



## HIV Infection Among Men Who Have Sex With Men in Albania, 1993-2013

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### ABSTRACT

#### Background:

Albania is still a low HIV prevalence country. As of December 2013, a total of 699 cases of HIV cases have been reported, with 124 new cases identified that year. Recent reports on the growing HIV epidemic among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Europe were accompanied by an increase of reported HIV among MSM in Albania, which is evident in the last years.

#### Methods:

The data were collected from the Albanian Surveillance System for HIV/AIDS and from different studies conducted in Albania. Cases were described by age, place of infection, clinical presentation of HIV infection, STI co-infection and source partner. We used simple linear regression to estimate trends over time.

#### Results:

During the study period, 71 MSM, aged from 17 to 73 years, were diagnosed with HIV. No significant trends over time in overall median age (37.0 years old) were observed. In the years 1993-2007, 1 to 3 MSM were diagnosed with HIV each year, while in the years 2008-2013 this increased to average number 9 cases per year. HIV-syphilis co-infection was reported in 20 (25.3 %) cases.

#### Conclusions:

HIV cases among MSM reported per year are increasing. Biological and Behaviors Surveillance Surveys (Bio-BSS) that have been conducted revealed that the current prevalence of HIV in MSM is higher than the general population. The increase in STI co-infections indicates risky sexual behaviors and a potential to spread both HIV and other sexually transmitted infections so HIV prevention strategies should be targeted on this vulnerable group. Further studies are needed to better understand the epidemiology of HIV/STI co-infection in MSM.

**KEYWORDS : HIV, MSM, Albania, stigma, epidemiology.**

### INTRODUCTION:

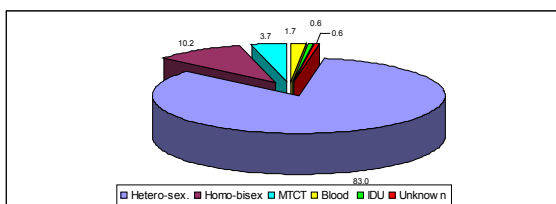
Many countries that do not report any data on MSM may be unaware of an epidemic in their midst. [1] There is clear evidence that men who have sex with men and transgender people are disproportionately at risk of HIV infection. [2]

The most recent surveillance data indicate that the number of people living with HIV in Europe continues to increase and that HIV is concentrated in key populations at higher risk of HIV infection such as men who have sex with men. Similar to recent years in Europe, the highest proportion of HIV diagnoses was reported in men who have sex with men (MSM) (40.4%), [3]

In Balkan countries such as Greece, Croatia and Slovenia the highest proportion of HIV cases was reported among MSM. In Albania, the predominant route of transmission remains heterosexual 83 %, followed by homo-bisexual transmission 10%. See the chart 1.

#### Chart.1

The distribution of cumulative HIV cases in Albania, by the route of transmission, 1993-2013.



The cumulative total of positive HIV/AIDS cases in Albania, from 1993-December 2013, was 699 cases. During 2013, 124 new cases of HIV/AIDS were confirmed. The most affected age group is people between the ages of 25 and 44 years old. Albania can be considered a country with a low prevalence of HIV/AIDS; there is an increasing trend evident during the last years. Because this fact, the focus is directed to high risk groups. In order to gain a better insight into the development of the HIV epidemic among MSM in Albania, we aimed to describe the HIV diagnosed MSM over a twenty year period, using demographic and epidemiological data.

### METODOLOGY:

This study is based on the Albanian Surveillance System for HIV/AIDS

database, managed at National AIDS Program. From the database, we extracted reports on males, who reported having sex with another man (majority of them reported having sex with women at some time) and were diagnosed in the years 1993 - 2013. A variety of epidemiological data are collected in addition, such as: presumed transmission route, time and place of infection, indications for HIV test, clinical presentation, diagnostic site and STI infections, concurrently existing with HIV infection diagnosed (STI co-infections). A date of infection is estimated from laboratory results, previous negative tests and patients' information.

### RESULTS:

The first case of an infected person with HIV in Albania was diagnosed in May 1993 through routine HIV screening of the blood bank. Sexual transmission continues to dominate the modes of HIV infection with approximately 93% of all cases. There is little knowledge regarding man having sex with man, including the sexual practices in Albania. Although stigmatized, a homosexual community does exist in Albania and is trying to become organized.

During the study period, 71 MSM (10% of total HIV cases) aged from 17 to 73 years, were diagnosed with HIV. The first HIV positive case among MSM was reported in 1993 (in 1993 only two positive HIV cases were reported). From then slowly but surely, the number of MSM seropositive cases began to escalate and in the last three years the number of MSM reported have been respectively 14 cases (2011), 10 cases (2012), and 8 cases in 2013. The geographical distribution of HIV positive MSM in the country reveals that 63% of total cases are concentrated in the capital city, Tirana. 44.3% of them received the antiretroviral therapy which is offered only at Infectious Diseases Department at University Hospital, in Tirana.

Less than half of them were married and the majority of them (82.3%) live in urban area (63% in capital city), only 17.7 % live in rural area. 37.9% out of them have been infected abroad, and only 11.3 % of the total has been infected in Greece. Approximately, 5 % of them belong to Roma ethnicity.

Of the HIV positive MSM reported in Albania, 47.6 % have completed the high school, 33.3 % have completed elementary school and only 19 % have completed universities. 44% out of them were married so they have had sex with a female.

No significant trends over time in overall median age (37 years) were observed. In the years 1993-2007, 1 to 3 MSM were diagnosed with HIV each year, while in the years 2008-2013 the average number was 9, a significant increase ( $p < 0.01$ ).

The proportion of MSM, presenting AIDS make up only 44, 3% and 15 % have died from AIDS. According to the referring system we can report that the majority (41%) of them have been referred by clinics, 30% has been tested as volunteers or referred by any NGO-s, 18 % have been referred by the National Blood Bank and the rest has been diagnosed as the consequence of epidemiological investigation.

The median age of MSM HIV positive in Albania was 37 years, but it's important to emphasize that late diagnosis is frequently in Albania. If we refer to the data from Bio-BSS 2011, the median age was 31 years.

Based on Bio-BSS conducted in 2005, 2008 and 2011 the prevalence of biological infections among the Bio-BSS target populations was low but in the other hand the behavior surveillance show that this group was the most vulnerable group.

**Tab.1 Biological data from BIO-BSS, respectively 2005, 2008, 2011.**

Bio-BSS	HIV %	Estimated Population Proportion % (95% CI)	Syphilis %	Estimated Population Proportion % (95% CI)
2005 Sample (n=199)	3	0.8 (0.1-2.0)	4.5	0.6 (0.1-1.4)
2008 Sample (n=198)	3	1.8 (0.5-3.3)	2	2.6 (0.5-5.4)
2011 Sample (n=200)	0.5	NC	1.5	1.8 (0.5-6.4)

#### HIV cases among MSM per year are increasing.

Current prevalence of HIV in MSM is higher than the general population (from BIO-BSS conducted). The results from bio-behavioural surveillance studies indicate that high risk behaviors are still present among MSM such as having sex with two or more commercial partners (but the median number of partners was three), consistent condom use with all type of partners was very low, using illicit drugs and having recent sex with females. Among those not using condoms, the main reasons cited for not using a condom were ("not necessary" or "did not think of it") and to access ("not available"). The data from biological and behaviors surveillance show that the majority of MSM are estimated to know that confidential HIV testing is available in Tirana with 70 %. Despite the knowledge, only 23.5 % reported to ever have had and HIV test. Consistent condom use with all type of partners was very low, and this fact is supported; only 12% e MSM has consistently used the condom with their female partners. [4]

Homosexual behaviors are heavily stigmatized in Albania. This has resulted in MSM experiencing discrimination as well as verbal and physical abuse. In the context of HIV and AIDS, MSM become stigmatized due to assumptions in society that they are core transmitters of HIV infection. [5] This fact supports that the number of MSM is likely an underestimate. During the past years, the network of MSM has been more organized. There are different NGO-s offering support and advocacy for this community. In comparison with Bio-BSS 2008, the MSM population in Bio-BSS 2011 seems to present a lower level of stigma.

The increase in STI co-infections indicates risky sexual behaviors and a potential to spread both HIV and other sexually transmitted infections so HIV prevention strategies should be targeted on this vulnerable group.

Individuals who are infected with STDs are at least two to five times more likely than uninfected individuals to acquire HIV infection if they are exposed to the virus through sexual contact. In addition, if an HIV-infected individual is also infected with another STD, that person is more likely to transmit HIV through sexual contact than other HIV-infected persons [6]. The most frequent infections among HIV positive MSM was: syphilis (20 cases) 25.3% and less is hepatitis B (6 cases) 7.6%.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Men who have sex with men are at a high risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Current prevalence of HIV in MSM is higher than the general population. Scale-up of HIV and syphilis screening and implementation of effective public health intervention programs should target MSM to prevent further spread of HIV and syphilis infection.

Further studies are needed to better understand the epidemiology of HIV/STI co-infection in MSM.

However, in Albania, it is difficult to obtain reliable data on how many people belong to MSM community.

HIV-positive MSM should be a priority for HIV and STI prevention programs.

Providing support for MSM organizations and groups in terms of capacity-building, public relations, and advocacy will help to target HIV prevention strategies in Albania on this vulnerable group.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] MSM, HIV, and the Road to Universal Access | [2] UNAIDS Action Framework: Universal Access for Men, who have Sex with Men and Transgender People; page 6, | [3] HIV/AIDS surveillance in Europe 2012; | [4] Bio-BSS 2011, Albania. | [5] Feng et al. 2010; Global Forum on MSM and HIV 2011. | [6] <http://www.cdc.gov/std/hiv/stdfact-std-hiv.htm> |