

Prevalence of HIV Infection and Risky Behaviors among People who Inject Drugs (PWID) in Albania

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Abstract

Background: People who inject drugs (PWID) are at higher risk of acquiring HIV due to risky injection and sexual practices.

Methods: This article presents the findings from the HIV Biological Behavioral Surveillance Surveys (IBBS) conducted among PWID. The prevalence of HIV, Hepatitis C (HCV) and Syphilis was measured. In addition, information was collected about their injection practices, sexual risk behaviors, HIV and other program coverage, stigma discrimination and violence, HIV knowledge and testing, and STI signs and symptoms. Data were collected using respondent driven sampling methodology (RDS) to recruit 755 PWID in four cities, Tirana, Durres, Elbasan, and Berat.

Results: The vast majority of PWID population report to have used any illicit drug for more than 5 years and three-quarters of them have injected for more than five years. Less than 10% report to have injected before the age of 19. Majority of them inject two or more times a day; the most commonly used injectable drugs in the past month were heroin (99.2%), cocaine (33.6%), heroin together with cocaine (14.2%) and heroin together with diazepam (9.2%). 25% of PWID are estimated to have injected with a used needle or syringe at last injection and about 16% of them have always or most of the time injected drugs with used needles during the past month; and about 42% of respondents have shared needles/syringes in the past month (48% in

Tirana). In addition to risk behaviours associated with injecting, the PWID population also engages in risk behaviours associated with sexual practices. 37% of the PWID population used a condom with their regular partner during their last sex and more than two-thirds (68%) with non-regular partners.

Conclusions: These findings highlight the need of strengthening information, education and harm reduction activities, tailored to specific needs of various districts. In addition, there is need to ensure harm-reduction programs include and further develop strategies for improving protective behaviors among PWID.

Keywords: HIV, Albania, sexual behavior, injecting drug use, respondent-driven sampling