

ASSESSMENT OF HIV/AIDS AMONG ROMA YOUNG PEOPLE

1. Aim

The aim of this assessment was to describe the risk behaviors of young people from Roma community, and the associated health consequences of their risk behaviors.

2. Method

The assessment was conducted in four different sites: Tirana, Vlora, Fier and Korca. These sites were selected according to the presence of roma community. The assessment consisted in conducting a questionnaire-based survey. Each young roma person recruited to participate completed a questionnaire. For those who were illiterate, the questionnaire was delivered by the focal point. The questionnaire used was the same version used during the RAR with vulnerable young people. The survey was conducted by roma focal point who was provided beforehand with some additional basic materials on HIV/AIDS and qualitative research. Recruitment of the participants was done based on previous observations of the sites and suggestions from roma community leaders who were contacted before the survey started.

3. Results

There were 74 young people from roma community aged 14 –24 years who agreed to answer to survey questions. According to sex there were 54 male (73%) and 20 female (27%) participating in the survey. According to sites and sex (M/F) there were: 14 in Fier (11/3), 35 in Vlora (28/7), 14 in Vlora (6/8) and 11 in Korca (9/2).

Drug use behavior

- Around 16% (12 out of 74) of the respondents used at least once drugs.
- Most frequent (mode) and mean age when first used drug were 16 years old (range 13-18)
- Areas where usually used drugs

Areas	Street	Bars/cafés	Home
% (n)	58% (7)	25% (3)	17% (2)

n = frequency

- Drugs most used in the last 1 month

Drugs	Cannabis	Alcohol	Cocaine
% (n)	83% (10)	25% (3)	8% (1)

n = frequency

- Around 50% of those who had used drugs (6 out of 12 respondent) have taken two or more drugs at the same time.
- 25% of respondents, who have used drugs, have had sexual intercourse under the influence of drugs.
- No one from the respondents has been injecting drugs.

Sexual behavior

- 63% of the respondents (47 out of 74) have had sexual intercourse. According to sex, 57% of the male (31 out of 54) and 80% of the female (16 out of 20) have had sexual intercourse.
- Most frequent and mean age at the first sexual intercourse is 16 years of age (range 11-20)

- Number of sexual partners in the last 1-year

N. of partners	1	2	>3
Total % (n)	53% (25)	28% (13)	17% (8)

- 50% of the respondents “never” used condoms and 43% used “sometimes” condoms during sexual intercourse (Only 7% used “always” condoms)

- Reasons for not using condoms

Reasons	%
Don't like sex with condom	43%
Trust partner	26%
It is difficult to use	15%
Embarrassed to ask the partner to use	6%

- 28 % (21) of the respondents have had sexual intercourse with someone in return for money, drugs, etc. Of those 19 are male (61% of the male respondents).

Health seeking behavior and consequences

- Places where to get information on HIV or other STIs

Places to get info	%, Frequency
Media	49%
Friends/peers	20%
No information	14%
Family	7%
School	5%

- 3 % of the respondents think they are at risk for HIV or other STIs.
- 10% (7) of the respondents have been tested for HIV/AIDS.
- No one have been tested for Hep B or Hep C
- 5 % of the respondents have had a STI in the past

Context

- Education level

	No education	Elementary	High school
%	65%	32%	3%

4. Discussion

Percentage of female from roma community who participated in this assessment is lower than male. This rate reflects difficulties of accessing this population during the survey. Percentage of young roma people who use drugs is 16%, a figure lower than other vulnerable young people seen during the RAR. Relative small number of people interviewed (74 young people) might have influenced the result. In the mean time, more than half of those who use drugs have been taking two or more drugs in the same time, which indicates that this group presents considerable risks for drug use. Young roma people start using drugs at a relatively early young age (16 years of age) with cannabis sativa the main drug being used. None of the respondents have been using intravenous drugs. However we have to be careful to generalize this result to all roma young community, considering the small sample size and difficulties of reaching injecting drug users among roma community. Of those using drug, around one fourth have been having sexual intercourse under the effect of drugs, which increases the risk behaviors of this sub-group.

Young roma people represent a relatively sexually active group (around two third of respondents have had sexual intercourse). To be noticed is the result that around 80% of female roma young people are sexually active, a fact that should be keep in mind while designing intervention for this population. Even the relatively young age at the first sexual intercourse (16 years of age) is a fact that support the results mentioned above. To this direction points also the fact that around half of those having had sexual intercourse, have had two or more sexual partners during the last year.

Their relatively high level of sexual risk behaviors is in contrast with low level of protective sexual behaviors presented, such as very low level of condom use (only 7% used always condoms). Like other risk groups, roma young people do not use condoms because mainly they do not like sex with condoms or they would trust the partner.

Low level of protective sexual behaviors would be related also with low level of knowledge and perceptions of risks they have about HIV/AIDS/STI.

Like other risk groups, the main sources of information regarding HIV/AIDS/STI remain media and friends, whereas school and family are regarded as less important sources of information.

The relatively high percentage of those tested for HIV (10%) would be related neither to their perception to risk (which is very low) nor to any good access to the services. This fact could be related to other reasons like blood donation, as it is known that a high number of roma people are regular blood donors (selling blood for earning purposes).

The low percentage of those who admit having had a STI before might be related with their low level of knowledge and health education, which lead to a low perception, and awareness of any STI's signs and symptoms.

Almost half of those having had sex in the past have had sexual intercourse in change for money, drug or other favors, which indicates how their low socio-economic level can influence their risk behaviors. This is also supported by the fact that almost two thirds of the respondents are illiterate, data that should be considered while designing interventions for HIV prevention with this community.