

Risk for HIV acquisition among sub-Saharan African migrant travelers in Belgium and Portugal

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Migrants often travel back to the origin countries and to other European states after settling in the residence country. Mobility along with structural vulnerabilities may increase HIV acquisition risk. Knowledge on HIV risk exposure when traveling is limited, yet crucial to inform prevention. This study aims to explore risky sexual behaviors and assess HIV prevalence among sub-Saharan African migrants (SAMs) who travel, residing in two European cities.

Two cross-sectional biobehavioral surveys were conducted in Lisbon and Antwerp with a venue-based sample of 1508 SAMs. Descriptive and multivariable logistic regression analyses were performed to examine travel patterns and associated sexual risk behaviors.

Overall, 68.4% of participants had traveled to other countries after settling in the residence country; 41% had traveled back

to Africa and within Europe, 25.2% only to Africa and 33.8% only to Europe. Among travelers who reported sexual encounters abroad (49.2%), condomless sex at last intercourse was high both abroad (62.5%) and in the host country (70.7%). Odds of condomless sex at the last sexual encounter in the host country were five times higher among those who also reported no condom use abroad [OR: 5.32; 95% CI: 2.98-9.25], controlling for gender, age, educational level, relationship status, survey country, partner type and origin, and number of sexual partners over the last year. Condomless sex was higher with a regular partner and with an African partner, both abroad (79.9% and 67.5%, respectively) and in the host country (81.3% and 74.6%, respectively). Among the 75 participants who tested HIV-positive (around 5%), more than half had travelled to other countries; of these, about half reported condomless sex with their last sexual partner abroad.

SAMs are a mobile population and are exposed to sexual HIV risk both while traveling and in host countries. Prevention interventions should address the complex interplay between migrants' mobility and HIV risk.

Key messages:

- Migrants often travel to their origin home countries and other destinations after having settled in host countries, and this mobility increases exposure to HIV risk.
- A transnational perspective on HIV prevention and sexual health promotion is needed for effectively reducing migrants' HIV risk related to their mobility.