

STEPPING UP

to the

FUTURE

of

YOUNG

GAY MEN'S

HEALTH

Proceedings of British Columbia's
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Stepping Up to the Future of Young Gay Men’s Health was a one-day dialogue held in Vancouver on November 3rd 2012. This report is a summary of the key points and recommendations from the day.

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Introduction: Stepping Up to the Future of Young Gay Men's Health

Ten years ago, the Community-Based Research Centre (CBRC) rallied community health and prevention leaders from across British Columbia to review circumstances with young gay men. HIV infections were rising. The first Sex Now survey (2002) had shown youth (18-29) to be alarmingly weak on fundamentals of gay health and HIV prevention. There was a glaring absence of gay youth in most community organizations. Who would carry on community health and HIV activism in new generations of gay men?

To address the situation, CBRC created Totally Outright (TO), a comprehensive, 40-hour program of health leadership workshops, presentations and interactive learning activities dedicated to young gay men, ages 18 to 26. After a year in development, TO was first offered in 2005 and was instantly popular with participants and instructors alike. The program has been offered every year since and, by this writing, more than 150 young gay men have completed the training.

Totally Outright radically altered gay men's health activism in Vancouver. A gradual trickle of youth participation throughout the field eventually became a wave. Totally Outright graduates were visibly

involved, leading a range of gay men's health activities. Some got jobs in related programs and research studies. And some went on to graduate degrees in the health field. But TO's greatest effect was how it catalyzed gay youth participation in general including new initiatives like Our City of Colours and Investigaytors.

More recently in response to ManCount – Vancouver's HIV surveillance study, YouthCO developed Mpowerment YVR for young gay men.

With the advent of these programs, Vancouver's gay men's health movement is much stronger in 2013 but significant challenges still exist. The rate of new HIV infections among gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM) has seen no decline. Greater numbers of young men under 25 are delaying HIV/STI testing, when the opposite is desired. Knowledge of new prevention technologies and approaches is scarce. And, despite evident social change, stigma, bullying and marginalization are still significant problems for gay youth.

We wondered how to capitalize on the momentum in the field to confront these continuing issues and the inequities underlying them.

Stepping Up to the Future of Young Gay Men's Health was a collaborative effort to keep young men's health issues at the forefront of the gay men's health movement. The Community-Based Research Centre hosted the one-day event in partnership with YouthCO AIDS Society. Funding was provided by the Shooting Stars Foundation and the AIDS Community Action Program of the Public Health Agency of Canada.

The event gathered 36 gay youth "movers and shakers" to consider the current state of young gay men's health in British Columbia and what can be done with the platform created thus far. Participants reviewed the latest regional research evidence, discussed currently existing health promotion initiatives, and identified new priorities for the field.

This report provides an overview of our collective discussions. *Stepping Up* happened at a critical moment in the gay health movement. It marked the beginning of broad discussions among young gay men themselves about the status of gay youth. It fostered deeper connections among individuals and organizations toward that end, and further strides toward a better tomorrow for young gay men.

The State of Knowledge on Young Gay Men and their Health

Research evidence is critical to the informed design of health promotion initiatives and health policy. But the state of knowledge about gay youth is often inadequate to help health promoters and activists intervene effectively.

- The HIV field is dominated by a bio-medical paradigm which is poorly informed by the real-life experiences of young gay men.
- Much of the research literature available becomes quickly outdated and cannot keep pace with ever changing trends among gay youth.
- Health research continues to focus on gay men's behaviour, especially sexual behaviour. But this approach inadvertently blames gay men for the health problems arising from their own behaviour, provides very little insight into appropriate intervention, and ignores strongly influential social and structural factors.
- There is little locally produced data describing regional and cultural differences specific to Vancouver and between Vancouver and other cities of British Columbia.

Nonetheless, since 2002, CBRC's Sex Now survey has become a widely valued source of information on the lives and health status of young gay men. Research Education Director, Olivier Ferlatte and Board Director, Travis Salway Hottes presented data from the latest survey September 2011 – February 2012. Here are some of the current trends:

- Social media is playing a significant role in the lives of young gay men. Most report using the Internet to watch porn (99%), look for hookups (82%), learn about sexual health (75%) and search for love (58%). Most are active on social media such as Facebook (94%) and Twitter (45%), as well as gay specific sites such as Manhunt (44%) and Squirt (66%).
- As the Internet has grown in popularity, measures of community engagement have declined precipitously. The survey has shown that a majority of young gay men (70%) are dissatisfied with the gay spaces available. Only one in four spends more than half of his free time with other gay friends, while only 1 in 6 is involved in a gay group.
- Sex Now data suggests that more gay youth are coming out at younger ages than ever before. 1 in 10 men now under 30 came out before the age of 15 compared to 1 in 50 among older cohorts. Sex Now has also shown that coming out early comes with a price: those who came out as teens had much greater exposure to harassment, violence, bullying and sexual abuse.
- Despite a greater acceptance and visibility of homosexuality and legal protections for sexual minorities, Canadian gay youth continue to face opposition and hostility towards their sexuality. Indeed, 61% reported harassment, 54% were bullied, 13% reported physical violence, and 9% were victims of sexual violence. Another 13% reported employment discrimination due to their sexual orientation.
- Exposure to homophobia and marginalization can have a negative impact on well-being and mental health. 1 in 5 young gay men in Sex Now had thought about taking his own life in the 12 months prior to the survey— 1 in 50 reported having attempted suicide. 1 in 10 had been treated for depression or anxiety in the same period.
- 9% of young gay men were diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection in the 12 months prior to the survey. 1 in 50 reported an HIV positive status, but, 32% had never had an HIV test (42% under 26). Sexual risk has expanded since 2002. In 2011, 30% reported at least one event of unprotected intercourse with an unknown status partner in the 12 months prior to the survey while in 2002 it was 25%.

*More information about youth in the Sex Now survey can be found at:
<http://cbrc.net/resources/2013/pride-prejudice-determinants-health-whats-trending-young-gay-men>*

Research Priorities for Young Gay Men's Health



Participants of *Stepping up* identified several key areas of research as important and under-examined in young gay men. Topics ranged from individual to societal; from sexual cliques to power and privilege.

Young men's relationships

Gay men engage in diverse and nuanced relationships with friends, peers, and partners—often poorly described in research. Future studies should look at:

- The dynamics of various relationship types, for example, how monogamy and non-monogamy are experienced by both partners.
- The strengths and resiliencies that relationships provide each partner.
- The impact of internalized homonegativity on relationships.
- The importance of queer role models and non-gay allies.
- Youth involvement in fetish or polyamorous subcultures.

Coming out – to oneself and others

In light of coming out earlier and the greater number of public figures coming out, there is an interest in revisiting the topic—what it means in a constantly changing social climate. Researchers should examine:

- The effects of negative attitudes (homonegativity, male chauvinism) on coming out and the social and cultural factors that contribute to the development of these attitudes.
- The developmental trajectories of gay men who are coming out earlier, particularly in high school, in comparison to those who come out later in life.
- The impact of coming out in the workplace and more specifically the impact that it has on career trajectories.

Gay Spaces

Young gay men navigate a variety of spaces online and offline in their attempts to access community, build friendships, and experience their sexuality. The following inquiries were suggested:

- The positives and negatives of 'gay-friendly' commercial spaces in gay men's lives.
- The impact of online social networks on sexual behaviour and norms.
- Young gay men's desires and needs for dedicated community spaces.
- Assessing which community programs and health care services are most and least used by young gay men.



Gender and sexual identities

Sexual identity and gender expression come in many forms among gay men but they are generally poorly understood. More knowledge is needed about:

- The diversity of sexual and gender identification among young gay men: from gay to queer to genderqueer to ‘post gay’.
- Stigma and other social implications of gender and sexual identity—their relationship to health.
- How gender and sexual identities are challenged and reproduced within online communities.

Exploring different experiences of being gay

For a variety of reasons, certain subsections of the gay youth population do not participate or are not well represented in research. Anxiety around self-identification and ethno-cultural barriers get in the way. Participants suggested the following:

- Provide surveys and interviews in multiple languages to improve representation.
- Use identity neutral terminology to include the unique experiences of closeted and bisexual men and men who have sex with men (MSM) but do not identify as gay.
- Conduct research on barriers to research participation and ways to overcome them in a variety of populations.

Structural issues

Systemic heterosexism is the root cause of many of the social and health inequities that young gay men experience. To move knowledge forward:

- Investigate how policies, institutions and other structural factors are contributing to young gay men’s health inequities.
- Extend research beyond HIV prevention and sexual health toward broader and more integrated approaches to health and well being.
- Investigate the factors that promote resilience to support the development of asset-based programs.
- Research how media shapes ideas around gay sexualities and gay men.

Engaging Young Gay Men in Knowledge Production

Equally important as expanding research on young gay men is increasing their participation in knowledge production. Knowledge production refers to research operations such as survey design, data collection, analysis and dissemination. Involving young gay men in every stage builds confidence, produces richer and more relevant findings, and bridges gaps within and across generations. *Stepping up* participants proposed the following to increase the involvement of young gay men in research:

Make knowledge production accessible

Research is often viewed as a highly technical and closed field. Part of the challenge of greater youth inclusion is deconstructing these assumptions.

- Build on the success of programs like Totally Outright and Investigaytors that train young gay men for the field of gay health and provide opportunities for their direct involvement.
- Increase the presence of young gay men in key roles and positions to create a snowball effect that attracts other young gay men.
- Expand programs outside of well-established gay communities to enrich perspectives and expose new populations to gay health research.
- Create spaces where young gay men can comfortably engage and discuss research issues.

Make knowledge production relevant and interesting

Apathy about research is not isolated to young gay men. Unlike mainstream communities, however, there are substantial gaps in knowledge about young gay men's health and development to explore. How then to inspire their excitement and commitment to knowledge production?

- Adopt a range of methods, including creative and arts-based approaches.
- Disseminate completed knowledge products to the community to create an ongoing cycle of interest and inquiry.
- Provide incentives to participation such as transferable skill learning and money earning opportunities.

Reframe knowledge production as social justice

Community knowledge production, particularly in marginalized communities, is a useful framework for tackling social injustice. Its data forms the solid base from which to lobby and petition for social change. An important aspect of increasing youth involvement then, is shedding light on the importance of research in advancing social justice.

- Young gay men are often unaware of the social and health inequities that gay men face collectively. Education on how these inequities are sustained through social interaction, institutional behaviour and government policy provides a critical perspective. It may also galvanize further interest to uncover the multiple factors that contribute to gay men's health challenges.
- *Stepping up* participants expressed the belief that young gay men should always be part of research processes in which they are subjects, from proposal development to the dissemination of findings.

Community Actions and Programs

Young men's involvement in Vancouver based gay health activities has never been as strong in terms of numbers involved, but also the number of projects. *Stepping up* participants reviewed the latest developments from four concurrent health promotion programs for young gay men of Vancouver.

Totally Outright (<http://checkhimout.ca/totallyoutright>)

Totally Outright is a sexual health leadership program, created by the CBRC, for young gay, sex-savvy trendsetters, ages 18 to 26. The 40-hour training event is delivered over two week-ends and includes thought provoking presentations from community leaders, an outreach experience, and a group project where participants design a health promotion initiative. Upon completion, graduates are encouraged to engage with their peers about the experience and to join community health initiatives where they can apply their skills and enthusiasm. Totally Outright training is offered annually by the Health Initiative for Men (HIM).



The Investigaytors (<http://cbrc.net/investigaytors>)

The Investigaytors at CBRC is a hands-on training program that aims to equip young gay men with the knowledge, skills and resources to contribute to research on gay men's health. The program offers "bootcamp" training on various aspects of research such as sample recruitment, data analysis, statistics and knowledge translation. Young gay men apply these skills working alongside experienced researchers. Through 2011 and 2012, the Investigaytors worked through a complete cycle of the Sex Now survey.



Our City of Colours (<http://ourcityofcolours.com>)

Our City of Colours (OCC) is a non-profit organization that started as a grassroots project in 2011. OCC aims to promote and affirm the visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people in a variety of linguistic and ethno-cultural communities of Metro Vancouver. OCC works with these communities to encourage positive messaging about LGBTQ people and same-sex relationships, helping to mitigate the combined effects of racism and homo/bi/transphobia.



Mpowerment YVR (<http://mpowermentyvr.com>)

The Mpowerment Project is an evidence-based, community level health program aiming to reduce HIV incidence among gay, bi and trans men in Vancouver by promoting safer sex practices, routine HIV testing and healthy relationships. This YouthCO program creates new social opportunities beyond clubs, bars and online dating sites. Participants are encouraged to sign up for Unmask, a casual, evening discussion group where participants talk openly about sex, relationships and the community. Mpowerment hopes to promote honest conversation about sex while building a strong, inclusive gay community.



Challenges and Barriers to Engaging Young Gay Men

An important aim in developing community programs and initiatives for young gay men is anticipating barriers to their participation. Participants of *Stepping up* identified what they felt to be key challenges for young gay men's health promotion.

- Lack of government investment in young gay men's health development.
- Limited, short-term funding tied to specific goals i.e., increased testing but no lasting community benefit.
- Programs centralized in Vancouver's downtown create barriers for young gay men living in the suburbs and beyond.
- Community participation often costs youth personal time and energy, often without any clear benefit.
- Some young gay men feel excluded in programs that ignore or discount diversity, particularly race/ethnicity, HIV status, or social class.



Strengthening Community Actions and Programs

While young gay men’s health activism in Vancouver is currently energetic, challenges remain for gay youth engagement. *Stepping up* participants put forward five suggestions to improve current and future initiatives.



Fortify social networks

Social networks have been identified as an important determinant of gay men’s health. Strengthening them should be a key component of health promotion efforts.

- Keeping gay men continuously active in community programs creates potential for countless constructive social interactions and networks.
- Non gay allies are an integral part of many young gay men’s social networks and their presence further strengthens community.
- Activities that integrate age groups—high school, young adults, older men and elderly—help to fortify social networks.
- Opportunities to participate in communities beyond the immediately familiar helps to foster greater social connection and stronger networks.

Explore Alternative Pedagogy

Stepping up participants called for alternative ways of doing health promotion with young gay men – beyond just disseminating health information.

- Health initiatives should focus on developing life skills, including interpersonal communication and assertiveness training.
- Develop opportunities for mentorships between older and younger gay men.
- Create strategies for engaging gay youth in online environments.
- Focus on collaborative methods of learning and education i.e. Potluck dinner discussions, community art.
- Integrate historical perspectives in community programs so that youth can learn from the lived experience of older gay men.
- Foster more opportunities to connect with academics to learn about research and theory. For example, *Theorizing Gay Health Reading Group*



Link Collaborating Organizations

The initiatives currently available for young gay men in Vancouver have little coordination, communication or collaboration across them.

- Develop local committees to link organizations, community members and key stakeholders in joint planning and collaborative action.
- Organizations might share resources as a way to overcome inadequate funding for young gay men’s health initiatives.
- Create an online platform for organizations and gay youth advocates to exchange knowledge and ideas.

Adopt a Social Justice Approach

Social justice in the context of health promotion means equitable opportunity to participate and benefit from programs and initiatives. *Stepping up* participants believe social justice should be the core aim of any health initiative addressing young gay men.

- Every initiative should engage a broad range of stakeholders, identify potential barriers and develop strategies to overcome them.
- Mechanisms should be in place for volunteers and leaders to reflect upon power and privilege within gay community and how it influences the ways in which programs are created and delivered.
- Integrate processes where young gay men shape the planning and development of initiatives.
- Avoid oppressive language and provide a safe environment, free of discrimination i.e., race/ethnicity, class, HIV status.

Promote Inclusivity

While much progress has been made, concerns remain about the participation of youth who may be marginalized from gay communities due to their gender expression, race/ethnicity, class/social position. Consider how to adapt programs for broader inclusion.

- Adopt an asset-based approach focusing on the benefits of diversity in gay youth groups and programs.
- Promote diversity in the leadership roles of young gay men’s initiatives.
- Organize “speedfriending” type events to promote interpersonal learning.
- Build relationships in education systems to engage gay youth in high schools.
- Develop relationships with non gay organizations whose goals intersect. i.e., youth welfare agencies, ethno-cultural groups, student organizations, health organizations.

Moving Forward

What next? *Stepping up* participants engaged in a lively discussion about the future of young gay men's health in Vancouver and beyond. They put forward five priorities toward sustaining healthy and thriving young gay men's communities.

Priorities

1

2



Build Coalitions & Solidarity

Advocates for young gay men often find themselves isolated from mainstream social advocacy groups impacted by the same social issues and policies. Identifying these shared interests may catalyze productive new relationships in promoting equity.

- Create meaningful opportunities to network and share experiences among youth interest groups and health advocates. For example, at the *BC Gay Men's Health Summit*.
- Develop strategic alliances with youth specialists—such as, education or legal—to advance specific issues.
- Explore relationships with LGBT interest groups, like *EGALE*.
- Engage businesses and corporations in promoting young gay men's health by providing sponsorships and funding. For example, *LOUD Foundation at GLBA*.
- Facilitate opportunities for experience sharing between gay generations.

Engage Activism

The most dramatic improvements to gay men's health and social status have happened as a result of community activism. Participants discussed how gay men's activism is losing relevance for gay youth (particularly since same-sex marriage was legalized) even though multiple health and social issues remain. *Stepping up* participants called for a revival of activism to pressure institutions and governments, where necessary, to take action in support of gay youth.

- Educate young gay men about policy, the policy making process and how to influence policy through activism.
- Reframe gay men's health issues with human rights and social justice language to interest a broader field of young gay men and their allies.
- Increase linkages between gay youth and gay politicians and allies.
- Organize an on-going Young Gay Men's Health Summit to build a common agenda.



3

Promote Diversity by Addressing Stigma

Stigma and shame were described as the two main barriers to the active involvement of young gay men in community programs—also responsible for many of their negative social and health outcomes.

- Build on the success of Our City of Colours.
- Develop campaigns to address stigma in & out of gay community—homophobia, HIV status, race/ethnicity, disability, body type, education, gender performance, income, class/social position.
- Health promotion campaigns should depict a broader representation of gay youth in their visuals i.e., gay men of colour, gay men with disabilities, and transgendered gay men.
- Create spaces and opportunities for gay youth to share experiences and stories to promote openness and understanding.

4

Build Support for Healthy Relationships

The relationships that gay men can have with each other is the cornerstone of what it means to be gay.

- Establish supportive environments to enable youthful bonding that lasts a lifetime.
- Take account of the variety of gay men's relationships beyond sexual relationships: i.e., with oneself, with family, with allies, with communities.
- Create social rather than sexualized spaces to foster friendships.
- Engage youth in a re-evaluation of their expectations of various types of gay men's relationships.
- Develop campaigns that reduce stigma and support diverse types of gay relationships.

5

Bridge the Knowledge Gap

Gay youth face a unique challenge in preserving the accumulated knowledge and experience of gay men from across generations. To keep building on gay men's rich history, programs should facilitate activities between generations.

- Bridge between youth and older generations of gay men through mentorship and oral history programs.
- Create links across community organizations to enable sharing of their institutional histories and acquired knowledge.
- Establish information exchange in high schools and underserved regions.

Conclusion



By the end of the day, new bonds had been created among participants and many felt more committed than ever to young gay men's health development in BC and beyond. It was a first step in rallying a group of dedicated young gay men to build a common agenda. *Stepping Up* participants identified some of the main challenges constraining the advancement of young gay men's health and potential solutions for strengthening the response.



Building on the discussions and suggestions from the gathering, we believe the following immediate actions are required:

1. *Implement an annual conference for young gay men that includes knowledge exchange, skills-building and networking.*
2. *Develop an intersectionality/social justice framework for young gay men's health programming that articulates the diversity of their experience to be integrated in both research and practice environments.*
3. *Establish a network of young gay men's health advocates to exchange ideas, information and resources.*
4. *Develop new research projects that address the social factors that shape young gay men's health. Future research should investigate developmental cohorts and the gay life course; address issues of diversity.*
5. *Building on the Investigaytors project, increase young gay men's direct involvement in research operations and skill development.*

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Report

Olivier Ferlatte, David Le, Rick Marchand and Terry Trussler

Note-takers

Sarah Chown, Joshun Dulai, Travis Salway Hottes, Jody Jollimore, David Le, Keith Reynolds, Jordan Sang

Presenters and Facilitators

Rob Bittner, Sarah Chown, Olivier Ferlatte, Daniel Grace, Michael Harris, Darren Ho, Travis Salway Hottes, Jody Jollimore, Jeremy Andrew Jones, Morgan Jones, Daniel McGraw, Michael Reid

Advisory Group

Jesse Brown, Sarah Chown, Olivier Ferlatte, Travis Salway Hottes, Jody Jollimore, David Le, Daniel McGraw, Rob Parry, Michael Reid, Keith Reynolds, Joshun Dubai, Jordan Sang

Report Layout and Design

Derek Reynolds

Photography

Alex Christy

In Attendance

Jorge Alvarez, Rob Bittner, Jon Brin, Jesse Brown, Stephen Chmilar, Sarah Chown, Stefan Crampton, Joshun Dulai, Olivier Ferlatte, Jamie Forrest, Stefan John Friesen, Cory Genereaux, Daniel Grace, Darren Ho, Trevor Hodges, Travis Salway Hottes, Jody Jollimore, Jeremy Andrew Jones, Morgan Jones, Mo Kazerooni, John Kuipers, Michael Kwag, Allan Lal, Simon Lam, David Le, Carven Li, Daniel McGraw, Lief Pagalan, Rob Parry, Michael Reid, Derek Reynolds, Keith Reynolds, Andrew Shopland, Cayne Standish, Jordan Sang, Jaedyn Starr

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Community-Based Research Centre

Ste 234 - 970 Burrard St,
Vancouver, British Columbia
Canada V6Z 2R4

www.cbrc.net

Telephone: 604 568-7478

Email: info@cbrc.net

 [@CBRCtweets](https://twitter.com/CBRctweets)



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