

## HIV/AIDS in China: Survey Provides Guidelines for Improving Awareness

Asia-Pacific Population & Policy summarizes research on population and reproductive health for policymakers and others concerned with the Asia-Pacific region.

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China stands “on the precipice of a potential AIDS catastrophe.” So reported the Global HIV Prevention Working Group (2002) to the July 2002 International Conference on AIDS in Barcelona.

The U.S. National Intelligence Council (2002) reports that, “China has significantly raised its official estimate of the number of HIV-positive people over the last two years from 600,000 to one million. The U.N. now estimates that 1.5 million are infected, while other experts believe the number probably is closer to 2 million or even higher.” The Council goes on to project that China will have 10–15 million HIV/AIDS cases by 2010, or 1–2 percent of the projected adult population.

In response to rising prevalence levels, the Chinese government is placing increasing emphasis on HIV/AIDS prevention. The State Council has set up a national committee for HIV/AIDS control with members from 26 ministries and commissions.

Public awareness is a key component of any prevention strategy, and China has an HIV/AIDS awareness program in place with an emphasis on mass media. As part of this effort, the State Family Planning Commission conducted a survey on AIDS awareness in December 2000. The objective was to provide baseline information for expanding HIV/AIDS prevention activities.

The results of the survey, summarized in this issue of *Asia-Pacific Population & Policy*, show that media cam-

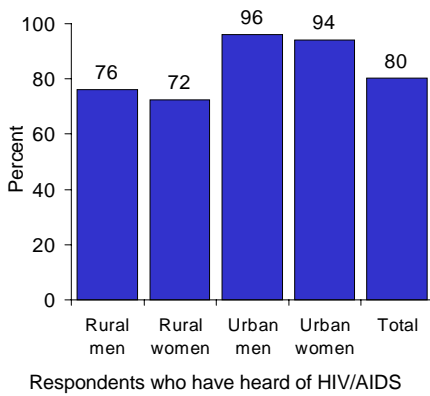
paigns have had an effect—most people in China who know about HIV/AIDS learned about the disease from the media. But the survey also shows how much more needs to be done—many people have a poor understanding of HIV, and others have not heard of the disease at all.

### ABOUT THE SURVEY

According to spokesperson, Zhao Baige, the State Family Planning Commission of China is reorienting its large staff and resources toward reproductive health and HIV/AIDS: “We have a very big, complicated, and very effective network in China, with 400,000 staff.... We have the whole system from the provincial, county, and township to village level. We first focused on population development and then moved to reproductive health including HIV/AIDS.”

The December 2000 survey marks an important step in the State Family Planning Commission’s reorientation. It covered five rural and two urban areas, chosen to include locations with varying levels of economic development and HIV prevalence.

The survey interviewed 7,053 people age 15–49, about half women and half men. Fourteen percent were unmarried. Support for the survey came from the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the Ford Foundation, and the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).



**Figure 1 Awareness of HIV/AIDS**

Source: Chen et al. 2001.

The survey shows that knowledge of AIDS is low, particularly in rural areas. Results also provide information on how people learn about AIDS and what communication channels could be better utilized to improve AIDS awareness.

## AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE

Overall, one-fifth (20 percent) of survey respondents have never heard of AIDS (Figure 1). Awareness is much lower in rural areas than in urban areas and slightly lower among women than among men.

As with general AIDS awareness, knowledge of each of the four major ways to avoid HIV is higher in urban areas than in rural areas (Figure 2). Among the survey sites, knowledge of ways to avoid HIV is highest in Sanya City and is also generally high in Shanghai's Jing An District (Table 1).

Among respondents who have heard of AIDS, the most frequently mentioned way to avoid HIV infection is to have only one sex partner (Figure 2). Much smaller proportions mentioned using condoms, avoiding unnecessary blood transfusions, or using clean needles. Even in Shang Cai County, Henan Province, where many people have been infected with HIV through blood dona-

tion with reused equipment and reinfection, fewer than one in five (17 percent) mentioned avoiding unnecessary blood transfusions as a way to prevent HIV (Table 1).

In the country as a whole, more than half of respondents (53 percent) either do not know that AIDS can be avoided, cannot name a single way to avoid infection, or have not heard of AIDS at all. The proportion with such poor knowledge is 64 percent in rural areas and 26 percent in urban areas.

## PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

**Risk perception.** The survey asked respondents about the risk behavior of others and their own perception of personal risk. Men and women in every survey area noted some level of risk behavior in their neighborhoods (Figure 3).

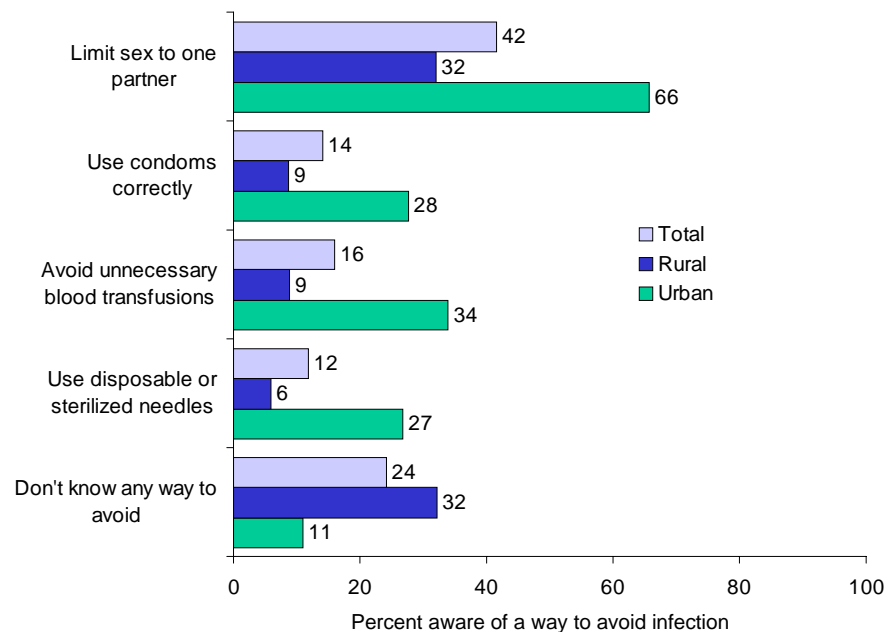
More than one-fourth of respondents (29 percent) are worried that they might become infected with HIV. And three-fourths (76 percent) want information

about HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). As with knowledge, perception of risk is higher in urban areas than in rural areas.

Respondents who had heard of HIV/AIDS were asked what they would do if they suspected they were infected. The largest proportion (70 percent) mentioned that they would seek medical attention. Fifteen percent said that they would avoid sex.

**People living with HIV.** The survey asked about attitudes toward people living with HIV or AIDS. Although many respondents expressed sympathy, others reported that they would "avoid contact" with an acquaintance living with HIV/AIDS (37 percent) or would "detest" (11 percent) or "blame" (5 percent) such a person.

Some people may have negative attitudes toward people living with HIV because they have a poor understanding of how the virus is transmitted. Six percent of survey respondents believe, erroneously, that they can become in-



**Figure 2 Awareness of ways to avoid HIV infection**

Note: Percentages are of people who have heard of HIV/AIDS and who know that it is possible to prevent infection. Among specific ways to avoid infection, multiple responses were allowed.

Source: Chen et al. 2001.

**Table 1 Awareness of ways to avoid HIV infection in seven locations of China**

County Province or municipality	Percentage having heard of HIV who are aware of a way to avoid infection						
	Urban areas		Rural areas				
	Jing An Shanghai	Sanya Hainan	Chang Ping Beijing	Dong Ning Heilongjiang	Shang Cai Henan	Hui Dong Guangdong	Bai Se Guangxi
Limit sex to one partner	79	78	67	55	39	72	62
Use condoms correctly	18	51	6	11	11	36	20
Avoid unnecessary blood transfusions	30	53	10	20	17	20	18
Use disposable or sterilized needles	19	48	4	10	10	16	19
Don't know any way	14	7	28	37	50	16	34

Note: Percentages are of people who have heard of HIV/AIDS and who know that it is possible to prevent infection. Among specific ways to avoid infection, multiple responses were allowed.

Source: Chen et al. 2001.

fected by touching an infected person. Five percent believe that they can become infected by touching an infected person's clothes. Misinformation about HIV transmission is more common in urban than in rural areas.

### SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Questions about exposure to mass media show that television reaches a wide proportion of the Chinese population. About two-thirds of rural (68 percent) and urban (65 percent) residents watch television regularly. Nearly one-half (49 percent) of urban residents read newspapers regularly. Exposure to all other media is much lower.

Most people who know about AIDS heard of the disease from television (Figure 4). Newspapers are another important source of information, particularly in urban areas. Few learned about AIDS from health workers or through lectures or print materials provided by the family planning system.

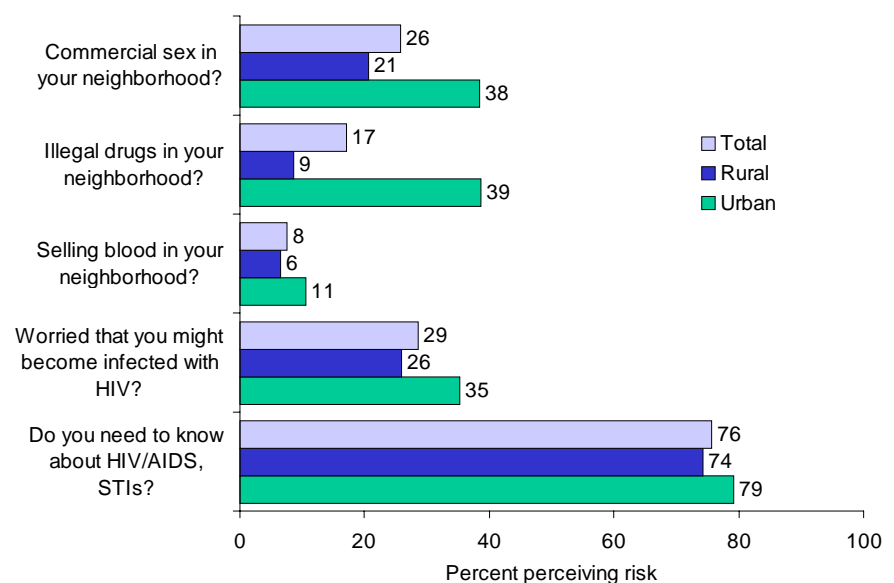
Preferences for learning about HIV/AIDS are similar to current sources of information (Figure 5). Television is a popular source everywhere, and books and newspaper are popular in urban areas. Interestingly, more people would

like to learn about HIV/AIDS from health and family planning providers (20 percent) than currently receive information from this source (7 percent).

Most men and women feel that young people should learn about sexuality, reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS prevention in school. Eighty-two percent think that Chinese schools should teach about HIV/AIDS prevention, and 77 percent think that the schools should provide sex education.

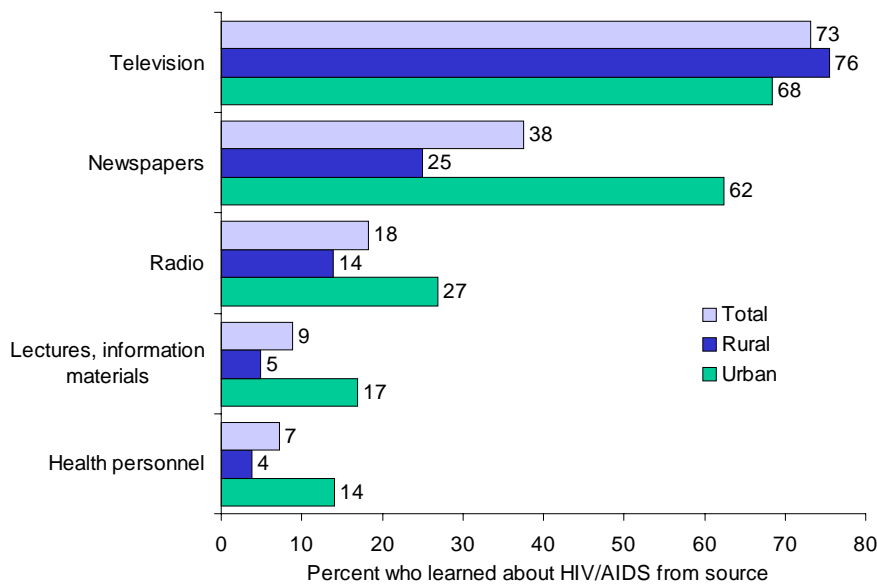
### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This survey shows that many men and women in China have a poor understanding of how they can protect themselves from HIV/AIDS or have not heard of the disease at all. Most people feel that they need to know about HIV/AIDS and would like to learn about the disease from television. Yet one-third do not watch television regularly.

**Figure 3 Perception of HIV/AIDS risk**

Note: Percentages are of all respondents.

Source: Chen et al. 2001.



**Figure 4 Sources of information about HIV/AIDS**

Note: Percentages are of respondents who have heard of HIV/AIDS. Multiple responses were allowed.

Source: Chen et al. 2001.

Most of these men and women are probably not at high risk of HIV infection, but they may be at some risk. Results show some degree of risk behavior—as perceived by respondents—in every location covered by the survey. The general lack of knowledge about HIV/AIDS and how to protect oneself is thus a serious concern. Better infor-

mation will not only help people avoid infection, but should also improve their attitude toward people living with HIV.

Findings on people's current and preferred sources of information point to the importance of mass media—and of television in particular. Newspapers are also an important source of information in urban areas. Any AIDS aware-

ness campaign should make full use of these media.

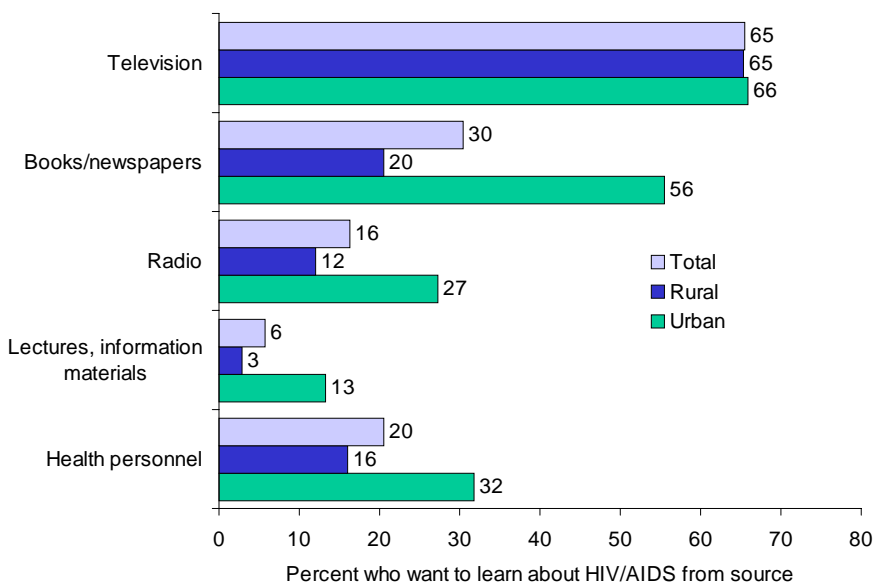
The survey shows, however, that one-third of respondents—in both rural and urban areas—do not watch television regularly. And regular exposure to other media is much lower.

In addition to mass media campaigns aimed at the general population, experience in other Asian countries suggests the importance of focusing prevention efforts on groups engaged in risk behavior such as sex work or injecting drug use. This approach has proven effective in efforts to limit new infections.

There are thus compelling reasons for improving the information on HIV/AIDS available through China's health and family planning systems. Face-to-face meetings with health and family planning personnel, supported by appropriate information materials, appear to be a particularly promising—and underexploited—avenue for increasing AIDS awareness.

## FURTHER READING

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**Figure 5 Preferred sources of information about HIV/AIDS**

Note: Percentages are of all respondents. Multiple responses were allowed.

Source: Chen et al. 2001.