

Prevalence of HIV-related stigma among participants of the Swiss HIV Cohort Study: a pilot study

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Background

HIV-related stigma presents a challenge to the health and well-being of people with HIV (PWH). As a first step to address such stigma, we aimed to quantify its prevalence in Switzerland.

Materials and Methods

- We conducted a pilot study at the Infectious Diseases Outpatients Service at Lausanne University Hospital, Switzerland, between March and June 2020, among patients at our centre enrolled in the Swiss HIV Cohort Study.
- Inability to speak one of the four available languages was the only exclusion criterion.
- We used a validated 12-item HIV Stigma Scale [1] which examines four stigma subtypes: personalized stigma, disclosure concerns, beliefs regarding public attitudes and negative self-image (three questions for each subtype). We added two questions regarding healthcare-related stigma.
- Responses were graded using a 4-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree) to give a score of 1-4 for each item (higher scores indicating higher stigma).
- The Stigma Scale was translated and back-translated from English into French, German and Italian and completed electronically by the treating physician during face-to-face interviews with their patients.

Results

	N = 351
Age , [years] median (IQR)	51 (42;59)
Sex , Female n (%)	118 (34%)
Ethnic origin , n (%)	
European	227 (65%)
African	93 (26%)
Other (Asia, America)	31 (9%)
Likely mode of HIV acquisition , n (%)	
Men who have sex with men (MSM)	126 (36%)
Heterosexual	177 (50%)
Intravenous drug use	26 (7%)
Other	22 (6%)
Duration of HIV infection , [years] median (IQR)	15 (8;24)
Total Score , median (IQR)	34 (27;40)
Personalized Stigma, median (IQR)	6 (3;12)
Disclosure Concerns, median (IQR)	10 (8;12)
Beliefs Regarding Public Attitudes, median (IQR)	8 (6;10)
Negative self-image, median (IQR)	5 (3;7)
Healthcare-related Stigma, median (IQR)	3 (2;5)

Table 1. Characteristics of the study population.

'I am very careful who I tell that I have HIV'

- 'agree' or 'strongly agree' in 89% of participants;
- highest score of all questionnaire items (median 4, IQR:3;4)

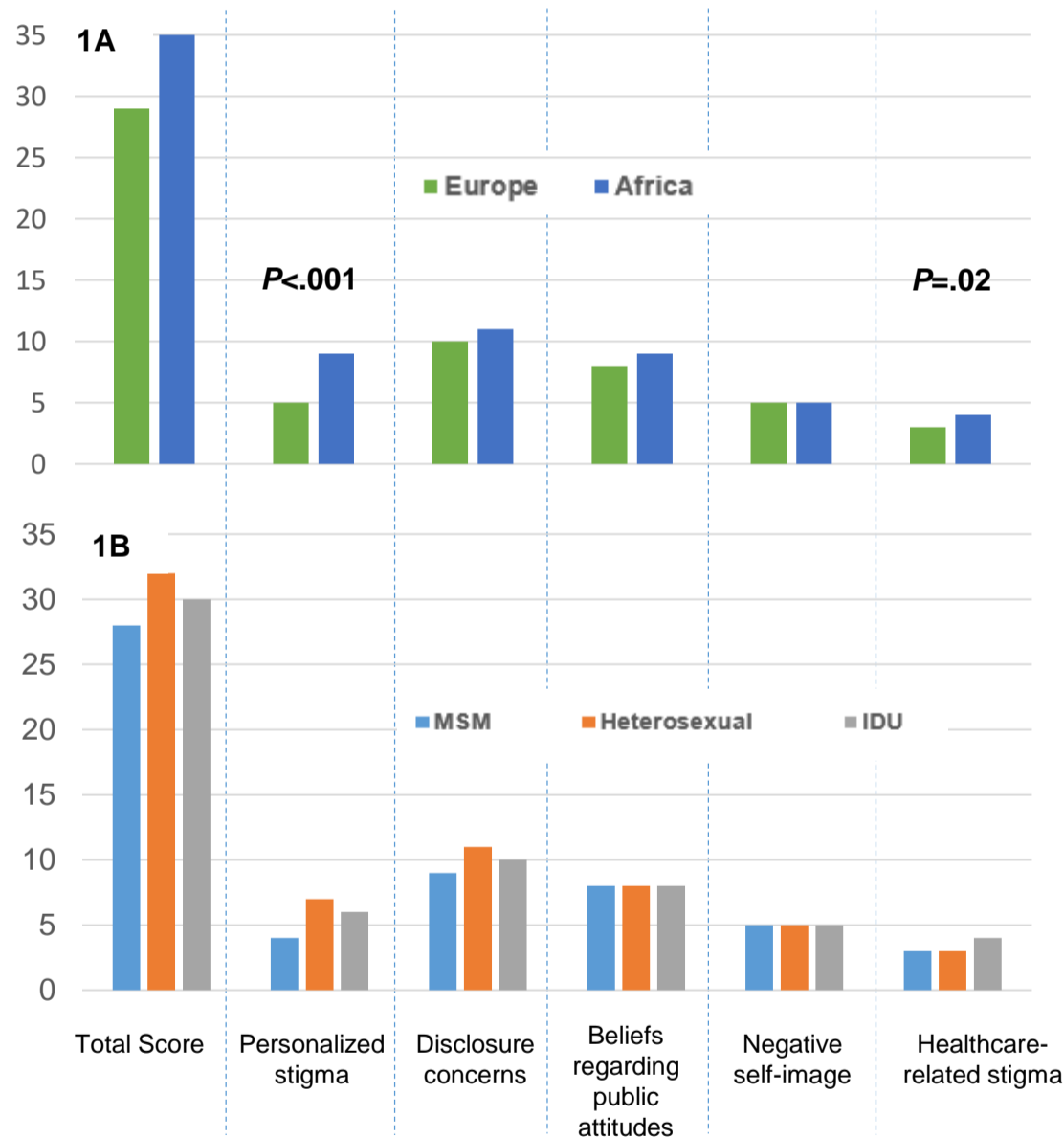


Figure 1A, 1B. Median stigma score, total and by stigma subtype, presented by participant origin (1A) and by HIV acquisition mode (1B).

Total possible score: 14-56; possible score for each of the four stigma subtypes: 3-12; possible score for healthcare-related stigma: 2-8. The y-axis has been truncated at the highest total score observed (35) so questionnaire sections with lower scores can be seen more clearly. *P* values refer to differences between patients of European and African origin.

Conclusions:

- Stigma is prevalent in our study population across all demographic groups.
- Disclosure concerns represented the highest stigma burden across all demographic subgroups.
- This pilot study will be expanded into a multi-centre cross-sectional study across Switzerland within the SHCS.
- Quantifying stigma and stigma subtypes is key in designing interventions for reducing stigma and improving care for PWH.

[1] Reinius M *et al.* Development of a 12-item short version of the HIV stigma scale. *Health Qual Life Outcomes* 2017;15:115