

HIV awareness, perceptions and prevention among immigrants in Spain

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CONTEXT:

From the mid-90s, nearly one-fourth of all new cases of HIV infection in the European Union are diagnosed in Spain. Furthermore, in recent years the prevalence of HIV infection has increased significantly among the foreign population residing in Spain. Hence, the tasks of evaluating the degree of knowledge of HIV transmission, the subjective perception of risk and the patterns of preventive behaviour among the immigrant population are crucial to adapt appropriately public health policies and prevention strategies.

OBJECTIVES:

- (a) To identify socio-demographic factors which influence the assessment of personal risk of contracting HIV.
- (b) To examine differentials in HIV risk awareness and perceptions among the Spanish and the foreign population.
- (c) To document disparities in the degree of knowledge of HIV transmission and prevention, condom use and HIV testing, across different nationalities.

DATA AND METHODS:

The analysis is based on the microdata of the *Survey of Health and Sexual Behaviour*, conducted by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics in 2003. The survey is representative of the adult population aged 18 to 49, both at the national level and at the regional level, and its sample comprises 10,838 individuals. It contains information on HIV risk awareness, beliefs and personal perception, degree of knowledge about HIV transmission and prevention, condom use patterns, and HIV test experience. We use logistic regression models to evaluate the influence of nationality and other socio-

demographic characteristics (such as gender, age, partnership status, educational level...) on the assessment of personal risk of contracting HIV, on the correct identification of transmission and prevention mechanisms, and on voluntary testing for HIV.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS:

Although the prevalence of HIV infection is relatively high in Spain compared to other European countries, the perception of risk among the Spanish population is quite low (only 2% of respondents assessed their risk as “great” or “moderate”). The perception of risk among the foreign population residing in Spain is also low (4%), although somewhat higher than natives. Also, the percentage of foreigners that declare that they have ever been afraid of being infected (27.9%) is significantly higher than that of Spanish (17.8%). As regards the degree of knowledge about transmission modes and preventive methods, there are few disparities between the Spanish and the foreign population. However, the number of sexual partners, diagnosed STIs, and non use of condoms are higher among the foreign population, increasing their vulnerability to health risks. HIV risk perception tends to be higher among women than men, but gender differentials are not uniform across nationalities. Voluntary testing for HIV is more frequent among the foreign population, women, those aged 30 to 39, those with higher education and those separated or divorced.



