MOBILE MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN:
AN EXPLORATION IN EUROPEAN RESIDENTS OF SEXUAL RISK TAKING WHILE TRAVELLING ABROAD

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INTRODUCTION

The formation of the Schengen area, European Union enlargement, and cheap flights have substantially increased the mobility of men who have sex with men (MSM). Internet and mobile phone dating allow long-term planning of sexual encounters. Travellers to foreign countries may disregard conventional norms of behaviour and indulge in risk-taking behaviour. Some studies suggest that the risk-taking behaviour of travellers on vacation (for example, alcohol or drug use, high number of sexual partners) may play an important role in the dissemination of HIV and other STI. Data from the European MSM Internet Survey (EMIS) were used to describe patterns of sexual behaviour risk among European MSM abroad.
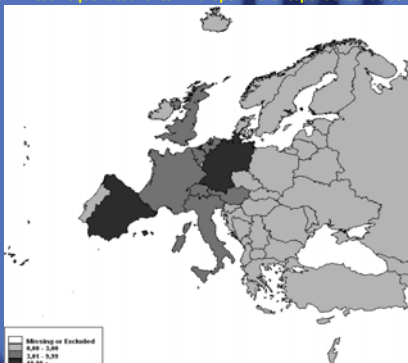
METHODS

The European Men to Men Internet Survey (EMIS) was implemented in 38 European countries from June to August 2010. Data on socio-demographics, sexual behaviour, HIV/STI prevention needs/services and other variables were obtained using an online questionnaire, translated into 25 languages. Also It included questions on the recency of sex abroad, country of destination, where contact was established, paying/being paid for sex, and unprotected anal intercourse (UAI). Descriptive, univariate and multivariate analyses were performed.
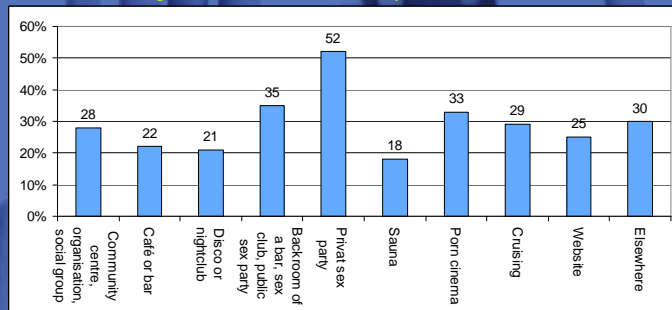
RESULTS

Data from 174,209 MSM living in 38 European countries were analysed. Between 15% (Ukraine) and 57% (Luxemburg) of respondents reported sex abroad in the previous 12 months (median: 26%). The dominant European destinations were Spain (18%), Germany (11%), and France (7%) (see Figure 1), while outside Europe the US (7%), Thailand (3%), and Brazil (2%) were most common.

Figure 1: Most frequent countries in Europe where respondents had sex abroad

Paid sex abroad was particularly common in Thailand (32%), the Czech Republic (15%), and Brazil (14%); but under 5% in most European countries or the US. The internet (32%) and gay saunas (14%) were the most common means to meet for sex abroad.

Anal intercourse (AI) was particularly common when travelling to Eastern Mediterranean countries or Brazil. Men who reported UAI in their country of residence were more likely to report UAI while abroad (aOR=13.4). As seen in Figure 2, the meeting venues with the highest levels of UAI were gay sex parties in private homes (52% of men who met their last sex partner abroad here, and who had AI, did not use a condom) and in backrooms of a bar, gay sex club or a pubic gay sex party (35%).

Figure 2: Place where men met a sexual partner and had UAI

A higher proportion of men with diagnosed HIV reported sex abroad than others (40% vs. 24%; aOR=1.81) and were more likely to report UAI (49% vs. 21%; aOR=3.75).

CONCLUSIONS

Among European MSM, sex abroad is common. How men meet sexual partners abroad varies by the country visited. The internet was the primary means by which participants in this study met sexual partners when travelling. The internet permits the creation of social and sexual networks that facilitate contact and the security of having a sexual encounter. Sexual risk (UAI) was particularly higher among MSM with diagnosed HIV while travelling abroad, particularly meeting partners at sex-venues, perhaps because these are places where verbal communication between sexual partners rarely occurs. These venues may be felt as safe spaces that do not require disclosure of HIV status. Prevention planning must address such cross-border sexual networks. Popular destination cities for MSM need to be sensitive to their international visitors.

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