
<td>9.9 (546)</td>
<td>19.3 (1010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>13.6 (810)</td>
<td>12.7 (963)</td>
<td>26.2 (1773)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>12.6 (692)</td>
<td>25.5 (756)</td>
<td>25.1 (1448)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-49</td>
<td>13.7 (688)</td>
<td>15.6 (901)</td>
<td>29.3 (1589)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Marriage and Cohabitation

More than one-half of all respondents (56.2%) were currently married and 66.7% had been married at least once. Fifty-three and two-tenths percent currently lived with a spouse. The average age at first marriage was 21.5 years, with 14-20-year-olds having married at age 17.3, 21-30-year-olds at 20.4, 31-40-year-olds at 21.7, and 41-49-year-olds at 22.

Among all males, 4% reported both being married and having current sexual partners in addition to their wives. Forty-four and eight-tenths percent of these men had one other partner, 22.9% had two, and 31% had more than two.

Of the 3.2% of 21-30-year-old men who reported other partners (on average 2.3) currently, about one-half lived with their wives. Of the 6.1% of 31-40-year-old men with other partners (on average 1.3), three-quarters lived with their wives. Of the 5.6% of 41-49-year-old men with other partners (on average 1.3), slightly more than one-half lived with their wives.

Current Sexual Behavior

Eighty-four and three-tenths percent of respondents said they had at some time been sexually active. A total of 77.6% had been sexually active in the past 12 months. Notably, 30.3% of 14-20-year-olds said they had been sexually active in the past 12 months, with a higher proportion of males (32.7%) having been sexually active than of females (28.1%). The mean age of coital debut for all respondents was 18.5 years. In each age group the men reported being sexually active slightly earlier than did the women. Our data indicate that the mean age at first sex has been gradually declining (Figure 1).
Among those who said they had had sex in the past 12 months, the partner of 60.6% was the official spouse, of 13% the unofficial spouse, of 20.8% a friend who lived separately, of 3% a casual acquaintance. In 0.4% of cases sex had been exchanged for money or gifts.

**Condom Use**

Of all respondents, 20.5% said they had used a condom when they had had sex most recently. Among the married in all age groups, only 12.2% used a condom. Among those not married, 24.5% did so. Figure 2 shows the age-group percentages of those who did not. Although the numbers are small, in the 14-20-year-old group all unmarried male respondents said they had used a condom, whereas none of the females did.

Among those who had had sex with a casual acquaintance, 48% of 14-20-year-olds, 36.5% of 21-30-year-olds, 61.3% of 31-40-year-olds, and 69% of 41-49-year-olds had not used a condom. Among those who had had sex in exchange for money or gifts, 35.6% of 21-30-year-olds and 43.5% of 41-49-year-olds had not used a condom.

![Figure 2. Unmarried Respondents Who Did Not Use Condom During Last Sexual Act](image)

Overall, 27.8% of those who had used a condom had obtained it at a store/kiosk, but a majority (59.5%) had gone to a drug store for it. The place where the condom was obtained did not vary by age or gender, except for 14-20-year-old males, who went to a drug store and a kiosk in equal proportions.

A majority (81.7%) of those who had used a condom said they had done so in order to prevent pregnancy, 34.3% to prevent STDs, and only 20% to prevent HIV. Most of the married respondents had used a condom to prevent pregnancy. Among the unmarried, 62.3% of those who had used a condom had done so to prevent pregnancy, 50.7% to prevent STDs, and 28.4% to prevent HIV. Figure 3 shows these data for respondents stratified by age group and gender.
Among those who said they had not used a condom during their most recent sexual act, 42.4% didn't think it was necessary, 29.3% didn't like using condoms, 7.1% said their partners didn't like using condoms, 7.7% just didn't think of using a condom, 6.4% didn't have a condom on hand, 5% were trying for a pregnancy, and 1.6% couldn't get condoms or thought they were too expensive. Figure 4 presents the main reasons for not using condoms. Reasons did not vary by marital status.

Figure 4. Why Respondents Didn't Use Condoms (%)
Among the sexually active, 66.4% said they had not used a condom during their first sexual encounter with their most recent partner. Higher proportions of women in all age groups (ranging from 41% to 76%) than of men (23% to 74%) did not.

Nine and seven-tenths percent of respondents thought their partners had other partners. Higher proportions (15% to 27%) of young men aged 14 to 30 years thought so than did young women in the same age groups (11% to 15%). Among those who believed their partners had other partners, only 33.8% had used a condom when they had sex most recently.

Almost one-quarter of the sexually active had consumed alcohol during their most recent sexual encounter. Figure 5 presents the data on alcohol consumption during sex by age and gender.

![Figure 5. Respondents Who Consumed Alcohol The Last Time They Had Sex (%)](image)

### Multiple Sexual Partners

Thirteen and one-half percent of the respondents, overall, had had sexual intercourse with a second partner in the past 12 months and 5.2% had had intercourse with a third partner in the same time period (Figure 6). Only 13.9% of those with a second partner and 25.5% of those with a third partner had used a condom on the most recent occasion when they had had sex with these partners.

### Sexually Transmitted Diseases

A large majority (94.2%) had heard of sexually transmitted diseases. During the past year, 1.9% had experienced a pus-like discharge or sores in the genital area that might have indicated STDs (Figure 7). Among them, 78.8% had sought advice and treatment—50.8% at a free hospital/clinic, 20.9% at a paying clinic, 4% from a private doctor, 4% from a traditional healer, 36.3% at a drug store, and 24.4% from friends or relatives.
Among those who obtained treatment or advice but not at a free hospital/clinic, 20.1% did so because they wanted to be examined anonymously, 13.2% wanted quick treatment, and 15.9% did so because they thought they would be followed up by a hospital/clinic for the rest of their lives (indicating a concern for anonymity and confidentiality).
Of those who got treatment, 76.7% obtained drugs to treat the discharge or sores, but only 62.6% actually took the drugs. There seems to be a significant proportion of the population with untreated symptoms indicative of STDs.

Three-quarters of those who had had symptoms said their symptoms had disappeared and 12.5% said they had not. Among those who took drugs, 80.4% said their symptoms had disappeared and 14.8% said they had not. (This could indicate a wrong diagnosis or wrong or incomplete treatment.) Among those with symptoms of STDs, only 32.2% told their sexual partners, 53.6% stopped their sexual activities, and 25.4% began to use condoms.

Knowledge About HIV

Overall, 95.7% of respondents had heard about the virus that causes HIV/AIDS, including a considerably higher proportion of the female population in the 14-20-year age group (96.7%) than of the corresponding male population (86.5%). About one-half as many (46.8%) had heard, read, or seen information about HIV/AIDS in the past four weeks. The principal sources of information on HIV for all respondents were television, newspapers and magazines, radio, and posters and billboards (Figure 8).

HIV Transmission

More than three-quarters (77%) of respondents thought HIV transmission could be prevented (in all age groups a slightly higher proportion of women than of men thought this), 6.2% thought it could not be prevented, and 9.9% said the question was too difficult to answer. Overall, 78.9% thought that a person who looked healthy outwardly could still be infected with HIV, 2.5% disagreed, and 11.8% said the question was too difficult to answer. More respondents between the ages of 21 and 40 (82% and 83%) answered these two questions correctly than did those younger (70%) or older (75%).
Of those who thought transmission preventable, 78.6% thought consistent condom use could reduce it, 3.9% did not think so, and 10.8% said the question was too difficult. Clearly, the latter two groups need to be educated about their effectiveness. Again, higher proportions of 21- to 40-year-olds (80% and 83%) were knowledgeable than of younger or older groups (72% and 77%).

Having only one sexual partner was thought to be effective in reducing HIV transmission by 83.4% of respondents, 4.2% disagreed, and 6% said the question was too difficult to answer. In the 14-20-year age group, a higher proportion of young women (80%) than of young men (68%) thought this was true (Figure 9). Twenty-two and six-tenths percent of respondents said that sharing dishes and silverware with an HIV-infected person could transmit the virus, 44.2% did not think so, and 26.9% said the question was too difficult. These opinions did not differ by age group or gender.

Seventy-nine percent said an HIV-infected mother could transmit the virus to her baby during delivery, 1.5% said she could not, and 13.3% said the question was too difficult to answer (among 14-20-year-olds, 18% found the question too difficult). HIV can be spread through breast milk, according to 38% of respondents, but 14.3% didn't think so, and 41.3% said the question was too difficult. A higher percentage of women aged 14 to 30 years than of 14-30-year-old men thought that breast feeding could transmit the virus; among older respondents the percentages were equal between men and women.

That HIV transmission from mother to child could be prevented was the opinion of 16.4%, but 27.1% said the infection would pass regardless of precautions, and 43.9% said the question was too difficult. For 5.4% the question was moot, since they believed that HIV can't pass from mother to child in the first place; this proportion did not differ among age groups.

Only 6.2% of respondents thought taking medicine before childbirth could prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Four and nine-tenths percent thought avoiding breast feeding, and 3% thought a caesarian delivery, could prevent transmission. Higher percentages of women than of men in all age groups thought medicine, avoiding breast feeding, and caesarian delivery could reduce the risk of transmission. A majority of respondents are not fully informed about the possibilities in this area.
Attitudes Toward People With HIV

Few respondents (4.9%) said they knew someone who was living with HIV or who had died of AIDS. If a teacher became infected with HIV, said 23.9%, he or she should be allowed to continue teaching, but more (39.8%) said this should not be allowed, and 28.7% said the question was too difficult to answer. Only 9.7% said they would patronize a grocer who was infected with HIV; 59.6% said they would not, and 22.7% said the question was too difficult.

These opinions were consistent both across genders and across age groups.

Sixty and six-tenths percent said they would take care of a family member infected with HIV, 8.3% said they would not, and 23.8% said the question was too difficult to answer. If a family member became infected with HIV, 68.3% said they would want to keep this a secret, 7.4% said they would not, and 17.2% said the question was too difficult. Figures 10 and 11 present these data.
HIV Testing

Overall, 37.9% of respondents said they had been tested for HIV at least once (Figure 12), although only 44.5% of them had been told their results; 53.1% said they had not been tested and 1.7% said the question was too difficult. Among those tested, 49.1% had been tested in the past 12 months. Of those women who had seen a doctor during pregnancy, 44.7% said they had been advised to get an HIV test and 97.9% of those advised had agreed to do so. Of those tested during pregnancy, 93.3% got their test results.

![Figure 12. Ever Tested For HIV Infection (%)](image)

Of the respondents who knew their test results, 69.9% had shared them with someone else, 32.6% with a constant sex partner, 3.1% with a casual sex partner, 19.8% with a friend, 28.7% with a family member, 18.9% with a medical worker, and 12.6% with a co-worker. Among all respondents, 41.8% said they would like to be tested for HIV/AIDS. Among those respondents who had already been tested, 62.2% said they would like to be tested again.

Sixty-seven percent of respondents knew of a place to be tested for HIV, 21.3% did not, and 4.4% said the question was too difficult. Among those who knew of such a place, 76.8% said they would go to a hospital, polyclinic, or medical center, 4% to a mobile laboratory, 23.1% to a women's health center or a family planning clinic, 8.4% to a private doctor, and 21.7% to an anti-HIV center. If found to be HIV-positive, 51.4% said they would share this information with someone, 24.4% said they would not, and 16.4% were not sure. Among those who said they would share a positive test result, 65.2% would tell a constant sex partner, 12.7% a casual partner, 18.6% a friend, 72.8% a family member, 54.9% a medical worker, and 7% a co-worker.

Conclusions

Our data show that the age of coital debut in Russia has been declining over the past three decades. In conjunction with our finding that a considerable proportion of the sexually active population does not use condoms consistently, this is a matter of concern. We also found a sizeable number of respondents who seem to have contracted an STD but have gone either
undiagnosed or untreated. This indicates an unmet need for both diagnostic and treatment services. Respondents are concerned about confidentiality and anonymity with respect to HIV testing and STD diagnosis and treatment. Misconceptions about the transmission modes of HIV are widely prevalent.

There is an urgent need in Russia to educate people, especially young people, about the dangers of HIV transmission through unsafe sexual practices and about the need to take preventive measures. Also, through education and knowledge, people's attitudes towards HIV-infected persons can be improved.