



DIGITAL
**SEXUAL
HEALTH**
INITIATIVE

Accessing needed sexual health services during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in BC

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CAHR 2021 Virtual



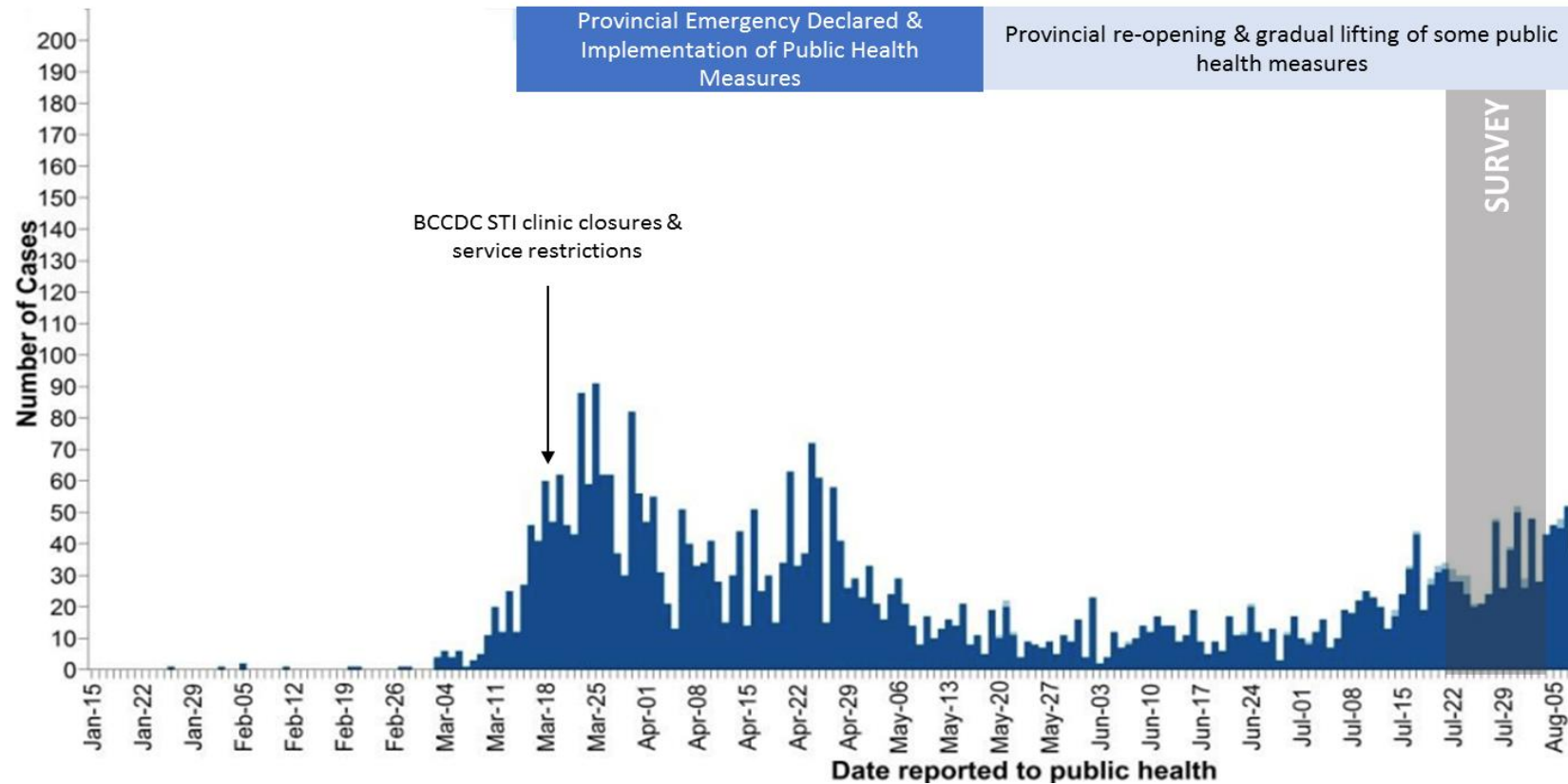
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COVID-19 cases in BC in 2020



- Saw decreases in STI testing & diagnoses after March 2020 (first phase)



Research Goal & Aims

Goal:

To understand how the COVID-19 pandemic affected access to sexual health services

Specific Aims:

1. To understand the characteristics of existing SH service clients who did not access needed sexual health services during the pandemic (i.e. who had unmet sexual health needs)
2. To assess the relationship between pandemic-related reasons for avoiding care on having unmet sexual health needs



Methods: Sex in the Time of COVID-19 survey

- Recruited from Provincial STI clinic & *GetCheckedOnline** clients who had previously consented to be contacted for research via email
- Inclusion criteria: accessed service year prior to pandemic; ≥ 16 years old; complete English language survey
- Email survey conducted July 21 – Aug 4, 2020
- Analysis:
 - Restricted to participants reporting needing STI test/sexual health service since March 2020
 - Primary outcome: unmet sexual health need
 - Logistic regression
- Ethics approval

*BC's Internet-based STI testing service offering testing for Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, HIV, Syphilis, HCV



GET**CHECKED**
ONLINE



Results: Participation

4,212 e-mail invitations sent

1,518 (36%) started survey

1,198 (28%) completed survey



706/1,198 (59%) reported needing an STI test or another sexual health service since March 2020



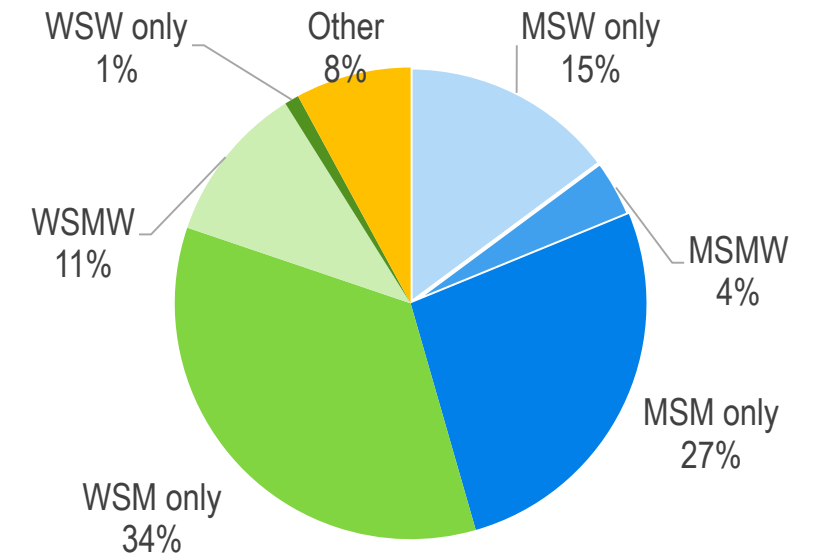
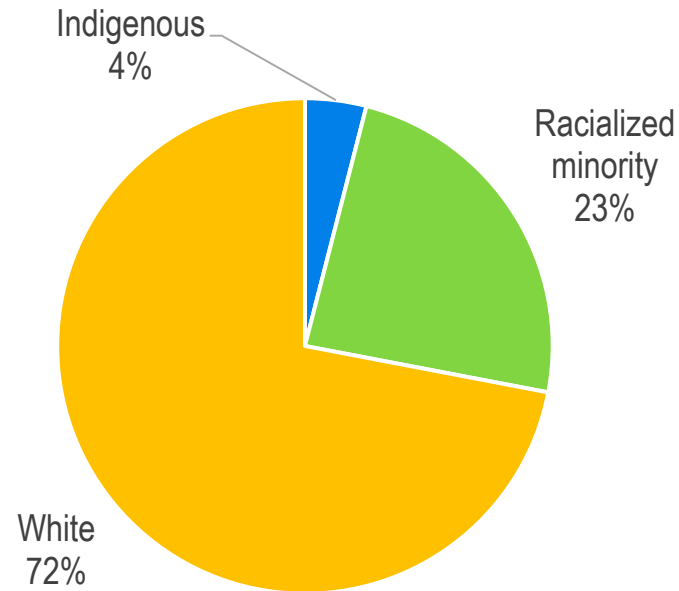
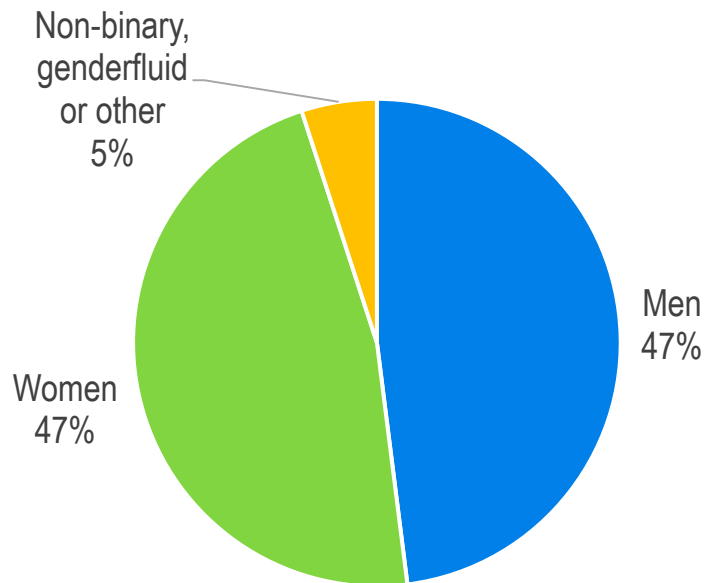
**Study
Sample**



365 (52%) had unmet sexual health needs

Socio-demographics of the study sample (n=706)

- Median age: 32 years (inter-quartile range: 26-39 years)





Characteristics of individuals with unmet sexual health needs (1 of 3)

Variable	At least one need unmet (N=365)	All needs met (N=341)	Unadjusted OR (95% CI)
<i>Gender identity</i>			
Man	43%	51%	Ref
Woman	51%	44%	1.37 (1.01-1.86)
Non-binary / Genderfluid / Other	6%	5%	1.36 (0.69-2.70)
<i>Gender of sex partners prior to the pandemic</i>			
Men who have sex with women only	18%	12%	Ref
Men who have sex with men and women	4%	4%	0.81 (0.35-1.93)
Men who have sex with men only	20%	35%	0.37 (0.23-0.61)
Women who have sex with men only	35%	34%	0.67 (0.42-1.07)
Women who have sex with men and women	14%	7%	1.24 (0.67-2.35)
Women who have sex with women only	1%	1%	0.61 (0.11-3.43)
Other	8%	7%	0.71 (0.36-1.38)



Characteristics of individuals with unmet sexual health needs (2 of 3)

Variable	At least one need unmet (N=365)	All needs met (N=341)	Unadjusted OR (95% CI)
<i>Type of sexual health service need</i>			
Testing for a new, specific reason (e.g., symptoms)	22%	30%	1.27 (0.79-2.04)
Testing as per usual testing routine	66%	48%	2.48 (1.64-3.79)
Speak with a health care provider about a sexual health concern	25%	18%	1.44 (1.00-2.08)
Access birth control	10%	18%	0.48 (0.30-0.75)
Access to HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis	6%	14%	0.39 (0.22-0.66)
Access treatment for a new STI	4%	9%	0.40 (0.21-0.76)
Access treatment for ongoing symptoms (e.g., warts)	5%	6%	0.84 (0.43-1.65)
Get a pregnancy test	3%	5%	0.52 (0.22-1.17)
Access to condoms	5%	4%	1.01 (0.49-2.10)
Access to harm reduction supplies	1%	1%	2.39 (0.51-16.79)



Characteristics of individuals with unmet sexual health needs (3 of 3)

Variable	At least one need unmet (N=365)	All needs met (N=341)	Unadjusted OR (95% CI)
<i>Comfort with accessing in-person sexual health services during the pandemic</i>			
Strongly agree / agree	42%	79%	0.19 (0.14-0.27)
Neither / disagree / strongly disagree	66%	48%	Ref
<i>Use of testing services prior to the pandemic</i>			
Get Checked Online user	73%	82%	0.62 (0.43-0.88)



Barriers associated with having unmet sexual health needs

Reason for avoiding or delaying seeking care	Total with sexual health need (N=706)	At least one need unmet (N=365)	All needs met (N=341)	Unadjusted OR (95% CI)	Adjusted OR* (95% CI)
Public messaging that wasn't supposed to seek non-urgent healthcare	35%	52%	17%	5.50 (3.85-7.96)	4.27 (2.88-6.42)
Concern about getting COVID-19 at clinic/lab	32%	46%	17%	4.21 (2.95-6.08)	2.63 (1.73-4.04)
Place usually go for testing/care was closed or had reduced services	27%	34%	19%	2.30 (1.61-3.31)	2.52 (1.68-3.82)
Concerned about getting COVID-19 while travelling to a clinic/lab	22%	32%	11%	3.87 (2.58-5.95)	2.21 (1.38-3.58)
Worried that healthcare provider might judge me for having sex during COVID	12%	17%	7%	2.64 (1.61-4.46)	2.56 (1.47-4.57)
Didn't know where to access services	12%	16%	7%	2.54 (1.53-4.35)	2.46 (1.38-4.48)
Live/close contact with someone at risk of COVID-19	5%	8%	3%	3.41 (1.60-8.13)	2.64 (1.11-6.92)

* adjusted for age, gender, sexual orientation (behaviour), race/ethnicity, education, comfort accessing in-person services, and being a GetCheckedOnline user



Conclusions

- Over half of existing sexual health service clients did not access needed sexual health services during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Urgency of need likely important factor (e.g., STI treatment vs routine testing)
- Most common reasons for reporting avoiding/delaying care were public messaging, concern about acquiring COVID-19, services closure/reduction
- Offering alternative service delivery methods may help to improve access
- Findings may not be generalizable beyond existing sexual health service clients in BC



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