INCARCERATION, STRESS AND SEXUAL RISK-TAKING: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF BLACK MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN THE DEEP SOUTH

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Background This study examined if the intersection of stress and experiences of incarceration was associated with sexual risk-taking among Black gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (‘Black MSM’) in the Deep South of the United States.

Methods Data for this analysis were collected during 2013–2015 as part of a study of sexual health among Black cisgender MSM in the states of Mississippi and Georgia. At baseline, participants responded to a 12-item scale of stressful experiences in the previous year with responses organized into tertiles (low, medium, high stress). Multivariate analyses assessed independent and interactional associations between stress/incarceration and several key sexual health risk practices.

Results Among our overall sample of 355 Black MSM, compared to those reporting a relatively low level of stress, a high level of stress was associated with drug use in the context of sex (adjusted odds ratio [OR]=2.0, 95% confidence interval [CI]:1.1–3.6, p=0.03). While this association was observed for men without incarceration histories (aOR=2.6, 95%CI:1.2–5.8, p=0.015), among those who had been incarcerated the relationship was stronger (aOR=3.9, 95%CI:1.8–8.6, p<0.001) and for these men experiencing even a medium level of stress was associated with sexual drug use (aOR=3.4, 95%CI:1.6–9.1, p<0.001). High stress among previously incarcerated MSM was also associated with condomless casual sex (aOR=2.8, 95%CI:1.3–6.1, p<0.001) and having ≥6 partners in six months (aOR=2.8, 95%CI:2.8–1.7–7.1, p=0.03); similar associations were not observed among men who had not been incarcerated.

Conclusion While stress was associated with some sexual risk taking among Black MSM, its intersection with incarceration was consistently (and more strongly) associated with a greater number and diversity of sexual risk practices. Men who have been incarcerated may struggle to deal with life stressors. Post-release programs for this population should provide adaptive tools for dealing with stress, including specific attention to safer sex and sexual risk.

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