

Bridging gaps in HIV screening for marginalized communities: insights from a community-based center in Genoa, Italy



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Introduction

- Community-based centers for HIV screening play a pivotal role in addressing the needs of high-risk populations, particularly **vulnerable and marginalized groups**, who often face barriers to accessing traditional testing services within hospital settings.
- IOC'ENTRO HIV checkpoint** in Genoa is the biggest out-of-hospital facility in the Liguria Region that offers free and anonymous services for HIV tests and counseling (Figure 1).

Results

- Since December 2021, a total of **607 rapid tests** for HIV screening were performed.
- Considering gender, 322 (53.0%) and 272 (44.8%) of users were, respectively, cisgender men and women, 2 (0.3%), 8 (1.3%) were transgender men and women and 3 (0.5%) were non-binary.
- The two most represented age groups were 25-39, with 313 users (51.6%) and 18-24 with 221 users (36.4%), while 67 users (11.0%) belonged to the 40-59 group and only 6 (0.9%) were over 60 years old.
- Among our users, 159 (26.2%) were men who have sex with men (MSM), 23 (3.8%) were or had sex with sex workers, 11 (1.8%) were or had sex with people who inject drugs and 6 (0.9%) used pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

Figure 1 – Anlaids Liguria IOC'ENTRO checkpoint



Table 1 - Sociodemographic characteristics and risk profile of users of IOC'ENTRO checkpoint between December 2021 and February 2024

Demographics	Profile								
	Overall	WSW	MSM	SW or sex with SW	IDU or sex with IDU	Engages in chemsex	PrEP user	STI <12 months	New HIV diagnosis
Age group									
0-24	221 (36,4%)	31 (52,54%)	36 (22,64%)	6 (26,08%)	2 (18,18%)	4 (36,36%)	0 (0%)	2 (9,52%)	0 (0%)
25-39	313 (51,56%)	27 (45,76%)	90 (56,6%)	14 (60,86%)	7 (63,63%)	5 (45,45%)	2 (33,33%)	17 (80,95%)	3 (100%)
40-59	67 (11,03%)	1 (1,69%)	31 (19,49%)	2 (8,69%)	2 (18,18%)	2 (18,18%)	4 (66,66%)	2 (9,52%)	0 (0%)
60+	6 (0,98%)	0 (0%)	2 (1,25%)	1 (4,34%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Nationality									
Foreigner	67 (11,03%)	5 (8,47%)	27 (16,98%)	6 (26,08%)	0 (0%)	3 (27,27%)	2 (33,33%)	3 (14,28%)	3 (100%)
ITA	540 (88,96%)	54 (91,52%)	132 (83,01%)	17 (73,91%)	11 (100%)	8 (72,72%)	4 (66,66%)	18 (85,71%)	0 (0%)
Gender identity									
F	272 (44,81%)	54 (91,52%)	0 (0%)	3 (13,04%)	4 (36,36%)	4 (36,36%)	1 (16,66%)	14 (66,66%)	0 (0%)
FTM	2 (0,32%)	0 (0%)	2 (1,25%)	0 (0%)	1 (9,09%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
M	322 (53,04%)	0 (0%)	157 (98,74%)	19 (43,47%)	6 (54,54%)	7 (63,63%)	5 (83,33%)	7 (33,33%)	3 (100%)
MTF	8 (1,31%)	5 (8,47%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
NB	3 (0,49%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (4,34%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Profile									
WSW	59 (9,71%)			0 (0%)	1 (9,09%)	2 (18,18%)	1 (16,66%)	4 (19,04%)	0 (0%)
MSM	159 (26,19%)			11 (47,82%)	3 (27,27%)	7 (63,63%)	5 (83,33%)	6 (28,57%)	2 (66,6%)
SW or sex with SW	23 (3,78%)			3 (27,27%)	1 (9,09%)	4 (66,66%)	1 (4,76%)	1 (33,33%)	1 (33,33%)
IDU or sex with IDU	11 (1,81%)				1 (9,09%)	1 (9,09%)	0 (0%)	1 (4,76%)	0 (0%)
Chemsex	11 (1,81%)						2 (33,33%)	2 (9,52%)	0 (0%)
In PrEP	6 (0,98%)							0 (0%)	0 (0%)
STI <12 months	21 (3,45%)								0 (0%)
Total	607 (100%)								

Objective

- The aim of this study was to evaluate the demographic **characteristics** and **risk profile** among users of the checkpoint.

Methods

- IOC'ENTRO is part of the **COBATEST network**, a European platform of HIV community-based testing facilities with the purpose of standardizing the collection of data.
- For this study, data collected employing the standard COBATEST questionnaire from December 2021 to February 2024 were analyzed (Table 1).
- Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests were used to compare categorical variables. P values <0.05 were considered statistically significant.
- Overall, **3 users had a positive HIV test result** and were referred to hospital services. Of them, all were males and foreigners, 2 were MSM and 1 engaged in sex work (p<0.001).
- Of 21 users who reported a STI in prior 12 months, 17 (80.9%) were aged 25-39 (p=0.033) and 2 (9.5%) engaged in chemsex (p=0.035).
- Among 11 users engaging in **chemsex**, 1 (9.1%) reported injecting drugs, while 2 used methamphetamines and 2 used cocaine. Notably, while chemsex is a phenomenon typically associated with the MSM community, 4 users were cisgender women and two of them had sex with women (WSW). While one was involved with both male and female partners, the other, also in PrEP, was involved exclusively with female partners.
- Contrary to the prevailing trends that neglects the **sexual health of WSW**, a large proportion of our users identified as such (9.7%).

Conclusions

- While, in our setting, HIV routine screening remains low in general population, the identification of positive cases underscores the importance of **early detection** and **linkage to care**.
- Our findings highlight the role of community-based centers in reaching **diverse high-risk populations**, including individuals engaging in chemsex, who frequently encounter a lack of dedicated services within local infectious diseases and substance use facilities, as well as other marginalized groups, such as foreigners and WSW, whose sexual health needs are often overlooked.