

On the Road: Croatian Truck Drivers, Commercial Sex and HIV/AIDS

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ABSTRACT

The primary aims of this study were to examine Croatian truck drivers' sexual contact with sex workers, estimate the frequency of condom use, and assess knowledge of HIV/AIDS within this population. The research was conducted from June 14 to September 16, 2005 at customs offices and accompanying parking lots in four Croatian cities. The sample consists of 69 truck drivers. Information about sexual behavior and condom use were gathered by using a semi-structured interview. Knowledge of HIV/AIDS, measured with a self-administered questionnaire, was found to be low. Six respondents (8.7%) had correctly answered all 13 questions. By contrast, 73% of drivers considered themselves well informed about HIV/AIDS, indicating that most drivers overestimate their knowledge. The majority of respondents (n=62) assumed that most of their colleagues engage in sexual contact with sex workers while on the road, although only one third of respondents reported that they personally have paid for sex. All of the respondents who reported engaging in sexual contact with sex workers stated that they always use condoms. Fear of being infected with a sexually transmitted infection was reported as the main reason for condom use.

Key words: HIV/AIDS, truck drivers, condom use, sex workers, knowledge of HIV/AIDS

Introduction

By the end of 2005, according to World Health Organization (WHO) estimates, there were 38.6 million people living with HIV worldwide. In recent years, the Eastern Europe/Central Asia region has been home to the fastest growing HIV epidemic in the world. The WHO estimates that approximately 1.5 million HIV infected individuals live in this area of the world today¹. As a nation within this region, Croatia is at risk for rapid expansion of its HIV-infected population. According to the Croatian National HIV/AIDS Register, by November 2005, there were 553 HIV-infected persons reported in Croatia. Of these, 239 had AIDS. It is estimated that about 60% of all HIV infections in Croatia were acquired outside of the country. Among HIV-infected heterosexual men, 87% were infected abroad. Of the 553 HIV-infected individuals, 80.5% are men and 19.5% are women².

Croatia has a low-level HIV epidemic³ which means that, according to criteria defined by UNAIDS and WHO, 'HIV prevalence has not consistently exceeded 5% in any defined subpopulation, although it may have existed in

that subpopulation for many years'⁴. Therefore, following their guidelines⁵, HIV surveillance in countries with low-level epidemics should not focus on the general population, as it has been the case so far, but on groups whose behavior exposes them to an especially high risk of acquiring or passing on HIV. These are 'hidden,' or hard-to-reach subpopulations, such as men who have sex with men (MSM), commercial sex workers (CSW), injecting drug users (IDU), and migrant workers.

Numerous studies reported HIV risk behavior among truck drivers worldwide⁶⁻⁸. Given Croatia's geographical position in a region home to a rapidly growing HIV epidemic, and given that most new HIV infections in Croatia are acquired abroad, truck drivers in Croatia are being increasingly recognized as a vulnerable population⁹. The aim of this pilot study is to examine contact between Croatian truck drivers and sex workers while on the road, to assess truck drivers' risk behavior, especially in terms of condom use, and test their knowledge of HIV/AIDS.

Financial and administrative support for the research was given by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) within the *Research and Capacity Building on HIV/AIDS and Croatian Migrant Workers* project, which is a part of the program *Unapređivanje borbe protiv HIV/AIDS-a u Hrvatskoj /Improving the Fight Against HIV/AIDS in Croatia/* financed by *Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria*, and coordinated by the *Croatian Ministry of Health and Social Welfare*.

Methodology

Truck drivers are operationally defined as male Croatian citizens with a permanent place of residence in Croatia, engaged in a permanent, intermittent, or temporary working relationship as drivers with a cargo transport company or are self-employed in international road transport. This study used a convenience sample of drivers that were accessible during the period of data collection. There are currently no data available regarding the exact number of truck drivers in Croatia, nor there are any data describing their socio-demographic characteristics.

We used the semi-structured interview because it afforded a great degree of flexibility within a standardized general format. Flexibility was particularly important in this context because there was very little previous data related to truck drivers in Croatia. The semi-structured interview gave us the opportunity to gather information and articulate questions that we could not anticipate before conducting the interviews. Because of the sensitivity of the research topic, a personal approach through semi-structured interviews seemed to be the most viable option for collecting information on truckers' sexual behavior.

While allowing for flexibility, the interview format also provided a framework for discussing a number of core issues, including experiences with sex workers, condom use, and questions about work conditions relevant to sexual behavior. Interviews were done with one researcher leading the interview, and the other writing down the answers. This way of recording data was chosen considering conditions encountered at the research site, such as noise and drivers not willing to be audio taped.

A written questionnaire was used to gather data on six sociodemographic variables: age, educational attainment, marital status, importance of faith, length of employment in international road transport, and most frequent destination countries. In addition, we used a 13-item self-administered questionnaire adapted from Štulhofer on knowledge of modes of transmission and protection from HIV⁹. The items formed two composite instruments: KMTS (knowledge of the modes of transmission scale) and KMPS (the knowledge of the modes of protection scale).

The instruments were of modest reliability (KMTS – $\alpha = 0.61$; KMPS – $\alpha = 0.56$), as shown by the Cronbach alpha coefficient. The result of each respondent repre-

sents the sum of correct answers. The question 'Do you think that you are sufficiently informed about the modes of transmission and the modes of protection from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS?' preceded the abovementioned self-administered questionnaire.

Research was conducted at customs offices in Zagreb (Jankomir, Žitnjak), Krapina, Split (Sjeverna luka), and Osijek. Most of the interviews took place in parking lots, and a smaller number in the accompanying facilities.

Results

Sociodemographic characteristics

Sixty-nine drivers were interviewed, while 35 drivers refused to participate. Reasons for refusal included fatigue, lack of sufficient time, and waiting for customs officer's call. Basic characteristics of the sample can be found in Table 1 (total numbers in tables differ because some respondents did not give answers to all the questions). The median age was 33 years (range 20–57) and 73.5% of drivers were married, while 91% had finished high school. The median length of employment in international road transport was 9 years (range 1–38). Most of the respondents reported driving to the countries of European Union (89.4%; $n=59$).

Level of HIV/AIDS-related knowledge

Results from the KTMS and KMPS instruments are presented in Table 2.

Seventy-three percent of respondents believed they were sufficiently informed about the modes of transmission and the modes of prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. Six percent did not think they were sufficiently informed, and 21% were not sure about their knowledge. By contrast, only 6 respondents (8.7%) answered all questions assessing knowledge of HIV transmission and protection correctly.

Paid sex and condom use

Approximately one third of respondents ($n=21$, 30.4%) reported that they paid for sexual services. All these respondents also reported always using condoms when with a sex worker. Almost all participants ($n=62$, 89.9%) believed that most of their colleagues use sex workers' services. More than half ($n=36$, 52.2%) stated that they believe that all of their colleagues use condoms during paid sex, while only 6% ($n=4$) stated they do not think they use condoms, and the rest were unsure.

The factor being cited as the most important one in terms of condom use, and readiness to engage in paid sex is fear of being infected with STIs. The factors that also influence the readiness to seek and engage in sex with sex workers are modest financial means, lack of free time, fatigue, and risk of robbery. In terms of likelihood of getting in contact with an HIV-positive sex worker, the level of HIV epidemic in countries they pass through should be taken into account.

TABLE 1
BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

	n (%)
Age group	
30 or younger	31 (44.9)
31 or older	38 (55.1)
Highest level of educational achievement	
Primary school	3 (4.5)
High school	61 (91)
Faculty	3 (4.5)
Marital status	
Married	50 (73.5)
Long-term relationship	12 (17.6)
Single	6 (8.8)
Importance of faith	
Very important	29 (48.3)
Somewhat important	28 (46.7)
Slightly important	2 (3.3)
Not important	1 (1.7)
Length of employment	
5 years or less	16 (23.9)
6–10 years	31 (46.3)
11 or more years	20 (29.9)
Most frequent destination	
Italy	20 (30.3)
Germany	16 (24.2)
Slovenia	6 (9.1)
Austria	5 (7.6)
Hungary	5 (7.6)
Sweden	2
France	2
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2
Poland	2
Turkey	1
Spain	1
Other	4

Discussion

The discrepancy between the drivers perception of their knowledge of HIV/AIDS, and the fact that only 8.7% of respondents had correct answers on all the items in the questionnaire indicates that overall knowledge of HIV transmission and protection from HIV was poor and was generally overestimated by drivers. Forty-seven percent of respondents did not give a correct answer to the question whether it is possible to protect oneself from HIV by vaccination, while 54% reported that HIV can be transmitted by using a glass that was used by an HIV-positive person. Almost half of the respondents answered that HIV can be transmitted by a mosquito bite. It seems encouraging that 95.2% reported that HIV can

be transmitted through sexual intercourse without a condom, and that 85.7% reported that it is possible to protect oneself by regular condom use. These findings, however, have to be taken into consideration by having in mind that some studies have shown that there is no positive correlation between knowledge of HIV/AIDS and condom use among truck drivers^{10–11}.

Almost all interviewed drivers (n=62, 89.9%) believe that their colleagues pay for sex. We found, however, that only a third of respondents (n=21) reported having intercourse with sex workers. This discrepancy is perhaps due to underreporting of sexual contact with sex workers by truck drivers. Engaging in sex with a sex worker is largely a socially unacceptable act and as such, respondents may choose not to disclose their actions, even within the context of a confidential interview. It is unavoidable, when researching such sensitive matters, that some respondents will give a socially desired response. Although two thirds of respondents reported that they personally do not engage in intercourse with sex workers, it could be the case that, according to the general opinion of the drivers, they do pay for sex, even if only occasionally.

Those who reported paying for sex described this behavior as understandable and even normal within the context of their profession. Respondents who reported paying for sex had a median age of 32 (range 22–49) and their median length of employment in international transport was 8 years (range 1–28). The majority was married or in a long-term relationship.

»Prostitution is common among truckers as you are on the road for 25 days in a month...such is the nature of our work, always on the road, and you get to see the world and try all sorts of things. I had experiences...it is an affair taking place all the time.« (41 year old; 20 years in international transport; married)

»Sex is a natural thing, you pass 15–20 000 kilometers monthly, everybody goes... and when you travel for so long you don't have the time to establish stable contacts with people.« (24 years old; two years in international transport; single)

All the respondents who reported paying for sex claimed to use condoms. In addition, more than half of all the interviewed drivers (n=36) believe all their colleagues use condoms during intercourse with sex workers. Only 6% (n=4) stated they do not think they use condoms, and the rest were unsure. Given the possibility that some respondents gave socially desired responses when reporting their own behavior, we posed additional questions intended to ensure that respondents were reporting condom use accurately. We asked, 'Who insists on using condoms, you or the prostitute?', 'Do you have condoms with you, or the prostitutes have them?', 'Which brand of condoms do you use?', and 'Why do you use condoms?'. Although additional questions do not guarantee honesty in their responses, they have nevertheless supported the view that truckers tend to use condoms with sex workers. Fear of being infected with an STI was reported to be the main reason for using condoms, along with sex workers sometimes insisting on their use.

TABLE 2
RESPONDENTS' KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HIV/AIDS

Question	Number of responses and percentages n (%)		
	No	Yes	Don't know
HIV can be transmitted by/using			
Already used needles or razors	1 (1.6)	60 (95.2)	2 (3.2)
Mosquito bite	32 (50.8)	14 (22.2)	17 (27)
Public toilets	33 (55)	14 (23.3)	13 (21.7)
Sexual intercourse without a condom	2 (3.2)	60 (95.2)	1 (1.6)
An HIV-infected pregnant woman passing the virus to her child	2 (2.9)	54 (85.7)	7 (11.1)
Hugging an HIV positive person	55 (87.3)	4 (6.3)	4 (6.3)
A glass that was already used by an HIV positive person	29 (46)	18 (28.6)	16 (25.4)
Can you protect yourself from HIV by/with			
A vaccine against HIV/AIDS	33 (52.4)	9 (14.3)	21 (33.3)
Regular condom use	6 (9.5)	54 (85.7)	3 (4.8)
Avoiding used needles or razors	1 (1.6)	57 (90.5)	5 (7.9)
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Avoiding sexual contacts (abstinence)	23 (36.5)	30 (47.6)	10 (15.9)
Having sex with only one faithful partner	6 (9.8)	53 (86.9)	2 (3.3)
Choosing sexual partners that look healthy	37 (59.7)	15 (24.2)	10 (16.1)

»Condoms are used no matter what because you never know who was there before you...because of pregnancy and disease.« (28 years old; 10 years in international transport; in a long-term relationship); »Of course condom is used, I'm not crazy to come home and get my girlfriend infected. They have condoms, but screw their condoms, I have mine, Durex.« (23 years old; 4 years in international transport; in a long-term relationship)

»Four or five years ago, it was hop on any girl you see, but the moment AIDS was mentioned the brake was pulled. There is sex going on, but people take care now, before AIDS you could take any girl along the road, but now you can't. People don't do it on the road anymore, after people have seen the pictures on TV, they've seen what AIDS is.« (45 years old; 8 years in international transport; married)

Risk of robbery, constant lack of free time, fatigue, and modest financial means are among common factors that reduce drivers' readiness to engage in paid sex. These provide truck drivers with rare opportunities to look for and use services of sex workers.

»You have those black girls who screw for 70 Kuna, you gotta run the hell away from them. And they wanna do it out there in the field...Italy is dangerous, you gotta be careful not to be hustled and robbed.« (23 years old; 4 years in international transport; married); »The biggest problem is predation on the road and non-paying employers. Two times in Hungary someone stole my oil...it's normal over there to steal oil or get robbed. Annually, the largest number of trucks is stolen in Belgium, while Italy is also dangerous.« (40 years old; 10 year in international transport; married)

»Look, you don't have the money or the time...and fatigue plays a great role as well...« (45 years old; 15 years

in international transport; married); »You don't have the time, you're being pressured by your employer, and you work for 2000 Kuna. You can't get no credit card, can't raise a loan, you can't do nothing and they say they don't have money, although they buy 4–5 new trucks each year. On top of all that, you're always on the move, driving more than 12 hours a day, so police gives you a ticket, and nobody cares, the only important thing is to get the job done, no matter what.« (45 years; 7 years in international transport; married)

»If you work the whole day for 50 euros and you loose them in a couple of minutes, you're screwed.« (28 years; 10 years in international transport; married) »Only to jump on top of her, I gotta pay 70 euros, and my salary for the route is 180...I'm not crazy to spend money on those things.« (34 years old; 10 years in international transport; in a long-term relationship)

In discussing the risk behaviors of truck drivers, it is important also to consider factors that reduce the likelihood of engaging in contact with an HIV-positive sex worker. Drivers reported passing most frequently through Italy, Germany, Slovenia, Austria, and Hungary. Each of these countries has a low level HIV epidemic, and even among high-risk groups like CSWs, prevalence of HIV remains below 5%.¹²

This is, to our knowledge, the first study of truck drivers and HIV/AIDS in Southeastern Europe. The findings discussed here are related to truck drivers' sexual practices, their knowledge of HIV/AIDS, and conditions under which they work. Although no definite conclusions can be made, they can serve as a starting point for a more comprehensive study.

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NA CESTI: HRVATSKI VOZAČI KAMIONA I HIV/AIDS

SAŽETAK

Primarni ciljevi istraživanja bili su ispitati seksualne kontakte vozača kamiona sa seksualnim radnicama, procijeniti učestalost korištenja kondoma i utvrditi informiranost o HIV/AIDS-u unutar ove populacije. Istraživanje je provedeno od 14. srpnja do 16. rujna 2005. godine na carinskim ispostavama i pripadajućim parkiralištima u četiri grada u Hrvatskoj. Postignuti uzorak sastoji se od 69 intervjuiranih vozača. Informacije o seksualnom ponašanju i uporabi kondoma prikupljene su pomoću polustrukturiranog intervjua. Informiranost ispitanika o HIV/AIDS-u, mjerena upitnikom koji su ispitanici sami ispunjavali, na niskoj je razini. Na svih 13 pitanja točno je odgovorilo samo šest ispitanika (8,7%). Podatak da 73% vozača sebe drži dovoljno informiranima o HIV/AIDS-u, upućuje na to da je većina ispitanika precijenila svoje znanje. Većina ispitanih vozača (n=62) drži da se većina drugih vozača koristi uslugama seksualnih radnica dok su na putu, dok je tek trećina izjavila da se osobno koriste njihovim uslugama. Svi ispitanici koji su izjavili da se koriste uslugama seksualnih radnica istaknuli su da pritom uvijek rabe kondome. Kao glavni razlog uporabe kondoma naveden je strah od zaraze spolno prenosivim bolestima.