

## FAQs on Internet surveys

- 1) Internet sample are not representative, because the sampling frame is unclear.

*No, they are not representative. It is very difficult to recruit a representative sample of MSM because there is no sampling frame of MSM. The absolute size of the MSM population is unknown and its size depends on how the construct 'MSM' is defined. Only very small representative samples of MSM (within the bounds of disclosure) have been recruited during the course of general population surveys, and these are much too small to use for programme planning purposes.*

*This is why in EMIS we are more concerned with differences across the sample (e.g. by age, area of residence, etc.) than the absolute levels of any variables. We can treat the EMIS samples as the population of MSM that public health and health promotion are able to reach and interact with. In this sense the samples ARE the population of concern. The HIV prevention needs assessment carried out with the MSM in EMIS describes the needs of the service user group of the EMIS partnership.*

- 2) If results from convenience samples are not representative, why do we do such surveys anyway?

*Absolute proportions from the EMIS study cannot be seen as being representative for all MSM in that country. However, they can serve as best guesses for a minimum or maximum proportion. E.g. if 30% in our samples have never been tested for HIV, the true value can only be higher, but not lower, because of oversampling men with an interest in HIV-prevention, and men with higher education. Instead of basing conclusions on absolute proportions, convenience samples can best be used to explore associations between different factors. This can be done both on an individual and on a country level.*

- 3) Why don't you use random samples based on the general population to then filter out those who are not attracted to men or never had sex with men?

*Using random samples drawn from the general population is not cost-effective for sampling MSM, because extremely large samples would be needed. To recruit the number of MSM who responded to EMIS with a general population approach, about 6 million men, or 12 million people would need to be approached.*

- 4) When recruiting through particular websites, a large bias is introduced.

*Yes it is. However we used a lot of different websites to recruit respondents to our survey. Furthermore, we included all major European social networks for gay men, using individual messages to ensure maximum participation. Bias is something you always consider when doing research, and what you take into consideration when performing the data analysis.*

5) Not all gay men have access to the Internet. By using the Internet, you introduce selection bias towards the more privileged MSM.

*Yes we do. In 2008, access to the Internet via privately owned computers still varied substantially across Europe. Nonetheless, the one thing all respondents have in common is that they have access to the Internet, whether it be at home or elsewhere. "Most countries in Europe, and in particular the EU members, have progressed from the first stage of information and communication technology development (access) to the second stage (use)". In the last two years, the sharpest increase of Internet use was among people who were older or who had lower educational attainment. Also, the digital divide between eastern and western Europe which was still visible in 2008 has become even narrower.*

6) Face-to-face interviews or print questionnaires are better instruments to recruit sexually active MSM

*By using the Internet, a broader range of MSM population can be reached as compared to print-questionnaires, venue-based approaches, or even RDS. This is true for younger and older age, for less educated men, and for men living in small cities and in the country side; or men less connected to established gay communities. The more important the Internet is for finding sexual partners, the more important it is to at least include Internet sampling.*

7) How can you compare samples from different countries, if the relative response rates (i.e. the number of respondents per 1000 inhabitants) are so largely different?

*If you look at the response rates of those who were personally invited to participate in the survey (e.g. by a message on their GayRomeo, Manhunt, or other gay social network Internet profile), the differences in response are much smaller.*

8) If you don't collect IP addresses, how can you be sure that people don't fake questionnaires or enter their data multiple times in order to move the results into a particular direction?

*Using such a large questionnaire makes it unlikely to fill it in repeatedly. Furthermore, we apply a plausibility check that would exclude people who gave rather random answers to get through the questionnaire. Though we cannot exclude fake answers, particularly if they are authentically faked, we can minimize random answers. Given the large number of responses, a few double entries will have minimal effect on the main findings and associations.*

#### Summary:

*EMIS was designed to describe the differences in HIV prevention needs across different groups of men, as well as to estimate the relative levels of different risk and precautionary behaviours. It is not representative of either all MSM or all gay and bisexual identified men. It cannot answer causal questions about the relative risk of HIV transmission behaviours, or the validity of HIV prevention needs. Nonetheless, EMIS can provide us with important insights into different risk behaviours and the unmet needs across different groups of MSM in many European countries.*

*As with all surveys, there are limitations to Internet surveys. We minimized those limitations during the planning of recruitment (using multiple online social networks and websites), during the questionnaire design (aiming not only at self-identified gay men, but at all men who have sex with men or who feel attracted to men, and by carefully balancing and pre-testing the questionnaire in multiple languages), and during the analyses (e.g. by adjusting for age, place of residence, source and weekday of recruitment, etc.).*

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\* International Telecommunication Union: Measuring the Information Society, Geneva 2010