

HIV and STI testing beyond key populations: Brescia's first community-based experience

M. Stizioli¹, M. Barracchia¹, A. Bergomi¹, P. Russo^{2,3}, A. Sala¹, P. Vinti²
¹Brescia Checkpoint ETS, Brescia, Italy; ²Milano Check Point ETS, Milano, Italy ³CIG Arcigay Milano ODV, Milano, Italy

Background

- Despite Brescia's high HIV incidence rates and its participation in the Fast-Track Cities initiative since 2021, HIV and STI testing services in community-based settings had never been available.
- This lack left a critical gap in prevention services, both for key populations and for groups that are non conventionally considered as key populations.

Material and Methods

- In 2024, the organization Brescia Checkpoint was established, to address this gap through a community-based testing service.
- The organization leveraged on expertise in HIV and sexual health services gained within other LGBTQIA+ and HIV organizations.
- Thanks to municipal funding, Brescia Checkpoint offered free and confidential rapid HIV and syphilis testing once a month between November 2024 and February 2025 at Spazio Lampo, a community space located near the heart of Brescia.
- Alongside testing, peer providers offered counseling on combination prevention strategies, and facilitated linkage to care at the local STI clinic as needed.
- All clients completed an anonymous questionnaire assessing STI services awareness, PrEP knowledge, and use of barrier methods for HIV/STI prevention.
- Data collection aimed at understanding testing behaviors and STI services accessibility across different population groups.

Results

- Out of 61 individuals who tested for HIV and syphilis, 20 (32.8%) got tested for the first time for HIV and 28 (45.9%) for syphilis.
- The majority of clients who had never tested before were heterosexual (65% for HIV and 60.7% for syphilis).
- 39.3% of clients reported not being aware of the local STI clinic, which offers HIV and STI services free of charge and without requiring a medical prescription.
- Additionally, only 54.1% had heard about PrEP before, with awareness gaps particularly pronounced among heterosexual clients (Table 1).
- 65.6% of clients indicated inconsistent use of barrier methods for HIV/STI prevention in the past year, with no notable variation across groups (Figure 1).
- Furthermore, 56.9% chose to test at Brescia Checkpoint explicitly due to its community-based approach (Figure 2).
- 2 clients had a reactive test result for syphilis, all were linked to care.

Conclusions

- These preliminary findings highlight the crucial role of community-based services in improving access to HIV and STI testing for key populations and the general population.
- The results also highlight a considerable demand for testing services offered outside of facility-based settings.
- Specifically, community-based service delivery, enhanced by peer-led support, can significantly reduce barriers to testing and prevention services for diverse populations.
- The expertise gained within HIV and STI services primarily attended by LGBTQIA+ communities and key populations can be used to address unmet needs among other individuals usually not identified as key populations, but who are at substantial risk for HIV and STIs.

Table 1. First-time HIV/syphilis testing, unawareness of STI clinic services and PrEP, by age, sexual orientation, gender identity, place of residence, employment status										
	Total tested		First time HIV tested		First time syphilis tested		Unaware of STI clinic services		Unaware of PrEP	
N. (%)	61		20	32.8%	28	45.9%	24	39.3%	28	45.9%
Age										
18-26	8	13.1%	6	30.0%	6	21.4%	3	12.5%	4	14.3%
26-30	14	23.0%	7	35.0%	9	32.1%	8	33.3%	7	25.0%
30-40	23	37.7%	3	15.0%	7	25.0%	7	29.2%	7	25.0%
40-50	10	16.4%	3	15.0%	5	17.9%	5	20.8%	7	25.0%
50-60	4	6.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	4.2%	2	7.1%
over 60	2	3.3%	1	5.0%	1	3.6%	0	0.0%	1	3.6%
Sex assigned at birth										
Female	23	37.7%	9	45.0%	12	42.9%	6	25.0%	10	35.7%
Male	38	62.3%	11	55.0%	16	57.1%	18	75.0%	18	64.3%
Sexual orientation and gender identity										
Bisexual man	8	13.1%	2	10.0%	2	7.1%	4	16.7%	5	17.9%
Bisexual woman	6	9.8%	1	5.0%	1	3.6%	2	8.3%	2	7.1%
Heterosexual man	13	21.3%	8	40.0%	9	32.1%	12	50.0%	10	35.7%
Heterosexual woman	14	23.0%	5	25.0%	8	28.6%	3	12.5%	7	25.0%
Homosexual man	15	24.6%	1	5.0%	4	14.3%	2	8.3%	3	10.7%
Pansexual man	2	3.3%	0	0.0%	1	3.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Pansexual woman	3	4.9%	3	15.0%	3	10.7%	1	4.2%	1	3.6%
Place of residence										
10-30 km from Brescia	22	36.1%	10	50.0%	13	46.4%	10	41.7%	10	35.7%
Brescia	35	57.4%	9	45.0%	13	46.4%	10	41.7%	16	57.1%
Visiting	4	6.6%	1	5.0%	2	7.2%	4	16.7%	2	7.1%
Employment status										
Employed	48	78.7%	14	70.0%	21	75.0%	20	83.3%	23	82.1%
Student	12	19.7%	6	30.0%	7	25.0%	4	16.7%	5	17.9%
Retired	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%

Figure 1. How often did you use barrier methods for HIV/STI prevention in the last year?

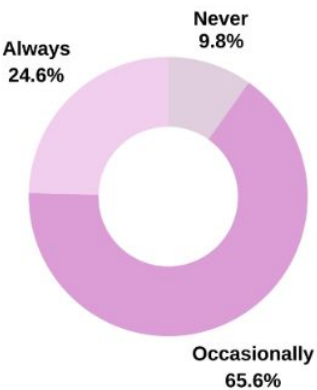


Figure 2. Why did you choose to get tested specifically at Brescia Checkpoint?

