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INTRODUCTION

Studies show impact of HIV-stigma on HIV interventions. Data are needed to show if visibility of HIV-positive people can be an effective tool against HIV-stigma: can role-models help breaking the silence about HIV in affected communities? Plus onlus is an Italian organisation of LGBT people living with HIV: among its objective, to stop HIV-related stigma and discrimination, especially within the LGBT community.

OBJECTIVES

To evaluate Italian situation regarding:

- visibility of HIV-positive MSM within their community;
- potential stigma correlated to being an homosexual or bisexual man living with HIV;
- different kind of relations among peers (social, sexual, emotional or romantic) among homo-bisexual men of different HIV status.



METHODS

Plus onlus is the Italian network of LGBT people with HIV. A national online anonymous survey called "ConvHIVere gay + e -" (Living Together gay + and -). The survey was based on a review of scientific literature related to HIV-related stigma within the gay community. The survey was disseminated in April-May 2016 and responses collected using Qualtrics and elaborated using SPSS.

RESULTS

2,380 validated questionnaires were included in final analysis. Characteristics of respondents are showed in figure 1.

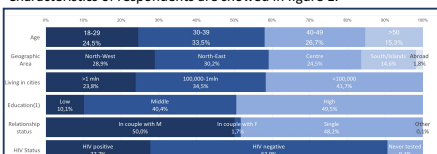


Figure 1 - PARTICIPANTS CHARACTERISTICS
(1) Education is defined "Low" when pre-secondary school was attended, "Middle", when Secondary school was attended, "High" when University was attended.

Excluding those who received a diagnosis of HIV infection, 13.0% of responders never tested for HIV.

Support at time of HIV diagnosis and after

More than one HIV+ respondent out of 10 could not rely on anyone's help in coping with their HIV diagnosis.

Respondents living with HIV were asked about who helped them at time of HIV diagnosis and, in a different question, all the time since then. Results, showed in figure 2, are diverse and no answers were chosen by the majority of respondents. However, friends and healthcare workers have an important role, while organisations – and even more gay organisations – have limited impact.

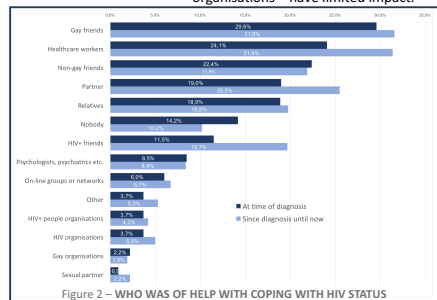


Figure 2 - WHO WAS OF HELP WITH COPING WITH HIV STATUS

Statistical analysis shows that, compared to others, those with higher internalised homophobia levels:

- were more likely to be unable to rely on anyone's help,
- were more likely to rely on psychologists or psychiatrists,
- were less likely to be able to rely on friends, either gay or non-gay.

Visibility as gay and as HIV+

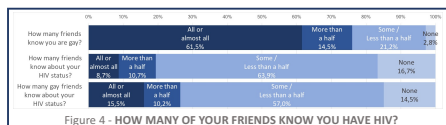
Participants were asked how many of their friends knew they were gay; results are shown in figure 3.



Figure 3 - HOW MANY OF YOUR FRIENDS KNOW YOU ARE GAY?

The proportion of men who were open about their homosexuality with friends is high and similar between HIV+ and HIV- respondents. Only 3.2% of them experienced a negative reaction to disclosure. Those living with HIV were also asked how many of their friends (either gay or non-gay) know about their HIV status (figure 4).

This research was made possible thanks to a unrestricted grant by Viiv Healthcare srl. Methodology and the survey were elaborated by Raffaele Lelleri with contributions from Giulio Maria Corbelli. Twenty three collaborators reviewed the questionnaire: they were, in alphabetical order, Andrea Perdicchi, Cosimo Martino, Daniele Nigris,



Among HIV+ respondents, 71.2% said more of their friends know they are gay compared to those who know they are HIV positive. One HIV+ respondent out of 20 (5.7%) were completely open about being gay, while none of their friends know about their HIV status.

Expected or experienced reactions to disclosure are shown in figure 5.

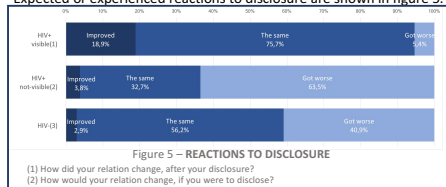


Figure 5 - REACTIONS TO DISCLOSURE

Those who disclosed their HIV positive status reported positive or neutral reactions much more frequently than expected by both HIV+ respondents who did not disclose their status and HIV- respondents, who both seem to overestimate negative effects of disclosure.

Social and sexual relations

Gay men living with HIV are part of the gay community: the majority of respondents know someone living with HIV, although only less than a half of HIV-negative respondents have an HIV-positive friend in their everyday network. Not surprisingly, respondents living with HIV have much more connections with other HIV positive people, compared to their HIV positive peers.

Interestingly, more than one HIV- respondent out of 3 reported they never met an HIV+ gay man; the same experience occurred for almost one HIV+ respondent out of 5. Moreover, while only less than one HIV+ respondent out of 10 reported they do not know personally another HIV+ gay man, almost one third of them do not hang out with other HIV+ gay men they can openly talk about their status.

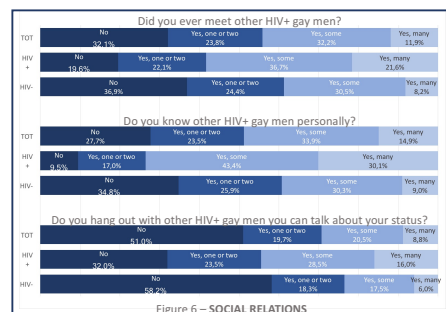


Figure 6 - SOCIAL RELATIONS

HIV+ respondents were also asked two other questions about their connections with HIV+ gay men at the time of their diagnosis. Comparison of results related to time of diagnosis to those related to the situation now, suggests that getting in touch with other HIV+ gay men was an important way of coping.

- those who did not know anyone living with HIV decreased from 46.5% at time of diagnosis to 9.5% now, while those who knew "many" others increased from 9.3% to 30.1%;
- those who do not hang out usually with other HIV+ gay men decreased from 64.8% to 32.0% while those with "many" increased from 6.9% to 16.0% (figure 7).

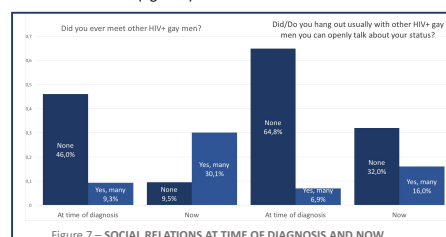


Figure 7 - SOCIAL RELATIONS AT TIME OF DIAGNOSIS AND NOW

Sexual relations were also investigated; this was not done to investigate health risks factors or prevention strategies, but to get a different view of social disclosure of HIV+ gay men in the sexual context. Time of reference of questions is the last twelve months. As per the number of sexual partners, one respondent out of 20 had no sex and the same proportion had more than a sexual partner per week. HIV+ respondents reported sex with more partners compared to HIV- ones.

Davide Barbieri, Ennio Passalia, Enzo Caruso, Federico Ferrari, Filippo Porcari, Francesco Giudice, Gabriele Prati, Jimmy Ciliberto, Lella Cosmaro, Lorenzo Zampieri, Luigi Pilotti, Matteo Beghelli, Maurizio Betti, Miles Gualdi, Paolo Sergio Galimberti, Pigi Mazzoli, Priscilla Berardi, Sandro Mattioli, Simone Marcotullio and another

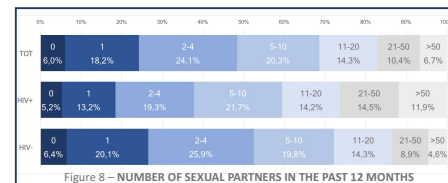


Figure 8 - NUMBER OF SEXUAL PARTNERS IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

Knowing about one's partner HIV-positivity is much more likely for HIV+ respondents compared to HIV- ones. No information could be obtained on whether serosorting is adopted as a strategy or this could be related to more awareness about and familiarity with the topic.

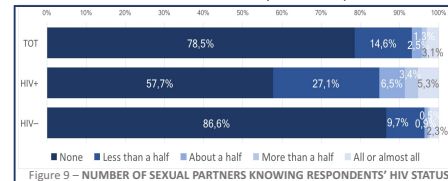


Figure 9 - NUMBER OF SEXUAL PARTNERS KNOWING RESPONDENTS' HIV STATUS

HIV-related stigma within the gay community

All respondents were asked about their opinion on seven statements related to different aspect of HIV-related stigma within the gay community (figure 10). The great majority of opinions are in the area of the agreement: in other words, respondents share the idea that a negative attitude towards gay men with HIV related to their HIV status is rooted within the gay community.

Despite this general agreement, there are some statements that are more broadly shared. Statements related to being "afraid of having sex" and "discrimination" are those with a larger proportion of respondents agreeing, followed by those about being "afraid of falling in love" and "do not understand".

A more pessimistic perception is shared by HIV+ respondents, namely referred to statements on "do not understand", on "discrimination", on the "rift within the gay community" and on "judgement". No significant difference could be observed about the statement on being "afraid of falling in love", while HIV- have a more negative perception related to being "afraid of having sex" and "treating differently".

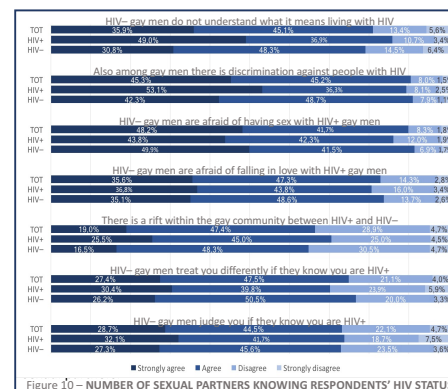


Figure 10 - NUMBER OF SEXUAL PARTNERS KNOWING RESPONDENTS' HIV STATUS

In both subgroups, about one respondent out of 5 strongly agree with the statement and the majority at least agree. HIV- respondent seem to have higher expectations of discrimination than HIV+ ones. In both subgroups, but more so among HIV- respondents, expectations of discriminations are higher from sexual partners than gay men in general.

Those who do not have a personal experience of the situation seem to overestimate the negative impact.

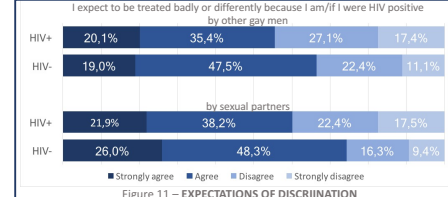


Figure 11 - EXPECTATIONS OF DISCRIMINATION

CONCLUSIONS

HIV is present in MSM community, but it is not a visible topic. Visibility of MSM living with HIV within the community is poor but fear of discrimination is higher than actual experience. Difficulties in sexual wellbeing and lack of understanding are perceived as the bigger barriers for a more inclusive gay community towards HIV+ gay men. Strategies aiming at supporting visibility of MSM living with HIV may improve HIV-related interventions outcomes within the gay community.

anonymous colleague. The final report was written by Raffaele Lelleri and partially reviewed by Giulio Maria Corbelli, Priscilla Berardi and Francesco Giudice. It can be downloaded at www.elleri.it/plus.