

HIV prevention in the high schools of Sardinia: the experience of LILA Cagliari

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Background

- LILA Cagliari (Italian League Fighting AIDS) has been working on HIV prevention in Sardinia since 1993.
- From 2013 to 2022, the EducAids project involved 9551 high school students in 69 days of activities, distributed 2062 condoms, and 5444 information leaflets.
- The project involved about 9 schools and seven volunteers per year.
- This work presents the results of the project's initial questionnaires collected between 2017 and 2022 in 36 Sardinian schools.

Material and methods

- The anonymous questionnaires were administered in BYOD (bring-your-own-device) and compiled in class with an operator from the association.
- Questionnaire sections:
 - age, gender, orientation, sexual debut;
 - prophylactic use, other contraceptives, alcohol and drug use during sexual encounters;
 - students' attitude on HIV (approach, stigma towards people with HIV/considered at risk of HIV, points of view on sexuality) (Tab.1), opinions on the organization of emotional and sexual education activities, availability of condoms during LILA intervention, and condoms sale in vending machines at school;
 - self-assessment of knowledge about statements about HIV;
 - feedback on difficulties and embarrassment about covered topics.

Question	Answer	%	Number
HIV only affects homosexuals, drug addicts, and sex workers.	agree	9,7%	403
	neutral	9,6%	399
	disagree	80,7%	3363
Anyone may become infected with HIV if they expose themselves to risks.	agree	90,7%	3778
	neutral	5,6%	232
	disagree	3,7%	155
It is better to take the risk of contracting HIV than to interrupt the sexual intercourse.	agree	6,2%	260
	neutral	8,2%	343
	disagree	85,5%	3562
People with HIV should not have sexual intercourse to contain transmission.	agree	32,7%	1362
	neutral	21,3%	888
	disagree	46,0%	1915
You cannot be sure whether or not someone has HIV based on their appearance.	agree	80,7%	3385
	neutral	11,8%	496
	disagree	7,5%	313

Table 1. Level of agreement, disagreement, and neutrality on some statements about HIV.

Results

- 4194 questionnaires were analyzed (age 13-20, mean 17 years; gender: 2378 women; 1804 men; 12 non-binary; orientation: 85.1% heterosexual; relationship status: 70.3% single) (Tab.2).
- 38% of participants already had sexual intercourse (57% before the age of 16)(Tab.1). 37.3% always used condoms in penetrative intercourse, 46.3% sporadically, 16.5% never.
- Reasons for the assiduous use of condoms were pregnancy prevention and STIs, greater safety, and agreement between partners.
- Among sporadic users, 37.2% didn't always have condoms, 26.5% found condoms uncomfortable, and 17.4% felt less satisfied.
- Among those who don't use condoms, 19.2% feel uncomfortable, 14.1% report decreased sexual pleasure, and 8.6% were exclusive.
- The knowledge reported on general statements on HIV was mostly higher than 60% (Tab. 3).
- On statements about HIV testing and PrEP, the level of knowledge was lower (e.g., "If someone becomes infected with HIV it may take several weeks before it can be detected in a test" (30.3% correct answers) (Tab.4).
- 100% of the students were in favour of the proposed interventions, and the majority were not embarrassed nor experienced difficulties dealing with the topics.

Conclusions

- Our results highlighted the need for more adequate education on HIV.
- The inadequate formation proposed by the Italian school system on emotional and sexual education was highlighted by the majority of participants that were in favor of structured and high-quality interventions.
- Furthermore, the scientific community, civil society, and international organizations recommend comprehensive sex education.
- Therefore, projects like EducAids by LILA Cagliari are essential to inform the students and amplify their voices about the need for the institutional actors to implement the international recommendations.

Variables		%	Number
Age	<18	68%	2885
	≥18	31%	1309
Gender	Woman	43,0%	2378
	Man	56,7%	1804
	Nonbinary	0,3%	12
Sexual orientation	Straight	85,1%	3568
	Homosexual	1,2%	52
	Lesbian	1,8%	75
	Bisexual	5,9%	248
	Other	6,0%	251
Relationship	Single	70,3%	2950
	In a relationship	29,7%	1244
First sexual intercourse	no	62,0%	2602
	yes	38,0%	1592
Age at first sexual intercourse	<13	3,6%	56
	13-15	53,4%	835
	16-17	40,8%	635
	>17	2,4%	37

Table 2. Participants details.

Question	Answer	%	Number
AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV.	knowledge	67,5%	2831
	uncertainty	20,1%	842
	lack of knowledge	12,4%	521
Risky behaviors for transmission are unprotected sexual intercourse.	knowledge	94,0%	3941
	uncertainty	4,1%	173
	lack of knowledge	1,9%	80
HIV can be passed during anal or vaginal sex without a condom, even if without ejaculation.	knowledge	62,9%	2638
	uncertainty	23,7%	996
	lack of knowledge	13,4%	560
HIV is transmitted through blood, semen and vaginal secretions.	knowledge	71,1%	2984
	uncertainty	18,4%	773
	lack of knowledge	10,4%	437
HIV cannot be passed during kissing (including deep kissing), because saliva does not transmit HIV.	knowledge	72,1%	3024
	uncertainty	17,9%	752
	lack of knowledge	10,0%	418
Contraceptive methods such as the pill, diaphragm or coil prevent unwanted pregnancies but do not protect against HIV transmission.	knowledge	69,6%	2919
	uncertainty	17,8%	746
	lack of knowledge	12,6%	529
There is currently no cure for HIV infection.	knowledge	59,2%	2481
	uncertainty	22,7%	950
	lack of knowledge	18,2%	763

Table 3. Level of knowledge, uncertainty, lack of knowledge about some general statements about HIV.

Question	Answer	%	Number
HIV infection can be controlled with medicines so that its impact on health is much less.	knowledge	56,1%	2353
	uncertainty	23,0%	966
	lack of knowledge	20,9%	875
You can be infected with HIV and have no symptoms for more than ten years.	knowledge	50,9%	2119
	uncertainty	20,6%	858
	lack of knowledge	28,5%	1188
The HIV test consists of a blood sample (specific) or rapid tests (salivary or capillary blood).	knowledge	52,8%	2214
	uncertainty	24,3%	1020
	lack of knowledge	22,9%	960
If someone becomes infected with HIV it may take several weeks before it can be detected in a test	knowledge	30,3%	1270
	uncertainty	26,2%	1097
	lack of knowledge	43,6%	1827
There is a rapid HIV test that analyzes a saliva sample.	knowledge	24,1%	495
	uncertainty	26,2%	538
	lack of knowledge	49,6%	1017
A person with HIV who is on effective treatment (called 'undetectable viral load') cannot pass their virus to someone else.	knowledge	29,4%	1235
	uncertainty	26,8%	1124
	lack of knowledge	43,8%	1835
An HIV-negative person can take preventive treatment that avoids HIV transmission: it is called PrEP	knowledge	20,6%	442
	uncertainty	15,8%	339
	lack of knowledge	63,6%	1363

Table 4. Level of knowledge, uncertainty, lack of knowledge about some specific statements about HIV.

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