

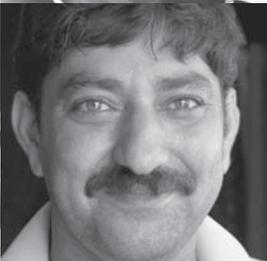


ALBANIA

2005 Behavioral and Biological Surveillance Study

USAID'S IMPLEMENTING AIDS PREVENTION AND CARE (IMPACT) PROJECT

USAID
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Albania





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of the 2005 Behavioral and Biological Surveillance Study (Bio-BSS) conducted in Tirana, the first such study conducted in Albania. The survey collected data from three groups: injecting drug users (IDUs), men who have sex with men (MSM), and the Roma. Survey data were also collected from the general Albanian population (hereafter termed general population) to compare with data from the Roma sample.

The Bio-BSS was implemented with financial support from the Albania mission of the US Agency for International Development (USAID/Albania). A survey working group, consisting of members of the Institute of Public Health (IPH), Institute of Public Opinion Studies, USAID, The Synergy Project, and Family Health International (FHI), was formed to design and manage surveillance activities. FHI and The Synergy Project provided technical assistance for the design, implementation, and analysis of the Bio-BSS and for this report. The overall goal of the Bio-BSS was to establish a second-generation national behavioral and biological surveillance system for HIV.

The general objectives of the Bio-BSS were to

- provide baseline measurements of key behavioral and biological indicators for high-risk and vulnerable groups in Albania, including correlations between risk behaviors and exposure to specific sexually transmitted infections
- enhance national capacity to maintain surveillance as part of the national AIDS monitoring plan
- conduct analyses to inform national HIV-prevention program planning in Albania

Before starting the Bio-BSS, approval was obtained from the Albanian Medical Ethics Committee and from FHI's Protection of Human Subjects Committee. Respondent-driven sampling (RDS) was used to recruit IDU and MSM participants. RDS is a modified form of snowball sampling that allows researchers to recruit highly stigmatized groups who do not congregate in known locations. RDS not only provides a probability method for achieving a desired sample size, but also allows the study team to identify networks and the characteristics of people within these networks. Thus, the data from the RDS samples allow inferences to be made about the characteristics of larger networks of IDUs and MSM in Tirana.

Standard household-cluster sampling techniques were used for the Roma and the general population. First, the Bio-BSS team updated and verified existing IPH maps of Roma neighborhoods. Then three Roma settlements (each representing a cluster) were randomly selected from 11 mapped settlements and a random sampling method was used to select specific households within these settlements. One male and one female between the ages of 18 and 49 were randomly selected from each household to participate in the study. Table ES-1 presents the projected (desired) and achieved sample size for each of the study populations.

Table ES-1. Sample Size Projected and Achieved, by Study Population

Group	Sample Size Projected	Sample Size Achieved
IDUs	200	225
MSM	200	199
Roma	620	630
General population	620	629
Total	1640	1683

Results

Biological Data

Overall, the prevalence of biological infections was low among Bio-BSS target populations. HIV was not detected among IDUs or the general population. Estimated HIV prevalence among the Roma was 0.3 percent and 0.8 percent among MSM (95 percent, CI: 0.1–2.0 percent). Syphilis was most prevalent among the Roma (a rate of 2.5 percent), indicating a potential risk for HIV transmission. Syphilis presence among the other groups was lower: 0.6 percent for IDUs and 1.2 percent for MSM. Hepatitis B occurred at much higher rates than syphilis in all populations. The general population had a hepatitis B rate of 5.6 percent, while the rate among the Roma was 13.5 percent. IDUs and MSM also had high rates of hepatitis B (15 and 17.6 percent, respectively). Most disturbing, however, was the elevated rate of hepatitis C among IDUs. One in every four is estimated to be infected with hepatitis C, indicating a potential pathway for HIV transmission.

Behavioral Data

Injecting Drug Users

The estimates reveal that most IDUs in Tirana are male. About half of the population are less than 25 years old (47 percent), and most are not married and do not live with a sexual partner (65 percent). Most IDUs have completed at least middle school (the eight classes that comprise compulsory education), and one-third of IDUs have also completed high school (12 classes). An estimated 11 percent are illiterate.

The vast majority of IDUs (92 percent) have injected for five years or less, and almost 18 percent have injected for less than 12 months. The median age at first injection is 21, with about 45 percent of IDUs estimated to have injected before the age of 20. More than two-thirds of the population (82 percent) inject drugs several times each day. During the previous month, the most commonly used injectable and noninjectable drugs were heroin (91 percent), diazepam (51 percent), marijuana (47 percent), and cocaine (26 percent). It is estimated that slightly more than half of IDUs (54 percent) injected with used needles during that month, indicating that sharing of needles and syringes is common.

Almost 90 percent of IDUs are estimated to have engaged in sexual intercourse, but fewer (77 percent) testified that they had experienced sexual intercourse within the past

12 months. More than one-fourth (27.8 percent) of the IDU population is estimated to have used condoms with their regular partners during last sex, and 38.9 percent used condoms with non-regular partners. The vast majority of respondents (91.6 percent) reported that they were aware that a person could get HIV by injecting with used needles, and almost three-fourths knew that switching from injecting to non-injecting drugs could help protect them against HIV. Approximately 30 percent of IDUs have had their blood tested for HIV; of those, almost two-thirds were tested voluntarily.

Men Who Have Sex with Men

The median age of MSM survey participants was 26.9, and more than half of MSM in Tirana were estimated to be younger than 24. More than 90 percent of MSM have completed at least eight classes of compulsory education, with 36 percent having completed a minimum of 12 classes. A total of 8 percent reported that they had never received any formal education.

It is estimated that about half the MSM population have experimented with marijuana and one-third have tried heroin. More than 20 percent of MSM also use cocaine and ecstasy. Population estimates indicate that more than one-fourth of MSM inject drugs (27.1 percent) and that heroin is the most common drug injected by MSM in Albania.

The MSM population is sexually active, with almost 100 percent estimated to have had sex during the past six months. During that period, about 60 percent of MSM had oral sex with a man, and almost half ejaculated into the partner's mouth or vice versa. The majority of MSM (67 percent) are estimated to have had more than one sexual partner during the six-month period and almost 10 percent had five or more oral sex partners. Almost all respondents (97 percent) had experienced anal sex in the past six months, and an estimated 40 percent had anal sex with a commercial partner.

Only 16 percent of MSM used condoms consistently, during every act of sexual intercourse. Among MSM who did not use condoms, "not liking it" was the main reason given. Less frequently mentioned reasons were related to access (not available or too expensive) and to awareness (not necessary; not thinking of it). Similarly, only a minority of respondents used lubricants (19 percent), and the most frequent reason given for non-use was not liking them. Oil-based lubricants, including butter and cooking oil, were those most frequently chosen by MSM who use lubricants.

While an estimated 80 percent of MSM are aware that confidential HIV testing is available in Tirana, only a small proportion have ever taken an HIV test. For most MSM who have been tested, the testing was voluntary, and they received their test results.

The Roma

The weighted Roma sample was young; one-third (31 percent) of participants were under 24 and their median age was 31. Half reported that they had married before the age of 16 (the official age for marriage in Albania is 18). More than one-third had received no education, while this was true of only 1.3 percent of the general population. A large

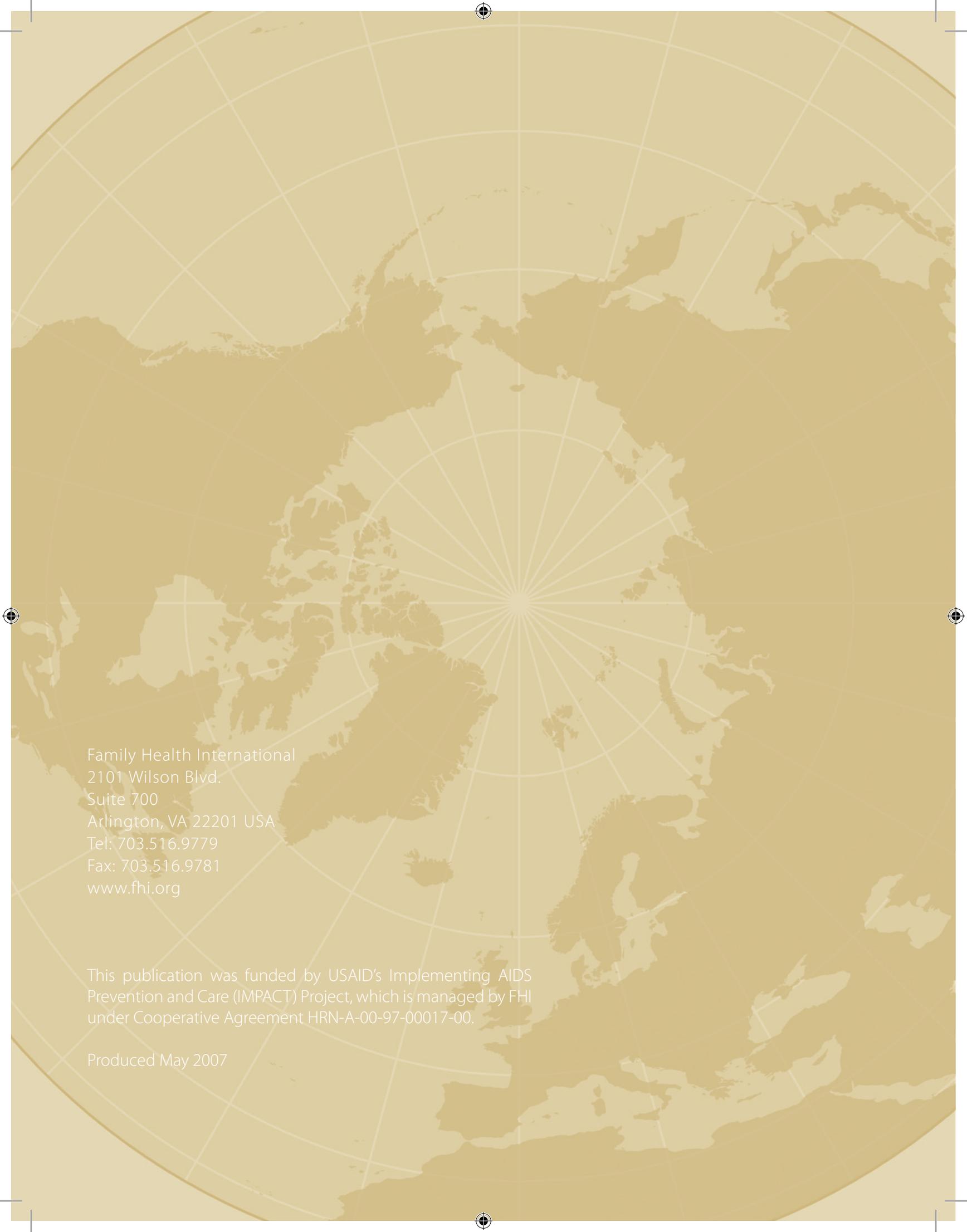
majority of Roma study participants had been married (90 percent) and almost 77 percent lived with their spouses.

Almost 98 percent of the Roma (compared with 87.5 percent of the general population) reported that they had experienced sexual intercourse (defined as vaginal or anal intercourse). The median age at first sex was 16 for the Roma and 19 for the general population. A large majority of the Roma (88 percent) had experienced sex before the age of 18, with 23 percent having first done so between the ages of 10 and 14. This early age of sexual initiation was more common among Roma females: 35.5 percent first had sex between the ages of 10 and 14, compared with only 1.2 percent of females in the general population.

Only 11 percent of the Roma reported ever using a condom, compared with 36 percent of the general population. Almost 80 percent of the Roma reported that they had sex during the past 12 months without using condoms, as did more than the half the general population. Almost 30 percent of Roma females (compared with 8.7 percent of females in the general population) reported that their sexual partners had forced them to have sex within the past 12 months.

Despite a general awareness of HIV prevention methods, the Roma and the general population both had misconceptions about HIV. (Incorrect response rates to knowledge questions were relatively similar for males and females within each group.) For example, only about 15 percent of the Roma knew that HIV is not transmitted through mosquito bites or by sharing a meal with someone who is HIV-positive. Of particular importance, only 64 percent of the Roma believed that a healthy-looking person could be infected with HIV (compared with 84 percent in the general population).

A high percentage of respondents reported that they were aware that a confidential HIV test is available in Tirana (61.1 percent of the Roma and 81.1 percent of the general population). Nevertheless, actual HIV testing was infrequent across both study groups, and Roma participants were less likely to have been tested (3.1 percent of the Roma had been tested, compared with 7.7 percent of the general population).



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