

# The Effect inside the Los Angeles House and Ball Communities of Support and Access to Social Networks

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**ABSTRACT:** *There is a high risk of HIV infection among African American young men who have sex with men (AAYMSM) from the House and Ball groups. Since these communities are not only sources of risk, but also support for AAYMSM, the resources these communities possess must also be considered by researchers. This awareness can help to devise more successful strategies for prevention and approaches to intervention. The current research illustrates the effect of minority stress on the psychological well-being of a group of MSM from the Los Angeles House and Ball populations, using Minority Stress Theory as a basis, and explores how these factors influence the relationship between minority stress and psychological well-being. Over the course of a year, surveys were administered to participants. To approximate a model of the interactions between minority stressors, help, social network interaction, and psychological well-being/distress (N=233), structural equation modeling was used. Important correlations between various sources of minority stress, including distal minority stress (e.g., racism, homophobia), gay identity, and internalized homophobia were shown in the findings. In contrast, minority stressors were substantially correlated with higher distress. The effects of distal minority stress on distress were substantially reduced by higher instrumental support, however. Greater social network linkage has also substantially decreased stress associated with gay distress recognition. The results capture the multiple sources of minority stress experienced by this population and how mental health consequences are interrelated with these stressors. Results also demonstrate how the negative effect of minority stress interactions can be reduced by help from and relation to social networks.*

**KEYWORDS:** *African American Young Men Who Have Sex With Men (AAYMSM), HIV Infection, Lesbian Gay and Bisexual (LGB), Unprotected Anal Intercourse (UAI).*

## INTRODUCTION

A broad range of stressors that can impair their mental health, well-being, and social functioning can be introduced to members of several stigmatized minority groups (e.g., sexual and racial/ethnic minority groups), such as African American young men who have sex with men (AAYMSM). These stressors, such as crime, bullying, homophobia, and bigotry, collectively referred to as minority stress, may be strong precedents for AAYMSM's poor mental health and HIV risk-taking [1]. Although there is strong evidence of the negative mental health effect of minority stress among young people in general who are lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB), little is known on how these stressors directly affect AAYMSM [2].

### **MINORITY STRESS AND ITS IMPRESSION ON AAYMSM**

Individuals may be subjected to a large variety of stressors, regardless of minority status. Minority stress refers to stressors that are linked to one's minority status, such as stigma and discrimination related to racial/ethnic minority and sexual minority individuals. Because of their dual minority status, AAYMSM are likely to be subjected to minority stressors from various sources. Although there is little empirical evidence to suggest that exposure to multiple minority stressors has an additive or an exponentially greater adverse effect on mental health than the experience of any single experience of minority stress, the often difficult and stressful interpersonal and social climate in which AAYMSM can find itself may fuel their poor mental

health and self-denial of risk, which could then compromise their health-protective behaviors and encourage greater risk-taking [3]. African American LGB people may face sexualized prejudice (e.g., being sexually impartial because of racial/ethnic background) and similar stressors related to their ethnic identity even within the LGB group. Findings from a study with an ethnically diverse YMSM sample suggest that AAYMSM experiences substantially higher rates of minority stressors relative to Latino and Caucasian YMSM, including experiences of homophobia and prejudice linked to both their race and sexuality. Results from the same study also revealed that AAYMSM was significantly more likely to encounter elevated levels of internal YMSM. More experiences of internalized homophobia have been linked with unrecognized HIV infection and decreased disclosure of serostatus in addition to its negative mental health effects. Engaging with partners of unknown serostatus in unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) is a significant risk factor for HIV, especially among Latino and African American MSM who do not know their own status [4].

Minority stressors may come from the family of origin of AAYMSM as well. There is a rising literature documenting the homophobia and bigotry that exists within families and communities of racial/ethnic minorities, whereby the practices of these communities mirror the practice of discrimination against LGB people by the dominant culture. The speech and identity of the LGB person can be stifled by these activities, including the show of aversion from family members and being silenced from voicing sexual identity. Some African American LGB teenagers can isolate themselves from families or even run away from home due to this unsupportive climate. As a consequence, they not only lose the few emotional bonds they have, but also the financial support and security that their families usually provide. This may result in greater issues with mental health and vulnerability to other risks. Homeless YMSM, for example, may be required to engage in risky work and behaviors that may expose them to other types of abuse and victimization that increase their risk of HIV infection (e.g. sex work and drug use).

## HOUSE AND BALL COMMUNITIES

Although diverse communities are African American MSM and YMSM (e.g., variations may include their sexual preferences, identity, and behaviors), a step towards understanding the risks facing AAYMSM starts by defining individual subgroups and understanding the unique experiences of each group. A subgroup of AAYMSM, part of the House and Ball populations, is at specific risk for HIV infection. Tuberculosis outbreak studies from 1998 to 2000 found that 16 out of 26 House and Ball members were living with HIV among the House members in Baltimore, MD and the New York City area. A recent study by the New York City Ball group reported that 20% of those surveyed were infected with HIV and 73% were unaware of their infections among those [5].

The House and Ball groups consist predominantly of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals from African America and Latino/Latina. Despite the diversity, participation is usually addressed to AAYMSM in the House and Ball societies. In response to the economic and social isolation of its members, the House and Ball communities were originally formed with the goal of providing unity and support for both existing and new members [6]. The House and Ball cultures had been largely underground phenomena until the documentary film *Paris is Burning* put this community in the spotlight in 1990. The societies of House and Ball are more akin to social networks and are not necessarily bound by geographic places. In major cities throughout the United States, including Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, New York City, Detroit, Chicago, Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, House and Ball neighborhoods have sprung up. While House and Ball groups have their own activities and events within each community, participants can travel to participate and socialize in other cities at events, which encourages contact and relationship building through these communities [7].

Houses and balls are distinct entities, but each fulfills significant roles that work together to help establish and shape this unified group. Houses are structures that are family-like and are mostly part of a national social network. These imaginary families or houses are often headed by "parents" of one or two houses. The primary roles of houses are to arrange balls and provide encouragement for children to play in the balls inside the houses. Balls are social events/parties organized by various houses with particular themes that take place many times a year. This is an opportunity for community members, along with friends and fans, to come together to participate based on dance/theatrics, sports, and gender identity in runway categories.

Members take these competitions very seriously because the winners not only earn modest financial prizes, but also group status and popularity [8].

➤ *Support inside the House and Ball Communities:*

The House and Ball communities can be identity-affirming places to find friendships and community among those of common backgrounds and experiences, including among those who are still related to their communities of origin, or who are not official members of Houses. Qualitative results from the current study found that House parents advise participants about how to cope with and direct them through personal difficulties and complicated life problems. In addition to offering emotional support, house parents are also a source of instrumental support by providing financial assistance to members and providing them with basic necessities such as clothes, food, lodging, and transportation. House parents will sometimes behave by abstaining from drug use, sexual risk-taking, and securing and retaining secure jobs as positive role models for household members [9]. In a number of ways, including improved mental wellbeing, physical health, and educational outcomes, having a positive and welcoming social atmosphere will significantly improve the lives of LGB youth. More support for one's sexual orientation has been shown to greatly boost the mental health of young people with LGB. In addition, Spencer and Patrick found that the establishment of supportive relationships would function to positively affect the well-being of emerging adults of the sexual minority in conjunction with the development of personal mastery (defined as the degree to which people feel they have power over the forces that influence their lives). The benefits associated with being part of the House and Ball groups can also help AAYMSM manage the daunting challenge of adult growth by instilling optimism for the future in them [10].

## CONCLUSIONS

This is one of the first studies to record and analyze the perceptions of minority stress among members of the House and Ball communities, and to assess the degree to which the mental health of its members is influenced by the support and relation to social networks present in this group. Minority tension from the Los Angeles House and Ball communities has a pervasive effect on the mental wellbeing of AAYMSM, and some of the negative impact of these stressors seems to be buffered by the encouragement and relation of these communities. Results from the current study also illustrate that distinct causes of stress can be differently moderated by the form of support. For AAYMSM and other racial/ethnic minority LGBT individuals, the House and Ball societies can be a place of great influence. In the creation of prevention and intervention strategies, further studies must find ways to integrate the nuances of the threats and resources that this population possesses. It is evident, for instance, that these groups are becoming an expanded family for their members. In addition, other benefits are also provided by the House and Ball societies, such as building resilience among their participants, which can have long-lasting benefits. However, not all help contributes to positive results (e.g., some people provide poor advice and/or are negative influences) and it is unclear to what degree the benefits offered by these groups permeate or persist over time in various areas of life. While the current results offer an important insight into the lives of MSM participants from these groups, we are only in the early stages of learning and collaborating with the communities of House and Ball to establish intervention strategies that can be successful in mitigating mental health issues and negative effects of behavioral health.

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