



**“Out”**

**on the Reef:  
10 years on**

A study of the experiences  
of gay men in Cairns, 2010



# Acknowledgements

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The authors would like to thank the local members of the Cairns gay community who gave of their time to participate in focus group discussion and shared their experiences, and the key informant interview participants who also contributed their time and their knowledge of gay men in Cairns.

This research also owes sincere thanks to the following organisations for their support and counsel:

- Queensland Association for Healthy Communities;
- Queensland Positive People;
- Spiritus Positive Directions;
- And; Queensland Health, who kindly provided funding for this project.

In particular, we would like to thank Vince O'Donell, Chris Howard and Simon O'Connor.

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ISBN: 978-0-7334-3049-7

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.26190/5dc4f3bec21a7>

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# Abbreviations

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GCPS	Gay Community Periodic Survey
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
PASH	Pleasure and Sexual Health study
PD	Spiritus Positive Directions
PLHIV	people with HIV
QAHC	Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (formerly QuAC)
QuAC	Queensland AIDS Council
QPP	Queensland Positive People
SOPV	sex on premises venue; includes saunas, sex shops and sex clubs
STI	sexually transmissible infection

## Executive summary

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For gay men living in Cairns, life probably remains very similar to how it was when the first “Out” on the Reef report was written in 2000. Men continue to be drawn there by the relaxed, tropical lifestyle, willingly leaving behind the stress of larger urban gay communities. The men in these focus groups described differing levels of attachment to any gay community in Cairns, which generally matched their desire for it. For the most part, the wider community increasingly embraced the diverse nature of the expanding Cairns population.

However, there was a strong sense that in recent years, gay community life in Cairns has been somewhat reinvigorated with several initiatives that encouraged more participation in highly visible activities. While some embraced these, others remained content in their decision to remain separate, although they appreciated the considerable efforts made by a few dedicated individuals.

The typical profile of men arriving in Cairns in recent years seems to be men in their forties, in relationships, seeking a lifestyle that is more conducive to settling down, without the pressures or trappings of city life. Often described as ‘suburban gays’, younger gay men or single gay men often felt this limited their opportunity to achieve any substantial connection with these men.

The instability of commercial venues provided some frustration; the one dedicated gay bar provided a valuable focal point for some, while many men were somewhat critical of the sex on premises venue. The most frequently cited occasion when men would connect with each other was at the relatively new, monthly ‘Out’ parties. These managed to attract a diverse mix from the various communities and were described as the only opportunity where the men felt truly free to express themselves. The proliferation of the internet appears to have changed how gay men meet sex partners, with mainly older or non-gay identifying men continuing to use the once busy local beats.

The attitudes of the men in the focus groups to HIV and sex were similar to those of other gay men in Australia; they seemed well informed about risk and, on occasion, would be prepared to accept an element of risk in their pursuit of sexual pleasure. There appeared to be little talk of HIV between sex partners, or more broadly as a community. This may be contributing to feelings of isolation described by some of the HIV-positive men. Following a considerable period, during which these men felt that service provision for people with HIV in Cairns was inadequate, an informal network of individuals had taken action to advocate for services that more proactively engaged with positive men, and it appeared that these efforts were achieving some results.

Overall, though, the men described a sense of belonging in their chosen communities and feelings of optimism for the future.



## Introduction & background

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*"2010 is ... definitely the gayest year we've had ever in Cairns! Like there's been more events, more parties. Yeah, I mean this year alone I've probably been to five or six friends' places that have actually had drag parties and things. So it's the whole, I don't know what it is!"*  
(Focus group participant)

This study is a follow-up to one conducted in the year 2000 that described the experiences of gay men in Cairns and their subcultures. The resulting report from that study was titled "Out" on the Reef. This current report is of a study in which we revisited gay men in Cairns, with a view to documenting their experiences, a decade later.

### **"Out" on the Reef, 2000**

The original study found that many gay men in Cairns had migrated there to enjoy the relaxed tropical lifestyle. While the men did not describe initial experiences of a cohesive, active gay community, many men were able to establish supportive networks with other gay men. Although some missed the larger, vibrant gay scenes they had left behind, they accepted the advantages that life in Cairns brought. While they experienced little harassment in terms of their sexual identity in the main centre of Cairns, the men were still required to exercise discretion in outlying parts of Cairns.

The handful of gay commercial venues operating in Cairns at that time were not seen to cater for a local gay population, rather catering to visitors. Instead, men would often meet other gay men at beats, through advertisements in a local paper, or over the internet.

Many of the men who participated in the original study had some connection to the tourism and hospitality industries. They described aspects of their employment in these industries that created barriers to participating in gay community, such as poor pay, working unusual hours and the itinerant nature of people who work in these industries.

The men felt adequately informed about how to maintain their sexual health and reported consistent condom use with sex partners. The experiences of HIV-positive men in the study were similar to those whose HIV status was undefined, although some of the HIV-positive men described financial hardship as well as initial difficulties in accessing appropriate health services for HIV management. These men reported little concern over discrimination on the basis of their HIV status. However, the HIV-positive men's accounts of the use of condoms differed from those of the HIV-negative men, in that condom use was not likely to happen, until they themselves initiated it.

The main conclusions of the first "Out" on the Reef report suggested a risk that safe sex messages reaching men in Cairns may be out-dated, and that men may become complacent about the risks of infection of HIV or other sexually transmissible infections (STIs). Further, it was suggested that difficulties in community formation and a lack of peer support networks for HIV-positive men might lead to an environment of fear and self-isolation for some positive men.

## Cairns in 2010

In the ten years since “Out” on the Reef, the population of Cairns has grown by more than 28% and continues to experience one of Australia’s largest population growths (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Cairns remains a hugely popular tourist destination; after Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, it is the fourth most visited part of Australia by international tourists. Approximately two million visitors, both domestic and international, visit Cairns each year (Tourism Research Australia, 2010).

Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics data, derived from the numbers of men who reported living in a same-sex domestic partnership in the 2001 Australian Census, as well as estimates from the Australian Study of Health and Relationships national study of sex among Australian residents and patterns of relationships among gay men as reported in the Gay Community Periodic Surveys (GCPS), there were approximately 1,500 homosexual men living in North Queensland at that time (Prestage et al., 2008). Applying the same rate of population growth to this population as was experienced in Cairns in general would suggest that there are now somewhere between 1,900 and 2,000 homosexual men living in North Queensland. This, of course, does not include the large number of gay men who visit Cairns as tourists (presumably around 15,000 per annum based on the same estimates described by Prestage et al., 2008), nor does it include men who would not be described as homosexual but who might rarely engage in some homosexual behaviour.

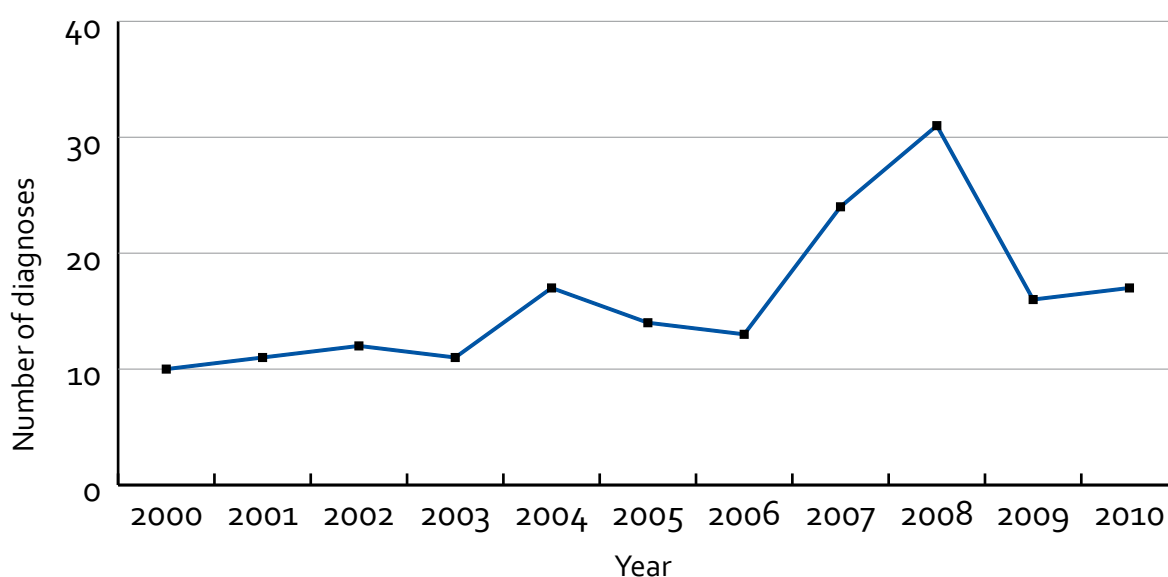
So in this report we address the question: What is it like for gay men living in the Cairns of today: what has changed over the past ten years and what remains the same?

The authors would like to note that this study is a ‘snapshot in time’ and reflects the views of gay community members and key informants at the time when they participated in the research focus groups and individual interviews in August 2010.

## Surveillance data

In the period 2000-2010, rates of new diagnoses of HIV increased until they reached a peak in 2008, since which time the number has fallen back to previous levels and appears to have stabilised. Over the past five years, HIV diagnoses made in Cairns represent about one-eighth of HIV diagnoses made in Queensland (Queensland Government, 2010).

Figure 1: Notifications of new HIV diagnoses in Cairns and Hinterland, 2000-2010

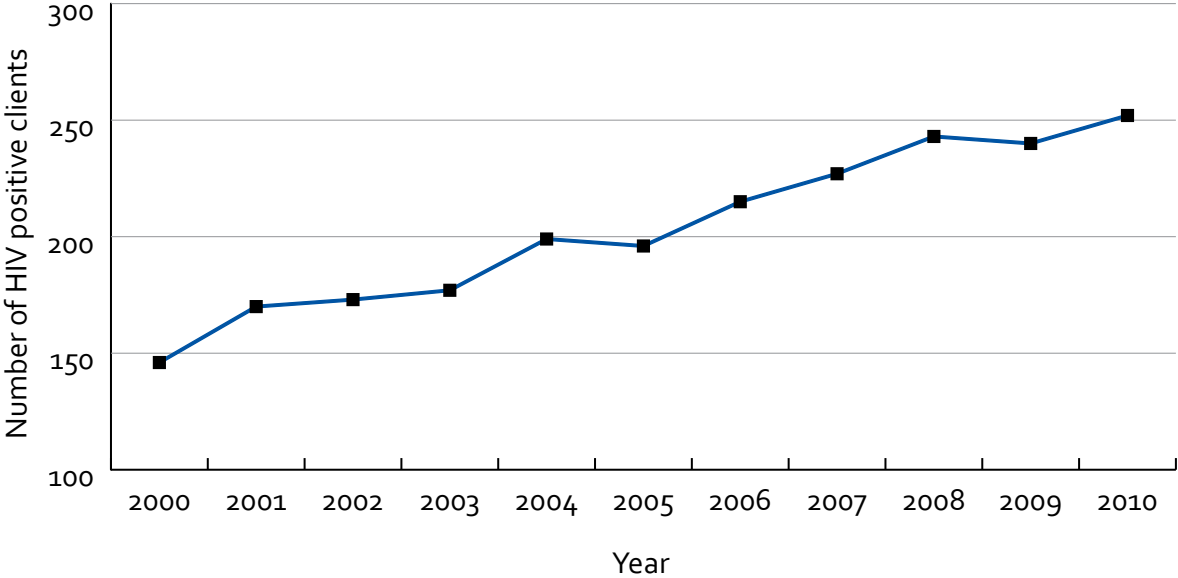


Source: QLD Government



The numbers of PLHIV accessing the Doll’s House (Cairns Sexual Health Service) have also steadily increased over the same ten-year period. In 2010, 252 PLHIV accessed services there, with a number of other PLHIV accessing the two community s100 prescribers in Cairns.

Figure 2: Number of HIV positive clients attending the Doll’s House by year



Source: Cairns Sexual Health Centre

It is estimated that in 2000 there were 155 people with HIV (PLHIV) in Far North Queensland (NCHECR, 2010), while in 2010 it was expected that that number would have grown to 319. Based on the estimated number of homosexual men living in North Queensland, and the HIV prevalence found in the GCPS, the number of gay men with HIV in Cairns may be around 200. This would not include PLHIV who were not gay men (i.e., women and heterosexual men).

### **The Gay Community Periodic Survey**

Behavioural surveillance of gay community attached men in Cairns has been conducted since 1999. In terms of their sexual behaviour, drug use and HIV and STI testing patterns, the men in Cairns are much like the men recruited elsewhere in Australia. However the men in Cairns differ from other men in some demographic characteristics: they tend to be slightly less well educated, and although they report the same rates of employment, they are less likely to hold managerial or professional roles. This may reflect structural issues in the broader workforce in regional Australia. More white-collar, professional jobs exist in larger cities while a greater proportion of service, sales and blue collar jobs are located in regional cities; therefore people with different skills are drawn to live and work in regional Australia. There is also less opportunity for tertiary education for locals raised in Cairns.

Men in Cairns are also slightly less likely to identify as gay than other men in Australia, though they do so at similar rates to men in Brisbane.

### **The Pleasure and Sexual Health (PASH) Study**

Of the 2306 men who participated in the 2009 PASH study, 50 men reported living in North Queensland, and several in-depth interviews were also conducted with men in Cairns. Demographically, the local survey respondents were much like the other men in the sample, with a mean age of 35. The proportion of men reporting being HIV positive was 9%, as was that of the national sample.

Although men in North Queensland were somewhat less socially involved with other gay men, they considered themselves to be as involved in the community as did the national sample. This suggests that their involvement in gay community life is not too dissimilar to that of men in the larger cities but, because there are fewer gay men living in the area, it is to be expected that they would have fewer gay friends. There was not a great deal of difference in their reported number of sex partners, with just a slight tendency to fewer partners, and they were just as likely to have casual sex and to be in a relationship. They were slightly less likely to report having had sex with HIV-positive partners.

The men from North Queensland reported similar levels of self-esteem and had similar attitudes to sex; they shared the same beliefs about HIV and similar levels of optimism about HIV treatments and risk of transmission; and there was little difference in their likelihood to use drugs or to have recently used condoms when compared to the national sample.

There may be a slight tendency for men in North Queensland to be inclined to think there are fewer HIV-positive men in their area, which is belied somewhat by the prevalence rate within this same sample.

These data do suggest that there may be a slight tendency for men in North Queensland to be more likely to engage in unprotected anal intercourse with casual partners, but there was very little information in the survey data to suggest any reason that would be the case.

In qualitative interviews for PASH, there was often a strong sense of social isolation and disadvantage expressed by the men in Cairns. Partly this was due to the timing of the interviews, during the height of the global financial crisis when tourism was at a very low level, thereby affecting the local economy more than was often the case elsewhere in Australia. Nonetheless, the sense of social isolation was common amongst these men, who seemed to feel that the local gay community was very small, so small that it severely affected their capacity to maintain confidentiality and therefore limited their opportunities for meeting new sex partners and friends or to form relationships.

## **The HIV Seroconversion Study**

The HIV Seroconversion Study is an interview-based study of individuals who have recently been diagnosed with HIV, to identify what they believe led to their HIV infection, and their experiences prior to and since diagnosis.

For the most part, the men in the Cairns sample are much like their equivalents recruited elsewhere for the Seroconversion Study. Testing patterns prior to diagnosis were broadly similar to men recruited elsewhere, although there was a large number who had not been tested during the two years prior to HIV diagnosis, and the majority of men appeared to be unaware of the availability of PEP. Knowledge of PEP may be a particular issue for men who do not regularly participate in gay community life. A similar factor may be involved in decisions not to use condoms, when men believe that they are at little risk because they believe, or assume, particular sexual partners have limited sexual contact with other homosexually active men.

As with recent seroconverters generally, at the high risk event that they believe led to their HIV infection, the men in the Cairns sample appear to have mainly engaged in receptive unprotected anal intercourse, often with partners about whose HIV status they could not be certain.

Recent seroconverters in Cairns were similar to those recruited elsewhere in that they tended to be fairly sexually active in general and also used a variety of methods to meet their sexual partners. However, probably due to the relatively limited range of venues in Cairns, they were also more likely to use beats than were those recruited elsewhere – but none of the men reported that their high risk events had occurred at a beat.

While the men in the Cairns sample appeared to be relatively cautious in their beliefs about HIV and transmission, their behaviour suggests that we may need to explore those beliefs in more detail. Also, issues of lack of information and relatively low involvement, socially and sexually, with other gay men suggests that there may be a need for more information about both access to services and relative risk, as well as about their emotional support and well-being. As is the case elsewhere, many men appear to put themselves at increased risk based on a perception that they know their partners and can trust them. In Cairns, this issue may be exacerbated by a perception of lower vulnerability due to less sexual involvement with other men. For the most part it is very likely that most gay men in Cairns, as is the case elsewhere, make such assessments based on reasonable information. However, these men are those who have been infected as a consequence of these sorts of decisions, and they highlight the fact that often men make such apparently reasonable decisions based on insufficient or inaccurate information.



# Findings

## Reasons for living in Cairns

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Most of the men in the focus groups were not originally from Cairns: They had come to Cairns, usually with the intention of a short visit, and were so enamoured with it that they had decided to relocate there:

*"Came up here for a holiday. Loved it. Went home. Quit my job. Sold everything. Moved up here. That simple." (Focus group participant)*

A small number of the men were born in Cairns and had grown up there. Among those men, all but one had spent extended periods of time living elsewhere - in other parts of Australia or overseas - and while they valued those experiences, they had chosen to return to their home town:

*"Look, for me ..., I grew up here, I lived in London for a while so I'd experienced lots of other things in the world. But I think it is a reality and the fact that, you know, we're all sitting here today and there is a huge gay population in this town. It's not a bad place to live in if you're gay, lesbian or bisexual. Otherwise we would not be here, you know? And that's something to be celebrated. You know, for me personally yes, there's things I miss about London and the big world, and all of that but, you know, there are worse places you can be." (Focus group participant)*

## Climate and lifestyle

For many, a major factor that drew them to Cairns was the warm, tropical climate:

*"Moved to Cairns about 18 months ago after putting up with ... 11 years of winter – 11 cold winters!" (Focus group participant)*

For others, it was the laid back lifestyle that appealed to them. Cairns offered a relaxed alternative to otherwise challenging lives:

*"A lot of people have come up here to, to retire from something that has caused them stress" (Focus group participant)*

Attitudes in Cairns were much less formal than in larger cities:

*"You come into work wearing long trousers and people say, 'Have you got your Brisbane clothes on?'" (Key informant)*

Cairns represented an opportunity to enjoy warm weather, wind down, and get away from big city life:

*"Climate was the biggest thing but it was also ... relaxed way of life, smaller town ... less of a hard club scene. That was just getting too much down in Melbourne." (Key informant)*

## Escaping

For some, the relentless pace of life in a larger city, career pressures and an unhealthy lifestyle had become too much. This man describes making the move to help him break a cycle of behaviour that was unsustainable:

*"Already planned to leave the city because I knew what was gonna happen and I could see what was happening in Sydney to all my friends. And it did. It was not getting any better because of HIV and the drug-taking ... most of my friends now in Sydney are all dead. I got out in time. I saw the light. A lot of my friends didn't 'cause they kept on going down the same road. I was there but I had to, I saw the path that was ahead of me and said, 'Nup, I've gotta go.' So that's why I'm here and enjoy the quiet lifestyle. And that's it. Work-wise I've taken on a, I had a serious job in Sydney. I was a, I worked for a big chain of hotels. I was a duty manager with lots of responsibilities. But since I came up here I thought, 'Don't need that.' Stress has gone downhill. It's great. That's it." (Focus group participant)*

The sheer isolation of Cairns helped provide a sense of anonymity, a place where they could distance themselves from their old life and start again:

*"People say, 'I've, I've escaped.' I've heard people say that. 'I've escaped. I don't want people to know that I'm here even.' I've even heard that." (Focus group participant)*

The combination of a warmer climate and the relative peace made Cairns an ideal retreat:

*"This place allows you anonymity for its size. Even within the gay community you can be a 'suburban gay' and only have that little circle. It, it offers so much for someone who wants to escape; even if it's just to escape to the sun." (Focus group participant)*

For one man, it was not the pursuit of anonymity that drew him to Cairns, but a desire to belong and be recognised, and a small town allowed this:

*"But like ... coming from a big city where you're dealing with heavy traffic, high-pressured jobs, and, you know, a bigger community ... where you can get virtually ignored because you're only one of a ... bigger number of people. Where here in Cairns you have an opportunity to stand out a little bit more because it's just smaller – a closer-knit community." (Focus group participant)*

## Staying the distance

For some, Cairns did not provide the escape from their troubles that they had anticipated:

*"I think a lot of people ... came up here for a holiday two or three years ago and what they've done is that they've ... gone back to Sydney or Melbourne, or wherever, and then suddenly thought, 'I don't need all of this shit in my life.' Problem is they jump on a plane and they bring all their shit with them." (Focus group participant)*

Leaving established friendship networks and adjusting to a different life was not always easy:

*"Well I think ... in the 35-plus age group ... isolation is one of the issues. And you do get a lot of people who are a bit disgruntled because they've had unrealistic expectations about Cairns. They've been living in Sydney and Melbourne, and they're fed up with the, you know, the rat-race and the lifestyle, and ... maybe, maybe if they're very out, people from ... the recreational drugs scene in, down south and they want to escape and come up north, and they think, 'Cairns!' They may have been here once for a holiday and they think, 'Cairns is a wonderful climate and wonderful place and, you know, it has got a reasonable gay community, I've heard, so I'll come up here.' And they, they come up here and they find 'yes', the climate is warmer. But, you know, they are cut off from the friends they may have had down south. And they find it hard to establish friendships up here because there isn't as coherent a gay community. And maybe they work, they haven't been able to get a job that is as good as the job they had in, down south, and may not be as well remunerated as the job they had down south. And they feel disgruntled about it. But they've kind of cut their, their cord, their ... anchors and, and they're a bit stranded up here. And I think ... for some of the older guys ... And particularly if they're not, you know, and I ... you know, be honest here: if they're not particularly attractive and if they find it hard to make any kind of sexual relationship with a younger guy, then they feel quite down and depressed about it. And I think, I think yes ... there is a, for those sort of people there's quite a sense of isolation I think." (Key informant)*

And in some cases, the change did not work out:

*"Basically, either, either be work or drugs, or the whole party scene. But they do: they land here and the majority of them you might meet once or twice – gone." (Focus group participant)*



## Experiences of being gay in Cairns

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Overwhelmingly, the men in the focus groups all believed Cairns to be a town where they felt safe and comfortable being gay. The men provided a variety of accounts of experiences of being gay in Cairns and for the most part their experiences had been positive:

*"I've lived in Cairns more than anywhere else I've ever lived and I've never got any criticism or adverse reactions ... I just felt the freest I've felt anywhere. I've lived in here in Cairns to be a gay man." (Focus group participant)*

### Increased acceptance

Some men felt sufficiently comfortable that they displayed affection to each other in certain public spaces:

*"The majority of places we go to, bars that we go to, I would consider gay-friendly because we can be in there, we can show a bit of affection and not be worried." (Focus group participant)*

One participant commented that he felt safer displaying same-sex affection in Cairns than he had in other cities with larger gay communities:

*"For a lot of us coming here it's much easier ... I know that since I, my partner and I have been here, we've been more affectionate to each other because it's a smaller community, people know each other ... and I've never, ever had one person even look sideways at me up here. But, you know, I've been in Sydney and Melbourne where I've felt really vulnerable." (Focus group participant)*

Men felt it was important to be open and honest about their sexuality. In a small town, if someone is perceived to be hiding something, it arouses suspicion and creates mistrust:

*"You know ... I think you've gotta be out and open. If you're hiding something, that's when people will get you." (Focus group participant)*

However, one man described being advised to be conscious of how he presented himself to others if he wanted to fit in:

*"Somebody said to me, 'If you sort of, if you're not loud, if you're not out and proud in peoples' faces and, you know, overtly gay, then people ... are too busy up here or too hot, you know, and they're just like, just let you be.'" (Focus group participant)*

## Lingering hostility

Some of those who did not conform to heteronormative expectations felt vulnerable to attack:

*"Anyway, I find most of them very, very accepting. But the homophobic thing is still here. I've heard it. I've seen it. I see it all the time. Like if a guy comes in who's openly gay and flamboyant, and standing there waiting to be served, there's always an attack. I see it all the time. So it's here but I find the young people really quite accepting. But the homophobic thing is still here, believe me." (Focus group participant)*

One couple who had recently arrived in Cairns after relocating from a smaller town were shocked at the homophobic treatment they received, causing them to question their decision to settle there:

*"And these boys yelled back to her, 'See even the ... homos shop here!' And something like that. And I'd never, never had that sort of reaction from people ... And I said, 'I think we've done the wrong thing. We shouldn't have come here. Because if that's the way gay people are treated in the bigger community, then I think we need to go back to a small community where you're safe.' ... Yeah, it was a little bit, you know, 'Have we done the right thing?' ... And, you know, we haven't really got a lot of choice. We've gotta sit it out or whatever but thankfully, touch wood, it's the only time that something like that's happened." (Focus group participant)*

Men acknowledged that homophobia can exist anywhere and, sadly, there was a sense of inevitability that narrow-minded attitudes may arise at any time and place, and Cairns was no exception:

*"But there's, what is it? 160-odd-thousand people in Cairns? So you're bound to come across a few people who are on the homophobe side of things. And I have to accept that. Not understand it 'cause I don't, but I have to accept it, you know?" (Focus group participant)*

Nonetheless, all the men felt that homophobic individuals were in the minority, and found welcome support among locals who were prepared to challenge bigotry:

*"I got called a fag once at the [bar] and the barmaid decked him. You know, I go to the [bar], that's my pub. I'm accepted there." (Focus group participant)*

While some settings presented more risk than others, those who were closely connected to Cairns' tourist industry felt safer:

*"I grew up here and I don't know, I mean I suppose I'm in a fortunate situation compared to most 'cause I work in the tourism industry and I've always seen that side and that industry as being well, very open-minded and very accepting. And I've always seen Cairns, I think comparatively to other regional towns that I've been to in Australia and in the UK for that matter as well ... in fact I've seen a lot more scary homophobia in regional areas over there compared to here in some ways. And I don't know. I guess I think tourism has been a, an important industry in this town for a long time ... I think a town can't afford to be seen as a redneck, you know, kind of town where homophobia happens." (Focus group participant)*

One man believed people in regional areas were more easy-going than some people in larger cities:

*"I think there's less here than cities [homophobia] ... I've found people very accepting." (Focus group participant)*

Others commented on ignorance that prevailed among some elements of society:

*"Scratch the surface in Cairns and the rednecks are all just there. Okay? There, there's an undercurrent." (Focus group participant)*

## Belonging

Overall, the men in these focus groups described strong feelings of connection to the wider community in Cairns, and they actively engaged in local community events. There were many stories of the activities and lives of gay and lesbian people in Cairns feeling a growing sense of belonging in the wider community:

*"The gay and lesbian choir – Out Loud choir... show the development of the community. The choir performs not just at gay and lesbian events but it performs at the Yorkey's Knob Festival, which is organised by the residents of Yorkey's Knob. And there were some letters to the Cairns Post about that the first year - how this was inappropriate ... But they performed again the following year and there was no comments. I mean, having the annual Pride Fair and ... there's a number of I think prominent community events now in the Cairns community calendar that it doesn't sort of raise an eyebrow. But I think it did a couple of years ago ... And for ... Mother's Day this year ... they always have, you know, babies born on Mother's Day or this sort of thing. But this year they had a lesbian couple who had a baby. And again that, that generated a lot of debate in the Cairns Post with letters, but predominantly supportive. And I think that those things show there is a supportive network and it's coming out more in Cairns."*  
(Key informant)

Increased recognition and acknowledgement from local government provided assistance for a gay themed entry in the local annual festival parade:

*"I was just thinking of things that have changed. Like this is, this'll be the third year that we've been in the Cairns Festival Parade and the third Pride, Pride Day as well, at the end of the Cairns Festival. But this is the first year that Cairns City Council has funded a position as a Pride coordinator. So that's kind of like, you know, more progress that's happened as well."*  
(Key informant)

Some of the men who had participated in the parade float entry described enormous pride at receiving rapturous cheers from the crowd as their float entered the street:

*"The second year, the second year that we marched and when we hit the esplanade, and I've been in many, many Mardi Gras and I've been in many, many floats, but that was probably a moment in my life I'll never forget when we turned to go into the esplanade and they were 10 deep, and the crowd went ballistic. And we, none of us ... everybody was like stunned."  
"We turned around looking to see what was behind us, whether there was someone behind us." (Focus Group participants)*

## Perceptions of gay community

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The foundations of gay community in Cairns were established by men much like those in the focus groups; who had come to Cairns for a short escape, but found themselves increasingly drawn to life there. These men formed the rituals that continue to be practiced today; those that make Cairns such an appealing destination for gay men:

*"And I think also, traditionally, Cairns has been a place, you know, way back in the eighties that was, it was known that gay men came here for holidays in the winter, and they sort of co-inhabited together and had, got beach and did nude sunbathing, and had sex, and then went back to Melbourne and Sydney. And that went through all the eighties and nineties. And then eventually a few of them started to stay and created that sort of community. And so it's sort of been born, I think, out of that, over that sort of thing." (Focus group participant)*

The men in these focus groups held quite different ideas of what gay community in Cairns meant to them. Some men spoke of their primary connection to the local, wider community of Cairns. Nonetheless, the common bonds that gay men tend to share remained and this did bring them together. The opportunity to maintain those connections and to draw upon them when needed was highly regarded:

*"I have many different other circles which aren't necessarily gay but I do still love to have a connection ... with that community." (Focus group participant)*

Connections with other like-minded gay men provided something unique and important:

*"Cause I think we have a commonality: there's things that we can speak to each other about that is, you know, like ..., there's things we laugh about that we all get. You don't get that amongst your heterosexual friends." (Focus group participant)*

Although these were a diverse group of individuals, their shared common characteristic – their attraction for members of the same sex – provided a shared experience. There was an instinctive feeling of connectedness and an urge to rally together to protect each other:

*"I think it's just probably ... that because there's just a small population here, we have to kind of learn to co-exist in some way." (Focus group participant)*

Although essentially it was about how they connect with other gay men, there was a range of interpretations of what 'gay community' meant. These are broadly categorised below.

## Participation in community

Through community organised groups and events gay men in Cairns are brought together in a variety of ways. This man describes his delight at arriving in Cairns to find such an active community, like no other he had seen:

*"I've never been in a town or community where a gay scene is so active like with Gay Pride and, and World AIDS Day in the centre of town in the park, and ... I was pretty excited." (Focus group participant)*

The main driver of community activity was the Queensland Association for Health Communities (QAHC), formerly the Queensland AIDS Council (QuAC):

*"The ... people who've been in, since I was here in '96, the most important group was QuAC. They were the leaders who organised things." (Key informant)*

By creating opportunities for community members to come together, people became involved and connected in ways that would not have otherwise been possible:

*"I mean there are some wonderful, I mean it's good that there are, are some groups, and this was the, the Out Loud Choir here. They've attracted a lot of people who have, would not normally have gone out or come out, or done some hall, or socialised. And that was ... a QAHC, you know, thing." (Key informant)*

Gay events provided a space where men felt they could freely express themselves:

*"And then once the Out parties started going ... okay that, still it was only once a month, you know ... it's the one place that I know that I can go to and I can be truly 100 per cent myself, you know?" (Focus group participant)*

Instead of only connecting with other people just like themselves, in a small community everyone mixed together, there was a sense of collective spirit among a diverse group:

*"But that is such a huge thing that I do love about living back here now ... you can just find where you fit in this small community and it has a nice feel, rather than in a big city where you find the subculture and you only ever hang around with the same sort of people. And ... I love the diversity that we have living here. And, you know, Fair Day's a perfect example of that where you ... see all that." (Focus group participant)*

The rich diversity of Cairns' gay community was demonstrated at large events:

*"Here, you look at the Out Parties. And I love looking around and seeing, wow! You've got your butch dykes over there, you've got your indie twinks over here, you've got your, your leather bear there. And, you know, any other big city you would go to, you wouldn't see that sense of having to, to all come together in one space." (Focus group participant)*

Organised community events brought people together and allowed them to reunite or form new bonds, strengthening networks:

*"Well things happen to bring people out I think. They make people think, 'I might have a party at my place and invite my gay friends.' And I think people seeing people when they're out that they haven't seen for a while, they think, 'Oh I might, I might see you again,' ... Doesn't it? It's like a roller coaster ride, in a sense. And when there's nothing, people go back and say, 'Oh well I won't go out. I'll stay at home every night and find things to do.'" (Focus group participant)*

For newcomers to Cairns' gay community there was a period of adjustment, to shake off the norms they had learned in larger communities and become used to the feel of a smaller, friendlier community:

*"When I came to Cairns it was such a breath of fresh air. Well, 'cause I got involved, I got involved with community, you know. I got involved with Out and I got involved with doing, you know, with the parties once a month ... And I just felt, I just felt more inclusive. I felt people were friendlier, you know. And at first I was at little bit, 'Ooh,' you know, 'I'm not used to this.' And as the 12 months has gone on, you know, I've really grown to like it. I've really grown to like where I am and who I am. Because I think ... you become a product of your own environment. If you're in an environment where it's more aloof and people are more pretentious, after a while you become a product of that environment and you don't talk to people. And if somebody does say hello to you or speak to you, you think, 'Ooh,' you know, 'why, why are you speaking to me?'" (Focus group participant)*

There was a strong sense that in Cairns there was plenty of opportunity to become involved in the gay community, choosing to engage provided a sense of attachment:

*"Being involved. You know, if you're not involved, you can't really appreciate the community can you?" (Focus group participant)*

## Licensed venues

There were a variety of ways the men in the focus groups described connecting with other gay men in Cairns. Many men placed considerable significance on the availability of a licensed venue that was considered a gay venue. A gay bar provided a focal point; a place where men could gather, and be themselves:

*"And it's surprising how many people come out of the woodwork when there's a gay establishment such as the Out Front bar has just opened at Bohemia. Now people are coming out of the woodwork and have been out for years or they go and drink with somebody else and they just want to be with other gay people 'cause they can relax a bit more. Out Front bar is a totally gay establishment. You go to any of the other hotels that used to be where gay people go and there'd be only, they'd be a mixed bar. And so you really couldn't be screaming your tits off if you wanted to." (Key informant)*

In the absence of a dedicated gay bar, some men had felt isolated from each other. In recent years there have been several closures of bars, or reorienting of bars to cater for a heterosexual clientele. Among some men there was a feeling of betrayal that these bars would stop operating as gay bars:

*"... our current gay-friendly bar at the time ... decided to basically turn its back on the gay community. Well this is how I felt. Turn its back on the gay community and go straight. And then at that time we had nothing. This was before Out Front, before the Out parties. There was a definite period there where gay people didn't have anywhere to go for themselves, you know." (Focus group participant)*

Men reminisced about venues that no longer existed, and wondered why other gay men did not support the venues with their patronage:

*"Years ago there was more things happening in Cairns as far as community was concerned. Like there was Rusty's. I don't know if anybody's here from the days of Rusty's? Rusty's is now Shenanigans. And that was the, that was a fabulous bar. It's shut to the general public at 10 o'clock and opened as a gay bar. You go through the back. They'd open up the back bar. It was fantastic. Then we had JDL's which then became New Tricks but I mean Cairns, as far as venues is concerned, has gone backwards, not forward. There's nothing that you can go to and have a drink. I mean we've got a pub now and, as far as I'm concerned, this is my point of view – I don't go there that often but I try when I've got time because of my hours – but the local gay population do not support the venues in this town. And I don't know why." (Focus group participant)*

The combination of social events and a dedicated venue brought with it a new sense of a strengthened community:

*"But now that we've got like the Out parties that are happening and we've now got a designated gay venue, I've had actually different friends have said to me like, 'Oh we're thinking of coming in drag,' and all these sort of things. So it's, it's started evolving back, I think ... Now that we've suddenly got this whole resurgence of, of, of gay that's back I think, you know, there's, there's the undertone now that people are starting to say, 'Well we can be as gay as what, you know, Sydney or Melbourne.'" (Focus group participant)*



However, some felt that as the gay community in Cairns had grown, it had become less accessible:

*"I was struck by the number of gay people that I met but more bisexual people that were living here that I came across. And the gay scene, there weren't, there was only one bar to go to. There was the old [bar] and that was it. And ... and through that you all ... that, that was enough though. Everyone was very, very friendly. So there was always something to go to – a party and things like that – probably more so (than) now. People were more friendly (then). I think so, because the community seemed to be smaller and then everyone would include someone. If you went to a bar, people would just come up to you and introduce, you know, say, 'I haven't seen you here before. Do you know anyone? Let me take you around and introduce you to everybody.' So you got to know more people and then there were parties on all the time. Someone always had a barbeque or a party but there, there was only that [bar] and then [another bar] started, and that was the same."  
(Focus group participant)*

Some felt that the small town charm was being replaced with a different atmosphere that was being carried in with the influx of people from larger cities:

*"This was really a different, Cairns had an identity that was so different to Sydney. But now, of course, so many more people have come from Sydney that we all bring our identity – Sydney identity – and those bars now are, the bars now in Cairns are like Sydney bars. And they're not like ... Cairns bars used to be like, which was so, so friendly. Where eye contact and ... everyone talking to each other. If you saw someone standing by, you'd talk to them. Just 'hello' 'how are you?' 'welcome!' But now you, you, you know, it's, it's a different thing. Same in the streets. If you, see I was surprised – the first day I came to Cairns everyone walked down the street and everyone was saying 'hello, how are you?' and they'd look at you and check what you were wearing ... [Giggling] And they'd say, 'Hello.' And I thought, 'Gee, I've never met all these people. You know, I must have met them at the airport.' [Laughter] People would say, 'How are you?'" (Focus group participant)*

## Social networks

The men described informal networks of men who socialise outside of organised community events or venues:

*"I don't mix in the scene in Cairns ... I very rarely go out, mainly because of my hours, and I still wouldn't go out because I'm a little bit past that ... But we have a group ... one group of friends which I find in this town a lot of people just have their own groups of friends ... but that's what it's about; we've all got our own little groups, right and our own lives. We meet once a week ... And I'm just satisfied doing that sort of stuff ... I don't mix on the scene, but that's my choice. I know lots of other people in this town like that, you know. Like you go to the gay fair and you see all those people at the fair, and you think, 'God, where the fuck did they all come from?' [Laughter] 'Where?' You know? You only see them once a year. It's mindboggling shit."  
(Focus group participant)*

Small networks of men took turns hosting dinner parties, to which they would invite their close circle of friends:

*"... you usually do it when you're a couple, when you're a couple because it's easier to do. And you usually invite other couples but you always invite, you always invite other people – another couple or another individual, or two new individuals in so as to, to increase the circle."  
(Key informant)*



However, men described difficulty in accessing these networks as an outsider:

*"That's a major problem. That's a, a serious problem for a lot of people. A lot of people can't connect into that ... You might go out to one of the monthly nights that they have in Cairns and you'll meet and be introduced to people. And then hopefully if you connect with them then they'll invite you to one of their dinner parties or to a barbeque, or a pool party, or a birthday party. Or they might take you to the beach and you can meet some other people there and connect with them that way. And then you can get involved in those groups. But you've gotta be fairly 'out there' to do it. I know some guys that come up here that have been a bit more reserved and shy, who have found it extremely difficult to get involved because they won't have the initial get-up-and-go to talk to people in the bars. So they never really meet the groups. Then they'll come and see me ... and go, 'Well there's nothing happening in Cairns.' And it's only once they start going out to those and getting themselves out there, that's when they start getting invited to different parties." (Key informant)*

Although some attempts were made to include others:

*"I always try whenever I'm having a, some kind of gathering, to invite somebody who's not normally in that group, who might be of another group." (Key informant)*

## **The age divide**

Many described vast differences between the experiences of younger men in Cairns compared to those of older men. While the relaxed lifestyle attracted men to Cairns later in life, after they had experienced gay life in larger cities, there is a substantial population of young gay men living in Cairns who have not yet had these experiences:

*"I think too, my experience has always been that there is that age top-heavy demographic ... And I think there is that sense of hearing peoples' experiences here, you know, moving to Cairns for the laid-back lifestyle, quality of life. And so in a sense there are a lot of gay men and lesbians who've moved here to, you know, to escape the ... busy life in the city ... to retire. And I think that does create quite a difficult conflict for younger gay and lesbian people who are living here that, you know, in a sense, they want to move out of Cairns and, and explore the big world." (Focus group participant)*

Inevitably, the two groups had different expectations of what Cairns gay community should be. These diverging expectations created a divide among the groups, who tended to socialise in their groups:

*"Now I think ... it's gone more into little cliques. And there's a young clique and this clique and that clique, and someone else's clique. But before it was far, far more homogenous." (Focus group participant)*

There was a suggestion that some younger men did not feel a need to rely so strongly on attachment to gay community, because they were more readily accepted by their heterosexual peers than the older men had been at that age. Nonetheless, those young men still welcomed opportunities to participate in gay social events that were based around partying:

*"They [younger men] go to straight clubs. They go to the straight clubs and they've got a, a mixture of straight friends who accept their sexuality in a way I guess was different to our generations. And I think they still enjoy coming to a monthly Out party because they still do feel a part of a broader community but they're a bit disconnected to it in the same ... they're not connected to it in the same way that we all are." (Focus group participant)*

Being at different life stages, there were few commonalities that the two groups had to share. While the older men were winding down their involvement in gay-specific social life, the younger men still had a need to explore themselves and their sexualities and to experience their lives:

*"The younger guys I've talked to who have raised it with me have been concerned that Cairns' gay culture is kind of like an older culture. And that they don't kind of feel part of that. I can understand that. They're not old. They're not 50. They're in their twenties and early thirties, and they don't want to socialise with people in their fifties and sixties. And I can understand that. So yeah, they voice those concerns ... They have struggled with that, those, the ones that I've seen, the young ones, yeah ... and a lot of them do move away from Cairns. They go to the bigger cities to meet people, young guys like themselves." (Key informant)*

Although perhaps it was now easier for younger gay men to be open about their sexuality, meeting other young gay men in Cairns was difficult:

*"So ... I think younger gay men are finding it a lot easier to come out and do their stuff. It's just I think they're probably having problems connecting with other young gay men unless they're at school with them or through friend networks maybe – I don't know. Maybe Facebook sites, that type of stuff; it's probably doing a lot for them." (Key informant)*

Young gay men who feel isolated would look to escape the confines of Cairns and experience the world:

*"Yeah, you'd leave town. I think the common, even like I left high school in '83 and then, yeah, anyone who was, didn't fit in with Cairns left town to work or study, or whatever – go to Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne. And I still think yeah, if you're young, Cairns is, while it's got bigger, you probably, there's probably still quite a drift of young people when they finish school to either study or work in the bigger cities, particularly if they feel either they're gay and lesbian or for some reason they find Cairns stifling in some way." (Key informant)*

However, this was not restricted to young gay men, young people in general felt the need to leave Cairns in order to experience life:

*"Okay. Well I think that you've gotta recognise that Cairns' population is a fairly shifting one and particularly amongst young people. I think young people who grow up here like to get out of the place so that when they go to university or whether, when they do a TAFE course or a trade course, or something, they like to go somewhere else. So they'll head for Brisbane or they'll head for Sydney, or something. So, so I think that for the local young people they, they do tend to want to, want to, you know, see the world a bit and get out of Cairns." (Key informant)*

There was also the impact of tourism, bringing young, enthusiastic people into Cairns on working holidays, who would become engaged in gay community, sometimes more so than the local gay residents – although it was often quite short-lived:

*"There's a lot of young people who come up here who want to work for a limited period of time. And, and because it's a, you know, it's known as an international tourist place, that applies not just to Australians but it applies to people from overseas as well. So it's got a big backpacker population and it's got a big temporary workforce who are people who are, you know, mostly working in the hospitality industry and who come up here, you know, to, to combine work with pleasure and holiday, basically. So, and that, of course, applies to gay men too. And so there's a large, you know, there's a significant part of the gay population up here – the younger gay population up here at any time – who are working, you know, in hospitality and who are here for a limited period, and who, you know, stay for maybe a few months, maybe a year or two and then go. And so if you have a group who are particularly interested in setting up something, they may arrive all enthusiastic and pair up with, you know, a couple of locals, and decide they'll open something or get something going, and it lasts for a while, then it fizzles because they, they move on or, you know, other people move on. I think, and so I think that there's a, there's a, there's still a fairly sharp division in the gay population between the younger people who tend to be a bit transient and fluctuant, and the older more established people of which I suppose my partner and I are representative who, who come up here and they like the lifestyle, and they settle down, and they ... and, you know, they probably don't contribute hugely to the gay community as such; they keep apart from the young, shifting lot. And, you know, they usually have settled down and they're in a relationship, and they get to know other people who are in relationships, and they sort of meet and, you know, you know, have, have dinner together and that sort of stuff. But, but they're not really, they're just living quiet, suburban kind of lives in, in Cairns... So, so I think that for that reason it's maybe not such a coherent community as maybe a lot of well-established communities in places like Melbourne and Sydney, and Brisbane."* (Key informant)

However, one man described concern that, for some older men, their experience has not been so easy. Having lived for so many decades being discreet about their sexuality, they may not feel comfortable at this later stage in life embracing the freedoms that now exist:

*"I think that for older people there probably are some barriers. Because some of the older people are perhaps not as out as, as others. I mean I put myself in a different category from that because I mean I think I've always been fairly out in Cairns. And, and I've always, because of work, had contact, reasonably consistent contact with the gay community even though I may not, you know, actually take part in any of the commercial type of activities. But, but you know, I've always had an interest in QAHC and I've always been a member of QAHC, and, and so I've always kept up-to-date which, with their, their part of the work and the HIV work. But I think that there are a substantial number of people who have, who, who are similar age or, you know, middle-aged who, who probably aren't quite so out maybe at work or, and therefore that probably is a barrier to them actually mixing much with the gay community."* (Key informant)

## Ambivalence to community

A connection to gay community did not hold much importance for some. Indeed, the very reason they came to Cairns was to remove themselves from it:

*"There's a lot of people who really just like, as my opinion, my impression of it, people who I think have chosen, consciously, maybe they lived in Sydney or Melbourne, or elsewhere and they've consciously decided to opt out of the gay community and ... gone for anonymity."  
(Focus group participant)*

Some questioned the need for gay community, in a time when there was no longer a need to unite for a cause. They felt their sexuality did not define them, and, therefore, little need to seek out or belong to networks of other gay men:

*"I do think there's, there are, there are quite a few gay men that, that aren't affiliated and don't see any reason to be affiliated with the gay ... you know, they, because they're just, they're just, they have their partner maybe, or not, and they are just gay, and they have friends, you know. And therefore it's not important for them because, maybe because they feel they don't face any prejudice or discrimination, and their sexuality is just something, it's not something they have to ... it, it isn't all of them, you know. It's just like an element to who they are and their, their relationship, or whatever."  
(Key informant)*

Simply having a large gay population did not mean that Cairns had a cohesive gay community; this man felt that something was lacking to create that:

*"I think, I, I always saw that community there, back in those days as well. I guess there wasn't just the same ... volume of, you know, different avenues that people in the gay and lesbian could, could explore. So ... But I mean again it's something that I, I've always thought has got a, a huge gay population but it's always lacked the same cohesion that you find in other places."  
(Focus group participant)*

## Sustaining community engagement

There was acknowledgement that considerable effort went into building an active community, usually the efforts of a few dedicated people. When those people were no longer around, a void was left that was difficult to fill:

*"And so QuAC, people in QuAC who were organising various things. And the community actually has, had lost, has lost a huge number of very talented people, you know, 15, you know, 10 to 15 years ago. And that cannot be replaced. It, gradually they, they come in. Of course they do. But a group who you would not normally ... you'd see ... I mean 50, 60-year-olds now, who are not around. Who should be doing these roles of organising, be the leading roles within the group. Now I'm not sure whether in, because it's a little microcosm here in Cairns, all those people, one, one or two people go, leaves a huge gap. Where you've got somebody in the city, there are always a lot more people there who could actually take that place. And I think that happens, you know ... it's more exaggerated here in Cairns because of that. People who fall off the perch, you know, and go. So that's important. In the smaller communities, if you lose key people, they're very hard to replace. Much harder than if you were in a community, in a big, bigger community. Because there just aren't the people there with the talent to do it. You can see what, the way I'm thinking there." (Key informant)*

Although many felt that the Cairns gay community was currently experiencing a renaissance, there was a reminder that, from past experience of an ebb and flow of activity, that things can change at any time:

*"Cairns has grown a lot. Cairns has developed dramatically in, in the last few years that I've seen but certainly in comparison to what it was when I first got up here, things have really developed and now there looks like there's going to be quite a rosy future with services, with organisations, with a little bit more connecting amongst the community. But it's one of those things you sort of have to wait and see. A lot of things in Cairns suddenly blow and become wonderful and fantastic, and then die. And then somebody moves away that was the lead organiser of it all. And then it all sort of fragments from there. And that's been a habitual thing in Cairns I've seen happen too many times." (Key informant)*

This vulnerability to change was further exacerbated by the transient nature of life in Cairns:

*"So I, I do, I think, I think, you know, the, the key thing that characterises Cairns is big fluctuations. I think it's a, it's, it's not a hugely stable population either for, either for the, the general community or and in particular for men who have sex with men. I think it's a, it's a very fluctuating, floating sort of ... And not, not, not desperately stable." (Key informant)*

## Relationships

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In similar respect to the different experiences of younger and older gay men, there were clear differences in how men experience connecting with other men in Cairns based on their relationship status.

### Couples retreat

Many gay men relocated to Cairns once they had found a partner, and were ready to settle down:

*"A lot of couples come up here. They move up to get away after they've met their ideal partner and they'll move up to, as far as Queensland to enjoy the tropical lifestyle, to get to know each other better in their relationship they've developed. And I've heard that from a lot of people."*  
(Key informant)

Cairns offered a more stable, relaxed environment for men to develop their relationship and establish a lifestyle away from partying:

*"But it was more just to get away from the heavy drug use, the continuation of lifestyle where you're just getting pissed every weekend and out dancing, and doing whatever. And it was to get away and get something new; get into a better lifestyle. My partner and I had been developing our relationship for a few years and we thought it was time to actually really settle into life with a lifestyle."* (Key informant)

This new lifestyle was intended to be a break from the gay scene, and many of these couples chose not to engage with gay community:

*"Lots of gay men move up here with their partners to escape the reasons I did maybe. Come to the tropical lifestyle. But they hide away. They don't come out. There's nothing to come out to in Cairns. The active scene, which might be bars, clubs, that type of orientation that you'd expect in a city, doesn't happen in Cairns. There's nothing like that that I know of in Cairns. There's only one bar, and you do see a lot of the guys out but only a small percentage of the guys that really live up here come out and do those things. A lot do the stay-at-home parties."* (Key informant)

Although some couples might engage sexually with other gay men, this would generally be with the more transient men, perhaps because they would represent less risk to the relationship:

*"... depending upon the sort of relationship they have, that either becomes ... they sink into, you know, suburban life, get a job, both get a job up here and, and settle down, and with maybe the occasional foray out into the wider gay community. But generally they either, they either, if they have that sort of settled relationship, you know, they just sort of sink into the background, whereas if they were a little, maybe a little more adventurous relationship then maybe they become a, you know, a part of the gay community and, and, you know, fraternise and, you know, have sexual relationships with, often with younger people who, who may be from the more floating population of Cairns."* (Key informant)

For the most part, those men in relationships tended to associate more with other couples, creating additional barriers to community formation:

*"I think more so here ... more cliquey perhaps and a lot of gays, gays are little couples in pairs, living out there in suburbia. And have their own circle of friends. It can be a bit hard to break into."* (Focus group participant)

## Relationship stress

For some couples, the move to Cairns put pressure on the relationship. Different housing and employment opportunities in Cairns, together with isolation often contributed to relationship breakdown. One observer believed that the survival rate of such relationships was not high:

*"Oh, I think, I think there are, the usual sort of pressures that apply to any couple and that is, you know ... a lifestyle move is, is a stress on a relationship because inevitably one partner's more keen on cutting, cutting the ties with the old place and moving to a new place. And the other one may be more reluctant but be doing it, you know ... and then if, if things don't work out as well then they, there's a tendency to say, 'I told you so – we should have stayed in Melbourne where we've got good friends. And I don't like it up here. And the weather's too hot, and ...' you know. And so that's a big stress on the relationship. The second thing is ordinary stuff like, you know 'have I been able to get a comparable job?' and it might mean that for one partner yes they have got a, you know, comparable job and for the other partner they've had trouble finding a job. And so, and, you know, one partner may be unemployed for a reasonable length of time and have to be kind of carried by the other partner. So I think ... And then there's the, you know, it may not be as easy to get a, to buy a house or to rent a decent property as it might have been in Melbourne or Sydney and, you know, there's all that ... There's financial stuff, you know. Because people do tend to do things – and it's not just singles – but I think couples do tend to do things sometimes again in this sort of funny, you know, middle life type of phase where they perhaps throw caution to the winds a bit and say, 'Oh yes, let's go and live in Cairns!' And they don't really think it really well through. So, so I think, so what, what's the survival? Well my impression is that, you know, is that at least 50 per cent of them, those emigrating couples break up at some stage over the next few years. I reckon, yeah."*

*(Key informant)*

When a relationship ended, men who then found themselves single found it difficult to re-engage with other men in Cairns:

*"That was very difficult. Yeah. Trying to meet people to start either a relationship or have sex, or just to actually meet new people was difficult ... And [I] drew away from interacting socially because it was difficult to get into the cliques after living up here for five years with a steady partner. A lot of the cliques weren't interested because they were into a bit more than just friendships, which my partner was very jealous about so we didn't get involved in that type of stuff."* *(Key informant)*



## Single men as the minority

With the steady influx of couples, single gay men in Cairns found themselves feeling in the minority:

*"The number of people that are new to Cairns, the number of partners that have come in, the number of gay men that have moved here that have already been in a relationship has been enormous compared to the number of single guys. And where I live there's probably 15 gay couples in the suburb. And that's just men, there's lesbians as well. And I don't know any single guys that live in [suburb] at all. But it's interesting, isn't it? And I don't know how anyone else's experiences are but to me there seems to be a lot of couples that move here. And maybe it's about lifestyle and all that sort of stuff. So maybe that makes it more difficult to meet people."*  
(Focus group participant)

Single men described feeling excluded:

*"When you're single in Cairns, it's a whole different ball game."  
"In terms of fitting in?"  
"Absolutely - you don't. You're a single person. You're a predator. You're the works. I couldn't believe it ... you come down to here and you're single, and it's amazing how your friends that you've had over that period, because you're suddenly single, you're not invited to the barbecues and the picnics ... And yeah ... it's an issue. But you are; you're looked at as being 'the single guy'."*  
(Focus Group participants)

While the steady stream of men passing through Cairns made finding sex easy, finding significant, lasting partnerships did not come so easy. For some, the wait was longer than they were prepared to accept:

*"Random sex is always meaningless ... There's a lot of random sex goes on here because there is so much fresh meat comes through on a regular basis ... No, I think a lot of people still can meet their partners up here. But a lot of guys get over it before they can actually allow themselves to find someone. A lot of single boys will move on quicker than what they maybe should let themselves."* (Key informant)

While it was acknowledged that finding relationships in any setting can take time, there was a feeling that in Cairns the chances were reduced simply because the same opportunities to meet other gay men did not exist:

*"It's just not so easy to meet them initially because there's not the bars up here. 'Cause there's not that place to go. Okay, you can do it on the internet but the internet I'm sure is meaningless sex most of the time. But you can still meet your partner there occasionally. You might just be lucky to bang into someone on the computer and, all roses from there. That's the same as the bars in Sydney and Melbourne where you can go and have random sex for 10 years and not meet anyone that would be even remotely who you like, and then bang! One night you go out and you meet that person. You've just gotta give it time and something potentially always comes around the corner. And that's exactly the same as Cairns. You can be walking down the street thinking nothing of the day and all of a sudden your ideal partner bangs into you and you have a coffee. It happens. It's just unfortunate because it's such a random thing. Certainly in Cairns it's so random because you don't have those meeting places that a lot of, especially the younger, single men that are here give up quickly and move back to the cities to get more of the lifestyle that they're looking for."* (Key informant)

There was a risk that emotional attachments would be made with men visiting Cairns, which were destined not to last:

*"I think that's, that's one of the things that you've gotta be very careful of here in Cairns. And as a few of those here will know ... you've gotta be careful that you don't fall in love with all the holiday romances 'cause that's what happens ... in the last couple of weeks I've seen two different guys that have absolutely been destroyed because they've had holiday romances."  
(Focus group participant)*

## Meeting men for sex

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There have been considerable changes in the ways in which gay men in Cairns meet other men for sex over the past ten years:

*"Well back in the day ... I can remember, you know, over 10 years ago when there was really just beats in towns. It was before [SOPV] opened up. And that was really it. And then the internet I guess brought about a bit of a revolution – Gaydar and, and that sort of way of networking and, and finding sexual partners – but it's evolved even more now. I mean I think there are still beats around town but they're not really as probably well-attended as they were, you know, over 10 years ago. Now there is a sex-on-premises venue. The internet has continued to evolve even more. I mean Grindr<sup>1</sup> is just, when you think about it, such an ingenious device. In a place like Cairns too where, you know, there is a transient tourist population going through."*  
(Focus group participant)

### Beats

Men meeting for sex in public spaces has historically played an important role in the local community, particularly during times when there were few alternatives. As well as allowing opportunities for sex, they also provided spaces where men would engage socially:

*"The main areas where people met were in the beats, you know. And that was the big, the biggest socialising of, you know, for Cairns was the beats. Not open, it couldn't be open."*  
(Key informant)

Although some felt that beats were no longer the primary way to find sex, they remained popular among particular groups of men; those who required discretion, and older men:

*"The beats have died over the last 10 years – no doubt about it. I mean they're still strong amongst the older gay men's community."  
"And closeted men as well."  
"And, and, you know, and men who have sex with men, you know. But yeah, oh yeah, certainly, certainly." (Focus Group participants)*

And this man believed that younger men were now increasingly using beats:

*"To my knowledge ... it's still as active as, probably more active, I'd say. Because Cairns, Cairns had quite a big cruising, sex-on-site premises which closed down and then a smaller one opened, and the smaller one that opened is just awful, apparently. And, and so I think a lot of younger people in particular are accessing beats more than they did." (Key informant)*

Some men still appreciated the social aspects of meeting men at beats:

*"In the past the meeting places for gay men have been places to have sex. Like sex-on-premises – I usually go to have sex. But parks and beats you go to have sex first, and then you talk afterwards." (Focus Group participants)*

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<sup>1</sup> Grindr is a mobile phone application used by gay men to meet other men, primarily for sex. Men create a profile, and they are able to view other men's profiles and send instant messages. The application can detect other men in the area, displays their profiles and indicates how close they are.

Men described a number of serious bashings that had occurred at beats that had left them scared to go back. There had also been considerable effort by local council and police to prevent men from using beats. In some cases, men were questioned and even searched by police if they were spotted at a known beat:

*"Yeah, and people ... not taking condoms to beats because if the police were there and you were searched, and have condoms ... only condoms on you, and so it would be like they were there just to have sex." (Focus group participant)*

## **Sex on premises venues**

For one man, the opening of a new sex on premises venue in town meant he had somewhere new to look for sex:

*"Well ever since [SOPV] opened up, I've never done beats since." (Focus group participant)*

For some, their use of a sex on premises venue depended on the environment that was created within the venue, and the types of interactions that enabled:

*"[SOPV], yes, I've been there on numerous occasions, particularly in the old premises, which was far more user-friendly than the current one. The current one, there is nowhere you can, in my words, 'escape to' and just have, as I call it, 'social intercourse' with someone rather than anything else. You just, you're right in the midst of it in the new premises and I just don't like it." (Focus group participant)*

Another expressed similar feelings towards the current sex on premises venue and found that left him with limited options for finding sex:

*"I think it's hard if you don't ... if you don't like [SOPV], which I don't, and you don't do beats – you're fairly limited. The Out bar is now a focal point. And I guess the internet." (Focus group participant)*

## Internet and other new technologies

There was a definite sense that the ways in which men meet for sex was ever changing:

*"I think the internet has become the new beat." (Focus group participant)*

However, there was a feeling that, although it was effective, using the internet to find sex partners reduced the opportunities for collective, more social meeting places:

*"Going on the internet? I find that really sad. And I don't know if it's because I'm in my fifties but I find that really sad that you've got these poor little people at home on their computer ... it's like, 'Go out! Go to a bar! Go to the ...'" (Focus group participant)*

A further advance came in the form of the mobile phone application, Grindr. The advantage of Grindr was that it was a portable device – so men weren't restricted to being at home searching for men. And the device was able to tell you the proximity of the potential sex partner. In a place like Cairns, where it may be difficult to determine someone's sexuality, Grindr was a way of providing that information:

*"But they are going out. I mean that's the whole thing with Grindr: it's a portable device where you can ... It's a way of actually, rather than having to go cruising and suss out another gay man and see if he's gay ... It's fucking right there in front of you. Yeah. 'Where are you? Oh, you're 10 metres away. Hi. Let's check each other out. Now we're meeting in person. Okay, we're not really, this isn't gonna go anywhere. Goodbye.' Or yeah ..." (Focus group participant)*

Grindr made finding sex even quicker and easier than the internet had, and as the latest technology, it was popular among younger men:

*"And, and then now I see a lot of the younger guys that are using Grindr now. I mean they're having, they're leaving work, having one on the way home and then going home, and then going down the beach and having ... you know? It's so easy to pick up on Grindr that they're having multiple partners in a day. So it's like the sex-on-premises venues all died because of AIDS, and they've sort of stayed there but, you know, it's a different scenario. But is that not just the same thing reborn, in a sense?" (Focus group participant)*

## Sexual health

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### Accessing information

The sexual health service at Cairns Base Hospital, known as The Doll's House, was established in 2001 and provided a specialised HIV and sexual health service, which was much needed by gay men in Cairns at the time.

The Doll's House has been a vital, well respected service for gay men in Cairns for the past ten years:

*"They're fantastic. They're great. A fantastic service they provide and they're all very helpful and informative, and very discreet." (Key informant)*

Men were surprised and grateful that such a service is available in Cairns:

*"I just, just want to add to what [was] said about the health service up here. And something struck me as soon as I first came up here is how good it is; how it was equal to anything in Melbourne or Sydney. And we're very fortunate to have that Doll's House as a continuation. It's still going strong." (Focus group participant)*

Some men with HIV actually chose to move to Cairns because they had heard about HIV specialist doctors there and of the standard of service provided by The Doll's House:

*"And people do think about where they're going to live. Like, you ask them about why they've come to Cairns. It's because, 'Well I've heard that (Doctor A's) here,' or, 'I've heard that (Doctor B's) here,' or, 'I've heard that the Doll's House is good and that was my, you know, I was thinking here or Broome,' or something. So they've opted for Cairns." (Key informant)*

An important aspect of the service is the provision of culturally appropriate service. As one Cairns Sexual Health worker describes, not all GPs in Cairns feel comfortable working with gay men:

*"Access to non-judgmental healthcare I think is an issue. Yeah. People still find they go to a GP and they might reveal that they're gay, and the GP doesn't want to have anything to do with them ... The GP shuffles them out the door. Person feels pretty stink about it and often ends up coming here, and talks about what happened. And we might then be able to sort of talk to them about where they live and where they might find a GP, like recommend some GPs who we know will be gay-friendly and aren't going to shuffle them out the door like that." (Key informant)*

In 2010 Cairns Sexual Health Service relocated from The Doll's House within Cairns Base Hospital to new premises within the Cairns North Community Health facility. The new larger premises provides the potential for more integrated service provision, including working with community organisations, Queensland Positive People (QPP) and Positive Directions (PD) to offer a more holistic community approach which includes health promotion as well as clinical services.

QAHC was also praised as a source of sexual health information, though there was a feeling that details of the recent changes to their services had not reached parts of the community:

*"I think QAHC does an amazing job. The Draper Street office that they've now opened and have done for a few years is a great venue. I know about it. 60 per cent of the guys in Cairns probably know about it. Unfortunately, there's a lot of guys still don't know about it because they believe QAHC is still the Queensland AIDS Council rather than a gay men's health organisation. They haven't done enough promotion of that and there's a lot of guys in Cairns that don't know about the Draper Street drop-in centre, which would help them with so many other things." (Key informant)*

All men in the groups knew where to access information on sexual health, though they were sometimes critical of other men's safe sex practice (even though behavioural surveillance data suggests local gay men's behaviour is broadly similar to that found elsewhere):

*"The safe, the safe sex issue. I mean all the information's here at QAHC. It's at The Doll's House. It's everywhere. And I've noticed recently, you know, going to The House that there's more and more people in there all the time. You know? And it's just like whoa! ... But the safe, the safe sex thing is not ... getting through in this town." (Focus group participant)*

This man spoke about the difficulty in obtaining detailed, honest information that might protect him, in a way that understands his desire for pleasurable sex. Instead he has only heard sex-negative fear mongering:

*"Even today I've still got questions, you know? And I wish I had better education because I, all I remember is scare tactics. Scare tactic after scare tactic after scare tactic. But I wish that maybe as a gay male, 'cause I've had no proper education where, you know, okay, you know, where I get, sit down and they say, 'Okay, you're a gay male. Let's talk about gay sex. Now you can do all this sort of stuff and, you know, these are the ...' rather than, you know, 'Don't do it, don't do it, don't do it, don't do it!'" (Focus group participant)*

## Beliefs about safe sex

Discussing the issue of sexual behaviour in the focus groups proved challenging. All the men in the groups where HIV status was undefined reported consistent condom use, whereas the men in the HIV-positive group described quite a different situation:

*"I've been turned down twice in the back room, in [SOPV], by people who are right ready to jump on my cock and I thought, 'Right, this is where it's heading.' I said, 'I am positive by the way.' And that was it: all over. Now they ... were ready to bare-back..." (Focus group participant)*

This echoes the same contradictory accounts provided by men ten years ago for the original "Out" on the Reef study. It may be that due to the small size of the community, the men were not comfortable speaking openly about their own sexual practices, if they were practices that others might condemn.

Nonetheless, we know from other data sources, such as the Gay Community Periodic Surveys and the Pleasure and Sexual Health (PASH) study, that the sexual behaviour of gay men in Cairns is much the same as that of other Australian gay men. In 2009, interviews were conducted with men in Cairns as part of the PASH study. Quotes from these interviews have been used in this section to supplement material collected through the focus groups.

Some men were aware that the background prevalence of HIV in Cairns was something that required them to be more vigilant. Information provided by the Doll's House was given in terms that this man could understand:

*"And I was told by Doll's House – I've never had this sort of advice in [larger city] but the generic, if you take ... if, if a cock goes up an arsehole, and it's a stranger, and it happens - chance in a thousand of transmission. But if you're a bottom - about 120 in Cairns. Is that, is that news to you? They tell me that at the Doll's House ... Next to, just under Oxford Street it is here ... It's supposed to be the – I have heard – the second highest [HIV prevalence] in the country after Oxford Street, but I don't know." (PASH Participant)*

Some believed the high rates of HIV and other STIs in Cairns were due to the reckless behaviour of tourists, who brought the infections in with them, preferring to believe that gay men in Cairns would 'look out' for each other. However, some were perhaps more realistic:



*"I can only assume, and I can only assume that the reason why there's a spike here is because it's the tourists. 'Cause I can't believe that it's the locals." "I'm sorry ... but you're so wrong there." "Well if that's the case, that's very, very poor for the people in Cairns as in the gay community because I just find that impossible to comprehend. I always practise safe sex and always have done." "You'd be, you'd be surprised." "Well I'd be very disappointed then." (Focus group participants)*

Sometimes the temptations offered by the visiting tourists were too tempting to pass up:

*"I mean you've gotta be honest. If you picked up a 24-year-old, you know, English back-packer that was suntanned, muscled, laying on the bed, you're half pissed and he says, 'Sonny ...' I'd, I'd be like, 'Um ... yeah.'" (Focus group participant)*

However, it was perceived that tourists represented some risk. This man describes choosing to have unprotected sex with another local man, who has told him that he has a lot of sex with backpackers, and that he doesn't carry condoms:

***"Interviewer: What made you say, 'This is okay. I trust you'? What was it about him that, that allowed you to still trust him even in the light of all those circumstances?"***

*"I think at the, actually at the time he, I didn't ... oh, I don't know. God! Why?"*

***"It's okay. It's a hard question."***

*"It's a good question. I have no idea. Why? Why? Because I thought ... he's ... he didn't like ... well he didn't look like he had AIDS. He didn't look sick. He didn't ... yeah, he looked healthy, I think. And he said, 'I don't have anything,' and I just kind of trusted him on that because ... to think he was someone who was having a lot of sex with backpackers, he must be pretty stupid to not have protected sex." (PASH participant)*

Misleading ideas that a person's appearance was a reliable indicator of their HIV status were common:

***"Interviewer: Under what circumstances would you find yourself not using condoms?"***

*"When it was real quick sex. When it was really passionate sex. When the guy was such a fucking turn-on. When the guy looked safe."*

***"What do you mean by 'looked safe'?"***

*"The physical appearance of him. In this town it's sometimes very easy to know that that guy is definitely HIV. Just with that, that gaunt expression they get on their faces. There's some sort of terminology for it. I see it written up in Sydney Star Observer." (PASH Participant)*

There was a feeling that those men who were from the surrounding areas of Cairns, such as the tablelands, were considered to be of lower risk:

*"I know he's hardly ever in Cairns. And – ... That's the reason for suspecting he doesn't get tested and it also, I think, probably, statistically removes him, considerably, from the high level of HIV infection in Cairns, because he's hardly ever here. But it's a bit of a sloppy way of looking at things, you know." (PASH Participant)*

Indeed, some men in the surrounding areas had remained relatively unexposed to the HIV epidemic and its consequences for their behaviour:

*"I don't like condoms and ... I mean, you know, if you ask a group of gay men, generally, most guys say, 'I hate condoms.' In fact, recently I was speaking to a guy who'd lived here the whole life in [small town outside Cairns], and they'd never used a condom. And said to me, 'Why do, why do you use condoms?' And he was a gay guy. And he'd never, ever used a condom." (Focus group participant)*

This isolation from the epidemic left some men vulnerable, creating little opportunity for discussions about HIV and negotiating safer sex:

*"And, and he says, and he found being a country lad as well ... but I think in general, he's not used to ... he told me; he said no-one's ever raised the issue before with him."  
(PASH Participant)*

Finding a sex partner who would discuss HIV, was a valuable experience for some:

*"But also he likes me because I have convinced him that when I speak about HIV as an issue, he said no other gay guy in his life ever has. It's always 'do it' and 'slip-up', and 'oh well, these things happen.' Wham-bam! Thank you. Gone. With him being a bottom; man I hope there's not too many of them for his sake and mine."  
(PASH Participant)*

On the other hand, this participant became frustrated about the talk of sexual risk behaviour, suggesting he had had enough of being told what he should or should not do:

*"You know, you're responsible for ... you know, I think there's too much of a 'nanny state' going on about all this."  
(Focus group participant)*

A sexual health expert provided the following comment, reflecting on his understanding of increasing risk in gay men's sexual behaviour in Cairns:

*"And, and talking to people who, who were then working at QuAC, and they had been outreach officers in those days (early 1990s). And, you know, the reports were that there was a heck of a lot of unsafe sex going on. Now I think that one of the, one of the reasons may have been... that there were people who were coming up here for holidays from down south who thought that the amount of HIV here in Cairns was less – the prevalence was likely to be less than it was in, in Sydney or Melbourne. And therefore, you know, you could be prepared to let your guard down a bit. And particularly as one of the things that's characteristic of holidays is that people let their guard down anyway and do things on holidays that they don't perhaps normally do, and act a little more riskily in all sorts of ways on holidays than they do when they're, when they're back at work and in their ordinary surroundings. So I think that may have been, that may have had a, a part to play. But I think certainly there was a culture of not being as careful about safe sex up here. Now, over the, over the time since I've been here, I'm quite sure that the prevalence of HIV in gay men has increased, and is now, you know, well it's probably somewhere between what it is in Melbourne and Sydney, and what it is in, in maybe, you know, another regional centre which isn't a big touristy place. So I think that, you know, so I think that the chances, if you have casual sex up here with a, with a gay, the chance of him being infected is, you know, it's maybe 15, 20 per cent, you know? So, so that whereas you might have been able to get away with it in 1993, your chances of, of getting away with, you know, much unprotected sex up here is probably considerably less now. And that may well account for the fact that we've seen seroconversions at an, at an increased rate in the last few years. So, in other words, I think that unsafe sex still happens up here. Yeah. And to a, to a, you know, to a reasonable degree."  
(Key informant)*

If the increased number of local HIV infections was due to visitors then this would mean that the visitors were either more likely to be HIV-positive themselves or were seroconverting while in Cairns and then infecting other locals. However, we have no evidence that suggests that visitors account for a disproportionate number of local infections.

The following description of a sexual encounter provides us with some insight into the various rationalisations that men often express for why they chose not to use condoms. In this case, it was a local Cairns man, but the story is not atypical of what men have said across the country. He describes an encounter in a sex venue in which he meets a man he chooses to have sex with. Condoms are not used; there are a number of reasons provided for non-condom use: the man is viewed as particularly 'hot'; the participant does not want to risk losing the opportunity of sex with this man to another man who may be interested; a risk assessment is made about the protective nature of withdrawal before ejaculation; and the fact that an HIV diagnosis, although serious, would not have a drastic impact on this participant's life:

*"We both approached each other. Went to a cubicle. Stripped off. When I saw the size of his dick I just couldn't stop myself. He wanted me to, he only agreed to fuck me if I'd fuck him. And there was no mention of or no indication of 'let's put on a condom' at all. We just went for it and he fucked me."*

**"Interviewer: Were there condoms available?"**

*"Yep."*

**"Did you have any inclination to use them? Or –"**

*"No."*

**"Why not?"**

*"Cause he was too hot."*

**"Because the guy was too hot? [Mmm] What does his hotness have to do with wearing a condom?"**

*"You want to do it quickly. You know, you don't want to lose that person. Because there's competition out there wanting him as well. Especially with the size of his dick. "*

**"Okay. So do you think that if you'd suggested using condoms that he would have declined the sex?"**

*"No."*

**"And then I don't understand the connection between using the condom and losing the guy. If you're in a cubicle, [Yeah] if you'd suggested using a condom you don't think he would have left?"**

*"I don't really know. But there was just sort of no thought about it. Because, you know, I just turned around and suddenly he was up me."*

**"Okay. Again, afterwards, did you have second thoughts about 'I shouldn't have done that' or 'I should have done that'?"**

*"No."*

**"No? Why not?"**

*"Well there was sort of nothing physical about him. Well, for a start he didn't cum in me. I came first and it had finished so he, he walked out of the cubicle still fully erect, having not cum. And okay, I do know that with unprotected sex, you know, there could be the pre-cum that infects you. But I just didn't think about it."*

**"Okay. How serious would you think it was if you came back HIV positive from your test?"**

*"Pretty serious."*

**"What do you think would change for you?"**

*"Well I'd have to go to the doctor more frequently. I would have to go to the Doll's House here, which is the STD clinic, with all the other people. My friend who is HIV, he tells me it's really busy there, at the moment. There's a tremendous increase of STDs around the place ... For the effect on my life, it wouldn't be that drastic because I'm not having a particularly happy lifestyle, at the moment ..."* (PASH participant)

## Living with HIV

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While overall men spoke of living open and comfortable lives in Cairns being gay, the same could not be said about the capacity to be open or comfortable about being HIV positive.

### Motivations for residency

A large number of HIV positive men chose to relocate to Cairns in order to improve their health:

*"To be perfectly frank, I've met more HIV-positive people in Cairns than I ever met in Sydney. Ever. ... they've come up here to try and have a healthier lifestyle." (Focus group participant)*

Early in the epidemic, men were making the decision to move, the primary motivation being the warmer weather:

*"And we had, I guess even then, a disproportionate number of HIV positive people for a city the size of Cairns because, particularly in '93 when the outlook for people with HIV was, was reasonably poor and we really didn't have any adequate treatment, people who were diagnosed ... anywhere down south ... used to think, 'Why should I put up with a cold and the terrible weather when my health's deteriorating? I might as well go and live somewhere tropical.' So, so we did have ... the vast majority of people who were diagnosed HIV positive had acquired their infection outside of Cairns, at that stage, and had been diagnosed outside of Cairns." (Key informant)*

For HIV-positive men, Cairns offered a sanctuary where they could be anonymous and reduce their exposure to stress. For some, this was seen as something that would help extend their life:

*"Well, it's such a large region incorporating, you know, Mosman, Port Douglas, the Tablelands, which, which is so massive itself. You know, in that, in that area, in that massive area, that location, it's so easy to become anonymous. And I can understand one of the biggest killers of people with HIV is stress. So if you want to de-stress your life, move to Cairns and become anonymous, and don't get involved with the humdrum." (Focus group participant)*

The anonymity that came from starting again in a new town meant that HIV-positive men could regain control over who knew their status:

*"You do hear that up here. Actually, I've heard it from lots of people that they've escaped away and that, they'd be out about being positive in Sydney or Melbourne, or Brisbane, and then they come up here - they just don't wanna be. And it's just that, that, they're just happy to come to a small community and just be gay, and not need to go beyond that." (Focus group participant)*

## Invisibility

Many men described a complete absence of dialogue among men in Cairns about HIV:

*"They feel isolated I think. Because there's ... it's difficult to say, because it's not talked about enough. People still feel there's discrimination against them coming out as being positive. That all the guys won't come out and show their status, or talk about their status. Even positive friends of mine won't openly discuss their, their status because they're living healthy, they're drugs are working so much more effectively nowadays that they don't have to talk about it. They don't have to talk about the night sweat they had the other night or the rash that they got, or the pneumonia that they had or the this, or the that. So it's become more of a 'you live with it and just live with it yourself'. The gay community in Cairns is obviously aware that there is a lot of HIV people up here but it doesn't seem to resonate. It's not something that's really talked about. World AIDS Day up in Cairns: if you get 50 people coming along it's a big day, which is disappointing when there's thousands of gay men living up here."* (Key informant)

One man expressed frustration and disappointment that a community which united so strongly and effectively at the beginning of the epidemic, now seemed to refuse to talk about it:

*"But I think also when you look at it historically though what HIV did for the, the gay community, I mean in a sense ... well not did for in a positive way, but it united the gay community in a way that nothing, no other disease or infection could ever unite a group in a way ... and yet, you know, when we move forward and think about now and the stigma and discrimination that HIV positive people face, and that our community is unable to, that people find it difficult to serosort, to, to talk about being positive, and people find it difficult to speak about HIV, you know, with sexual partners, that you wonder where that fight has gone, and what we've done with the, with the language, and ... you know, how, how open ... Well is it that or is it just that people just don't want to talk about it because it breaks down the excitement of what's the passion, the sex, you know – all that sort of stuff?"* (Focus group participant)

The anxiety caused by the prospect of someone discovering their HIV status led some to engage in risky behaviours:

*"Every HIV person is always paranoid about the fact that if they disclose their status that the person will run to the hills and scream from the highest mountain that they've just been informed that this guy is 'unclean' as they call them. It's my paranoia, it's always been my paranoia, and I'm sure it goes the same with all other HIV guys up here. I know, I, because of my status, I know a lot of HIV guys up here. And I'll be friends with them. And I know that quite a few of them won't disclose their status. And I also know there's a few of them have unsafe sex because they don't disclose their status. Because if they pull out a condom the other person will contemplate that they are positive. So they don't want to do that, so they just have unsafe sex, just for the hell of it. Which is terrible but that's what happens."* (Key informant)

Among those men in the focus group for HIV-positive men, none could recall any situations where disclosure had occurred prior to their becoming positive:

*"When I was negative I can't remember anybody ever disclosing their status to me. Can't remember one person ever saying to me [That's true] [No, I don't think I can either] [That's true – that never happened to me] [Me neither] ... and yet now that I'm, now that I'm positive, I've declared to every single partner and ... I've had a couple of rejections but very few. But most have said, 'It doesn't worry me.' And they, and that's been the thing. 'Doesn't worry me,' or, 'Fine.' It's never been, 'Look, I'm negative,' or, 'I'm positive as well.' So it's like, almost like guys are scared to say it. Scared to say their status. Whether it's negative or positive. Somehow. Isn't it?" (Focus group participant)*

Some men appeared more willing to have unprotected sex with men of unknown status, than to have protected sex with partners they knew to be HIV-positive:

*"And certainly you hear, you hear that fairly commonly from, you know, established HIV positive people who, who've perhaps done the right thing and told, told a prospective partner that they were positive and that they'd have to be careful about safe sex, and that meant that the partner doesn't want to have, go ahead with a sexual contact. So, so I think they are, you know, irrational ... And that, you know, the same guy, non-HIV positive guy, might be quite willing to have sex with someone of unknown status. But if it's broached it means that they're not gonna go ahead with it. And I think that does, that's still very, very true up here." (Key informant)*

The networks of positive men who were open about their status were small, and the men all knew each other:

*"But as HIV positive people too, I would like to be able to go somewhere where more people were HIV positive that you might meet a partner. But I find that when I go out there's, you know, just the, the same old crew, you know. We all know each other and we're hardly going to all say at the end of the night, you know, 'Let's go home together. I've loved you for so long!' [Laughter]" (Focus group participant)*



## HIV services

### Hospital pharmacy

The men raised concerns about the hospital pharmacy, the only point of access for HIV medication, and they reported what they believed were repeated breaches in client confidentiality. One man described approaching the pharmacy counter and finding a script, with the person's name, address, and medication sitting on the counter clearly visible for all to see. After lodging a complaint, he himself then felt uncomfortable using the pharmacy for fear that his complaint may impact the service he receives there.

*"But I thought to myself, 'I don't care about people knowing I'm positive.' But there are some people who are terrified of knowing anyone else might find out ... And if the word gets out that the hospital has breached peoples' confidentiality, a lot more people will be a lot more fearful of accessing HIV drugs. So people won't be confident about going onto drugs if they think –"*  
(Focus group participant)

The behaviour of the pharmacy was described as often being insensitive and inappropriate:

*"When I went there on Monday to get my drugs, she, there was a new chemist or new pharmacist there and she yelled through the window at me. [Shouts] 'Have you had Trevada before?'"* (Focus group participant)

There was a fear that this kind of behaviour may preclude some people from accessing treatments:

*"And that is enough to make some people choose not to go onto treatment. I have no doubt about that."* (Focus group participant)

However, the men were aware that soon they would be accessing their medications from a pharmacy in the new sexual health centre, and hoped that things might improve.

As well as the opening of a satellite pharmacy within the newly structured Cairns North Community Health Facility, a specialist HIV and sexual health pharmacist position has been created in 2010. The satellite pharmacy has a private consulting room for clients and the enhanced service includes the pharmacist being available for individual appointments. In May 2011 the satellite pharmacy conducted a client satisfaction survey to identify opportunities to improve service delivery for people living with HIV.

### Services more broadly

In general, there has been a longstanding view that services for people with HIV in Cairns were drastically underfunded, given the HIV prevalence in the area:

*"I can see from 20 odd years ago when I had a lot of my friends were sadly passing away from these problems back then, and being in a big city then and seeing the services that were available way back then, to come to a small, regional town like this where HIV is very prevalent – it's one of the highest growing HIV rates in Queensland – and the services aren't there. They just don't have the availabilities. They don't put it out there. And the people I know that live up here that have problems that need access to services or need counselling, or need something just don't have, don't have it. They just don't know where to turn to. And if they do try and turn to somewhere, they generally can't help them either. Whereas if you're in a big city, you'd have much more services available and much more easy contact with them, and the likelihood of a lot more happening for you as well."* (Key informant)



In the absence of services, people with HIV relied on each other for support:

*"Because I know a lot of positive men specifically in Cairns that have had a lot of issues, had a lot of problems that they've had no-one to turn to and get the support from. And instead they're getting their help and support from other positive people that you can talk with rather than from services that should be provided and available for them. And if they were in a big city they would have had that. 'Cause they're in a regional, small place like this, they don't get it or haven't had it in the past." (Key informant)*

Over the last ten years there have been considerable changes to the allocation of funding for work with HIV. The leading, community-based HIV organisations in Queensland had been the Queensland AIDS Council (QuAC), established in 1985 in response to the epidemic, and Queensland Positive People (QPP), formed in 1989 as a peer support and advocacy organisation for people with HIV under the auspice of QuAC. In December 2003, QPP was incorporated in their own right and relocated into new premises.

In 2003, Queensland Health announced a new process for providing funds to community HIV organisations through competitive tendering. In 2004, the tender for the client services contract was awarded to St Luke's Nursing Service, who had provided palliative care to people in advanced stages of AIDS related illnesses earlier in the epidemic. St Luke's formed the organisation, Positive Directions (PD), to provide access to information, care coordination and referral services for people with HIV.

From then QuAC was no longer funded to provide client support services for people with HIV. After extensive consultation, the organisation decided to broaden its purpose to address wider lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender health issues, in addition to HIV prevention, and in 2006 the organisation became Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (QAHC).

Among some men in the community there was apprehension that a faith-based organisation would be providing services to a group primarily made up of people that most religious institutions have consistently maligned:

*"Yeah, that was one thing that [we] were definitely united on. We didn't want that, that service to go to a religious organisation. We just felt it was wrong, you know. And we ... they, they've got their own ideas and their own prejudices about things. And, and it comes through in their service." (Focus group participant)*

The men felt that this new doctrine was being imposed on them:

*"They stamp it on every single publication they've got. They've got this stamp of a bloody dove with the 'Anglican Church Caring'. In other words, your ... and you've got no option. That's the service to go for ... 'You'll do it our way,' in other words." (Focus group participant)*

At a time when social and legal equality have been largely achieved, religious barriers remain and religious organisations are often viewed as antagonistic to gay men's capacity to achieve full acceptance and equality. Some men therefore felt they were expected to rely on organisations whose basic philosophy and symbolism are problematic, in order to receive much needed services:

*"You'll, you'll, you've got no choice but to engage with the church when gay men have suffered, largely the oppression that gay men have suffered they can trace back to church organisations or church ethics." (Focus group participant)*

While the nature of support to people living with HIV has changed significantly over the past decade, some men still associated St Luke's with the services they had provided in the early days of the HIV epidemic:

*"And I can remember really early on when that first, that first happened. The first thing I ever read about St Luke's was: 'St Luke's – caring for sick' ... something like 'caring for HIV people who are sick or dying'. And that's what it was all about. It was all around that. Nurturing death in the old days. Not, not about encouraging healthy living. Not about celebrating life ..."*  
(Focus group participant)

The most immediate concern for these men was to feel connected, and that required being informed about what was happening:

*"Well communication is the big thing, you know. We never got any communication to speak of from PD [Positive Directions] over the years. Like there'd be LEAP [Life Enhancement Action Program] projects or a chef thing or whatever, and we wouldn't hear about it. Only through the grapevine. Like [QAHC staff member] would send out notices at the very end."* (Focus group participant)

There was a feeling by some men that the service provided by Positive Directions was restricted to practical support and referral to other services. What HIV-positive men in Cairns indicated they needed was a service that would reach out and engage with HIV positive people in their communities:

*"Specifically on HIV, the services in Cairns are poor. They don't connect enough with the positive people."* (Key informant)

It must be noted that an extensive review and evaluation of Positive Directions' services (University of Queensland, 2010) highlighted difficulties around service provision in rural and remote area, and in Northern Queensland, in particular Cairns and Mackay. The evaluation also revealed a perceived lack of marketing of the services offered and a lack of service provision for gay men specifically. The report recommended that service discrepancies in different geographical areas be addressed.

This man reflected on past experiences of services for men with HIV and compared what he received then to what was currently offered:

*"I, when I moved up here 10 years ago, QuAC was still the HIV/AIDS group and they had some really wonderful volunteers and organisers working there, really getting out there and outreach to the community. Really supporting and helping the HIV people and their partners, and their friends, and their families. Positive Directions, since they've taken over in the last five, six years or something that they've now been running, they've still got a really shitty little office. It's a backwater. It's really unfriendly. It's, they're not out there in the community liaising with people. If you want, if you try and help, get advice or help, or support either being an HIV person or a partner, a friend or a whatever, they're very difficult to connect with. That's changing. They have got new staff started in the last few months but only in the last few months, which is a fraction of the time that they've actually been operating in Cairns. They need to be out there within the community doing stuff, really showing their support and help, and assistance of what can be done, which you get in the big cities. There are special nights being held for positive people. That's started again in Cairns but ... it's only just started. I mean it's like ... two different groups, because of the, the long years of nothing happening ... And I can see the changes are starting to happen, and hopefully that'll develop."* (Key informant)

This informant is reflecting upon recent changes to HIV services delivery in Cairns in 2009 and 2010 in response to the spike in new HIV infections in 2007 and 2008. A number of respondents voiced concerns about levels of service delivery in the past but also noted that the situation had already started to be addressed and was turning around.

Positive Directions recruited a community nurse in early 2010 to work together with the Client Liaison Officer position and QLD Positive People also placed a part-time peer support and community development staff member in Cairns in 2010. These changes have been supported by the Cairns HIV Services (CHIVS) interagency collaboration between the three non-government HIV organisations (QAHC, QPP and PD) and Queensland Health, which was formed in 2006 to improve service coordination. One outcome of this network was a weekend retreat for men with HIV in September 2009:

*"And we had a lot of ... people come along over the weekend and speak to the group, who were the majority HIV positive men except for some, some of the people who came along to speak to us or people that came along for some of the group sessions. And yeah, it's really good. It was like a forum like this where we just felt so comfortable in just speaking very openly amongst our peers. You know, things we felt, things, stigmatisation, things we'd gone through, things we look forward to in the future. We had somebody come and speak to us about healthy eating. We had, the Positive Directions [QPP] treatment officer was there speaking to us about drugs, speaking to us about nutrients coming out and, and, and options for people. And so it was informative but on a very informal level. And it was great. It was a really good weekend. And then out of that ... the second day in the afternoon we were asked what do we want to get out of it. What did we hope we could get out of this, this experience? And one of the general consensuses was: wouldn't it be great if this type of group of all these people that came together could continue on after this?" (Focus group participant)*

Following from this successful retreat, the men decided to form the Positive Action Cairns (PAC) group to maintain, for themselves, a voice to continue to advocate for improved services for people with HIV in Cairns.

*"I believe that the changes that have happened in Cairns and ... positive life has been so positive in the past sort of six months with the changes in Positive Directions – an enormous change around that service, the QPP worker coming on board, the Planet Positive events, the formation of PAC. All of this has followed on from that retreat. That one single retreat. I don't believe the changes in PD would have happened if that retreat hadn't happened." (Focus group participant)*

Recent improvements had provided HIV positive men with a sense of optimism that services, and outcomes for them, might improve:

*"But really ... it really hangs over that whole picture of living as a gay positive man in this town. Because my self-esteem, my worth, my self-worth is based on the way I feel about myself. And the way I feel about myself is hugely engaged around being HIV positive. And so that impacts on my everyday life and does for all, I believe, all HIV positive people. And the services need to recognise that. And that's what they don't recognise. They think of it as a referral. 'We're gonna give this person what they need. Give them a fridge ...' What about all the emotional stuff, you know? And that's what you get from retreats. That's, if you know you're going to a retreat, you're thinking, 'Wow, this is about my emotional wellbeing.'" (Focus group participant)*

## Spiritus Positive Directions

Men in the focus groups were, of course, unlikely to be broadly representative of all gay men with HIV in Cairns. However, given that focus group participants were specifically recruited through Healthy Communities, Positive Directions was asked to specifically comment on issues around service provision to PLHIV in Cairns.

Below is a slightly abridged version of the response they provided:

Positive Directions is a program of Spiritus and Spiritus is aligned with the Anglican Church. Approximately 85% of our clients identify as gay men or men who have sex with men (MSM) and in the delivery of our services we strive to acknowledge the lived experiences of the populations we support, in particular MSM and gay men acknowledging that historically this population has not, at times, been treated well by the Christian faith. The historical irony is that Christian aligned services have been at the forefront of the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Australia, in particular, St Luke's Nursing HIV/AIDS Unit. The early response certainly reflected a palliative approach to caring for the sick and dying, however our current model of service delivery focuses on chronic condition self-management for improved health and well-being outcomes for PLHIV.

Our approach to service delivery aims to produce productive interactions at all levels and in response to the "Out" on the Reef: 10 years on report, Positive Directions wishes to draw attention to the Mission, Vision and Value statements of the Positive Directions Program. This document sits under the broader Spiritus and Social Services mission and strategic intent. The values that have been developed by the Positive Directions team reflect well the values of the service.

They are:

- Respect and dignity
- Integrity and honesty
- Inclusiveness and diversity
- Professionalism and ethics
- Responsiveness

The Innovative Care for Chronic Conditions framework (WHO, 2002) underpins our model of service delivery and individual workers are recruited into the service based on their experience and expertise in delivering high-quality community based clinical care and interventions focusing on the social determinants of health. Our workforce is reflective of the diversity of the individuals we support, in particular people from different cultures, religious convictions, genders and with different sexual orientations.

In relation to developing marketing and communication strategies, one of the challenges faced by Positive Directions is how to ensure the message is inclusive of the diversity of the people we support. Positive Directions advocates that any strategies and materials be sensitive to the historical context of service provision to PLHIV and AIDS and the experiences of some of our clients. Messages must also reflect the essential nature of how we currently deliver services: focus on people first, ensure inclusiveness, celebrate diversity and communicate that people will be treated with dignity and respect no matter how they identify. Positive Directions is also sensitive to the role that religious philosophy, symbolism and practice has played in the alienation of the individuals we support, however the perception that doctrine is a driving factor behind and/or a significant barrier to our delivery of services needs to be tested more widely and explored.

In an attempt to acknowledge and address what was articulated by focus group members recruited for "Out" on the Reef: 10 years on, Positive Directions would like the opportunity to engage in dialogue through consultation with the PD client base in relation to their lived experience of service provision, questioning their perception of the existence of a faith based agenda.

## Discussion

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*"I'd just like to say that, that even though we've got our little complaints about what we could do, the fact is that overall Cairns is a really wonderful place to be gay. That's my feeling about it. I think the community here, there are some really, really wonderful people. Can take a bit of time to get to know them but it's got, it's got a really rich community. The place itself is lovely. I just absolutely love... you know ... in Sydney there was times when I used to take 45 minutes on public transport to get to work and now it takes me about seven minutes on my pushbike. [Laughter] And, you know, it's, you know, you get to spend, that's an hour -and-a-half every single day of life that I can spend free time in a tropical holiday town. It's really, you know, it's, it's a great, great place and I, I'm very optimistic about the future here. I think services are picking up. I think the community is, is out there. It's getting more confident. It's getting more sophisticated. And I think this city's got a really good future." (Focus group participant)*

Cairns continues to attract large numbers of gay men with its tropical climate and laid-back lifestyle and, based on the experiences of the men in our focus groups, for the most part, gay men living in Cairns achieve their aspiration of finding their place in Cairns.

In the ten years since the initial "Out" on the Reef study was conducted, there appears to have been progress in the attitudes of the wider community in Cairns. In terms of how these men express their sexual identity, there were no significant experiences of hostility. Rather, there appears to have been a breakdown in previously held prejudices and growing appreciation of the role of gay men in the social fabric of Cairns; as demonstrated by their participation in the Cairns Festival, and the encouraging response received from the crowd.

There is a sense that some men who relocate to Cairns have already reconciled that this involves leaving behind previously held attachment to gay community. Indeed in some cases, this may be the motivation behind the move. However, the men in these focus groups mainly described a desire to seek out and maintain some form of connection to other men like themselves.

Although some elements of gay community may remain elusive to men arriving in Cairns, there have clearly been considerable efforts made at creating opportunities for gay men to connect with each other – and the men in these focus groups described some of the resulting achievements. Men cannot be made to engage in gay community, but for those who wish to, it is important that the means exist for this to happen. The Health Promotion team at QAHC have provided options, which are open for those men who so wish, to participate in them. The Out parties have been hugely significant for those who want to connect socially in a party environment, or to suit other tastes, The Out Loud Choir is an example of an alternative. QAHC's monthly magazine Culture is distributed to 600 gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people monthly, providing information on upcoming activities and events that people can engage with. For those men who choose not to participate in gay community, continued work is nonetheless required to further reduce homophobia in general, so these men are able to feel safe in the broader Cairns community so they can live their lives as 'naturally' as possible.

That there are differences in the experiences of younger men in Cairns compared to those of older men came across strongly in both the focus groups and interviews. However, a limitation in these data is that the youngest man who participated in the study was aged 32; so the accounts that we have are primarily from older men. This in itself is an interesting reflection on the age divide; the focus groups were widely promoted through a range of networks and media, yet few younger men responded. Attempts were made to interview younger men as key informants, and this proved difficult. Do younger gay men choose not to engage in certain aspects of gay community life, or indeed the gay community itself, because they perceive that community or aspects of it as dominated by older men and they feel more comfortable engaging with others in their own age group? Is there an active community of younger gay men who have not engaged with the services and media through which this research was promoted, and if so, what are the barriers to this?

Men in the focus groups expressed concern about young men's non-participation in what they understood as gay community, but young gay men may not necessarily participate in community life in precisely the same ways as older men. In any context, young men will engage more with men of their own age. If young men choose not to engage in certain gay community activities, this does not mean they are 'in need'. The lack of direct information from younger gay men in our data and their non-visibility in some aspects of gay community life in Cairns do not necessarily mean that they are isolated or at risk. There may be an argument, however, for ensuring that this is not the case, through further research to investigate the particular needs of young gay men in this community, and through specific activities to provide social spaces for younger men.

The accounts of lack of appropriate community support services for HIV-positive men are of concern. However there was also evidence that changes to improve this situation were already underway. Some community members described a set of relationships that had developed through community activity when QuAC, as QAHC was known at the time, provided peer support to HIV-positive men, and many of the HIV-positive participants had been closely connected, as clients and volunteers, with local QuAC services and activities. So, were these men expressing a view that reflects their longstanding relationship to this organisation and the loyalties that have grown from this, or perhaps their own resistance to change? Or are their concerns a reasonable critique of the services available to them? There is the likelihood that delivering services via a faith-based organisation to a community that has been so ill-served by religion historically might create a feeling of hostility and suspicion, at least for some gay men. Perhaps recent developments involving closer collaboration and joint activities between the three service provider organisations may be the harbinger of greater acceptance within the community. Nonetheless, it is likely that some men with strongly held antagonisms to the role of the church in relation to gay men's rights and acceptance will continue to feel antagonistic. Presumably, some strong expressions of support for gay men's rights and their broad acceptance within the community from within the organisation will gradually allay some of these men's suspicions and sense of dissatisfaction.

In the past, the focus of HIV care and support services tended to be on providing palliative care to people who were close to death, but the needs of people with HIV have changed drastically over the last fifteen years, making the kinds of services they require now quite different. For many in this study, the kinds of services required appeared to be related more to increased capacity to live a healthy integrated life as a gay man. For some of these men, it may be that the services they now require no longer relate so much to their HIV status as to their desire to feel a sense of connection and support from other gay men, regardless of HIV status.



The men in these groups clearly felt a deep sense of attachment to life in Cairns. The extent to which they placed an emphasis on the importance of 'gay life' in Cairns was different for each participant. However, with the exception of some aspects of the provision of appropriate services for HIV-positive men, these men seemed quite contentedly living within their chosen communities.

There were few references to the Cairns of ten years ago, possibly due to the fact many of these men had not yet arrived in Cairns at that time. However, there were many references to the future, and in this regard there was a strong sense of optimism – including among the HIV positive men in regards to services. In the same way that those men who visited Cairns in the 1970s and 1980s sowed the seeds for gay life in Cairns, the men in these focus groups are part of a considerable network involved in building a sophisticated, cooperative and purposeful community for gay men to enjoy into the future.

It is important to acknowledge that the experiences described in this report are those of the individuals who made up these groups, and cannot be considered representative of all gay men in Cairns. It is unavoidable that the characteristics of the individuals that comprised each group will influence the outcome of the study's results.

Every effort was made to ensure the groups were comprised of a diverse range of men, to mirror the fabric of shared experiences of gay men, and it is reasonable to hope that their stories are indicative of gay men in Cairns generally. Nonetheless, the methods of recruitment likely attracted men with some understanding of gay community and who come into contact with it from time to time. Undoubtedly there is a wide range of issues affecting other men gay in Cairns, which were not revealed in these discussions. For example, a number of men in Cairns who were interviewed for the PASH study described experiences of financial hardship as a result of lower numbers of tourists to the region following the global financial crisis; yet the men in these more recent groups did not raise this as an issue for them.

In each of the groups, all participants voluntarily contributed greatly to the discussions. The discussions were enthusiastic, robust, and, in every instance, carried on well after the recording mechanism was turned off. Feedback from participants was tremendously positive. Participants expressed that they had appreciated the opportunity to discuss the issues and called for further opportunities to come together in a similar forum.



## Recommendations

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- Explore ways in which it may be possible to engage early with men who are new to Cairns, facilitating access to networks of other gay men.
- Ensure the continuation of the 'Out' groups that provide opportunities for men to meet on a monthly basis.
- Conduct additional research specifically among young gay men in order to hear their accounts of gay life in Cairns.
- Investigate the needs of HIV-positive men in Cairns in relation to the kinds of services being provided, to identify gaps where additional or enhanced services may be required.
- Develop programs and services to support young gay men in Cairns, enabling them to develop supportive networks.
- Provide opportunities for single gay men in Cairns to connect with each other socially.
- Continuation of the CHIVS (Cairns HIV Services) network to ensure appropriate coordination of service delivery.
- Provide support, perhaps through QPP, for networks of HIV-positive men, such as the Positive Action Cairns (PAC) group.
- Develop closer working relationships with local gay commercial venues, ensuring their continuation as a place for gay men to connect.
- Support alternative social opportunities for men who do not wish to participate in activities based around gay commercial venues.

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In early 2000, a study was undertaken to document what it meant to live as a gay man in Cairns at that time. The resulting report, *"Out" on the Reef*, described the experiences of a group of men as they lived their lives in tropical north Queensland. Ten years on this study has been repeated, to address the question: What is it like for gay men living in Cairns of today: what has changed and what remains the same?

During the past decade Cairns has grown significantly. The booming tourist industry continues to attract visitors in droves to the tropical beauty of Far North Queensland, and still, a number of these visitors decide to remain and call Cairns home. For several decades there has existed a significant population of gay men in Cairns, who are attracted the area for the warm climate, and the ability to escape. Unfortunately, not everything can be escaped: in the past ten years Cairns has experienced large increases in the incidence of HIV and other STIs.

What continues to bring gay men to Cairns in such numbers, how do they assimilate to life there, how comfortable can they be expressing their sexuality, how do they meet other gay men, and are there appropriate support networks and services available to ensure their health and well-being needs are being protected?

