

HIV testing trends among MSM in Croatia: review of surveys conducted from 2005 to 2012

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INTRODUCTION:

Men who have sex with men (MSM) are the population most affected by HIV in Croatia. In 2012, 84% of newly reported HIV cases were MSM. This is the highest proportion in Europe (HIV/AIDS surveillance in Europe 2012, ECDC).

HIV prevention for MSM in Croatia has started in 2003. One of the key objectives of prevention programmes is timely detection of new HIV infections, which is done through health promotion activities of testing and community based testing.

OBJECTIVES:

Describe trend of HIV testing uptake and reasons for not testing by reviewing bio-behavioral surveys conducted from 2005 till 2012 when prevention programmes were conducted.

METHODS:

Surveys containing data about HIV testing uptake and MSM prevention programmes were collected using literature review and contacts with organisations. Only data points with the same sampling technique and survey question wording were used to detect trends.

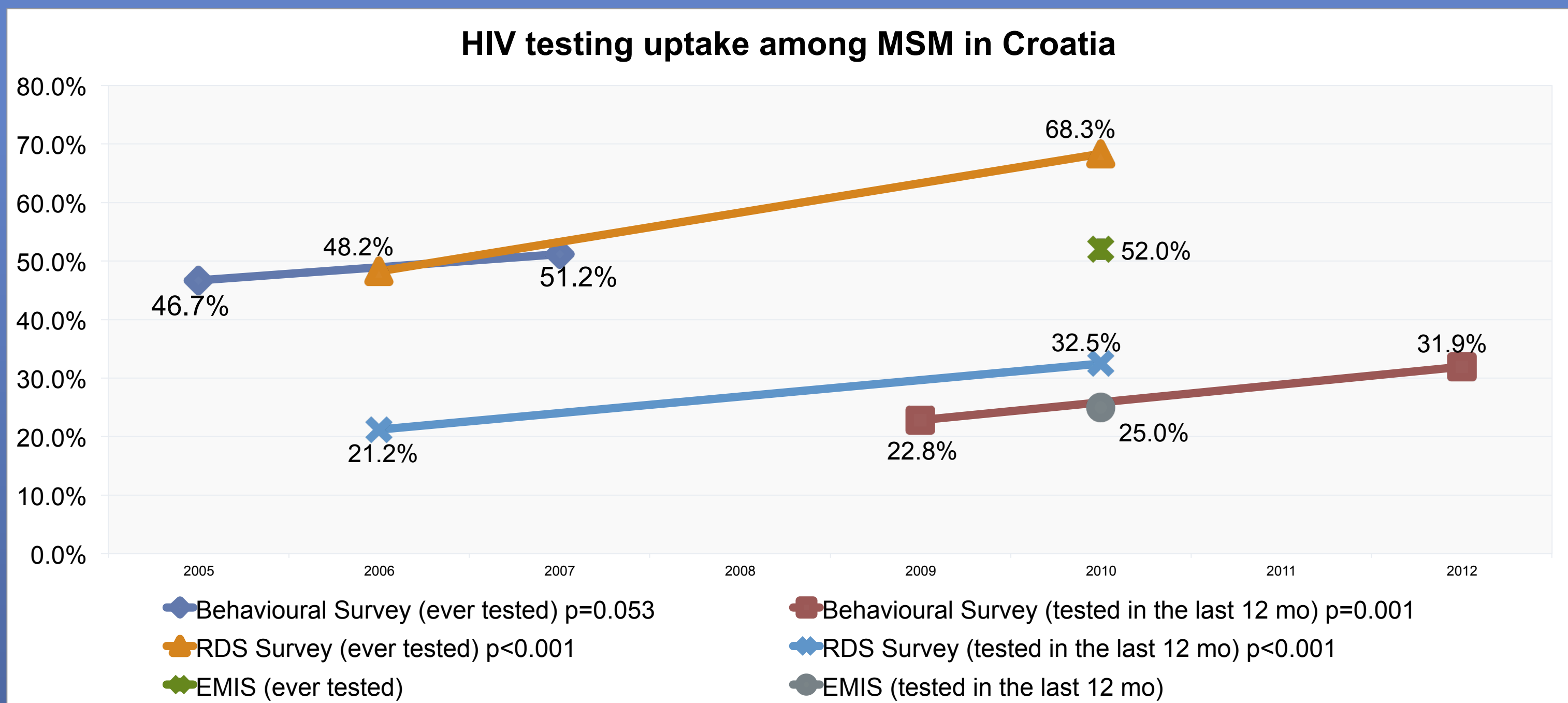
As all comparable data points were pairs, a Pearson's chi-squared test was used for significance testing in Stata.

RESULTS:

Six surveys were found that had at least two comparable data points: behavioural surveillance surveys using convenience sampling conducted in 2005, 2007, 2009 and 2012; bio-behavioural surveys using respondent-driven sampling (RDS) in 2006 and 2010; and one with a single data point: EMIS in 2010. In these surveys two types of questions were asked about HIV testing uptake: having had a test and having taken a test in the previous 12 months.

All data pairs show an increase; three show a significant difference and one is borderline significant. The survey with one data point (EMIS) aligns with the trend of Behavioural surveys in 2009 and 2012.

Three surveys asked about reasons for not testing. In all of them, the main reason for not testing was the perception of no risk of HIV infection. 61% of MSM not tested in the previous 12 months think they were not at risk of infection. An analysis from behavioural survey in 2012 showed that 82.6% of those meet the recommendation to get tested every 12 months.



CONCLUSIONS:

The surveys conducted among MSM in Croatia show an upward trend in HIV testing uptake providing some evidence of successful prevention programmes. Testing rate is still lower than the European median testing rate for MSM (EMIS 2010 median=34.5%, 25% in Croatia). The main obstacle to testing is perception of low risk. The main limitations are self-selection and social desirability biases which may overestimate HIV testing rates. A further corroboration with absolute number of MSM tested at all different sites is needed.

Recommendations: A health promotion message should highlight the importance of regular testing and high undiagnosed rates (56.4% of HIV+ MSM not tested). More investment to enable MSM to test is recommended. Further research to gain a better understanding of non-testing and risk perception is needed.

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