

HIV/AIDS Infections

According to the official statistics the number of HIV carriers in the country (including those who have already developed AIDS) is 356 people. This is not a comforting figure, although it is far from the situation in some African countries where 70% of the population carry the HIV virus. This however is probably only the tip of the iceberg, while in reality HIV carriers may be several times more. Moreover, the unsatisfactory sanitary conditions, especially among marginalized groups such as the Roma minority, create conditions for an AIDS epidemic like the ones in Ukraine or Libya. The number of registered HIV carriers is highest in Sofia which also has the highest number of intravenous drug users (between 10 and 20 thousand people). Drugs, especially heroin, are also common for the Roma communities in the cities.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD)

There are no differentiated data on other sexually transmitted diseases apart from HIV/AIDS and our projections are based on common practice and experience. The patriarchal model of the closed Roma society in which traditions prevail clashes with the realities of city life. The argument "This cannot happen to us, we are no such people," the existence of highway prostitutes, for example, or the numerous cases of neglected and untreated venereal diseases further complicates the problem and makes intervention even more difficult.

Reproductive Health Programs

Strengthening the National Program for Reproductive Health

Currently, the Ministry of Healthcare and a number of government agencies and NGOs are working on a three-year project initiated by the World Health Organization and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and focused on the needs of the Roma population in the area of reproductive health. An interdisciplinary group of Roma NGO activists and experts was established under the project to develop the component of the National Program for Reproductive Health targeted to Roma.

National Anti-AIDS Coalition

This is an informal coalition of 30 non-governmental, governmental and business organizations, which have joined their efforts to prevent AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, create models and good practices, and organize campaigns for promoting responsible behavior among young people. The Roma community is also represented in the coalition.

The Roma Reproductive Health and Sexual Education Project of the Bulgarian Family Planning Association

This is a two-year project, which was launched in August 1998 with funding from the Phare Program of the European Commission and was completed in 2000. The preliminary collection of data on the needs of Roma in the sphere of reproductive health started as early as 1996. Experts from the Bulgarian Family Planning Association conducted a research in three towns – Sofia, Sliven and Pleven – which proved beyond doubt that there is a pressing need for health-care services in this sphere.

The project is targeted to the Roma population and consists of three main components: opening three specialized family planning centers, organizing an intensive training program, publishing promotion materials, and producing an educational video. Three specialized family planning centers were established under the project in the Roma neighborhoods Fakulteta in Sofia and Stolipinovo in Plovdiv, and in the village of Dolna Mitropolia near Pleven.

A comprehensive health education program was launched in the schools of these neighborhoods, complemented by specially designed information materials: posters, the Roma "trilogy": "Boys' Matters," "Girls' Matters," "Our Matters," a booklet on sexually transmitted diseases and others. The texts and the illustrations were carefully prepared to match the needs