

Living with HIV in Romania and the impact of stigma

Florin Lazar

University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work

A generation of 7,000 children infected in 1988-1990 in hospital settings survived with HIV for over 25 years. At the beginning of the epidemic the medical aspects prevailed, the social aspects being neglected. As a result of perceived and enacted stigma many families chose or were forced to withdraw their children from school and refused to register with the public social services to receive social entitlements. After 2000 social programs diversified and the legislative framework encouraged people living with HIV (PLHIV) to come out of the silence. A National Federation of Organizations of PLHIV was created (in 2000) and between 2004-2010 the Global Fund Against HIV, Tuberculosis and Malaria financed many social integration programs. Based on administrative data on access to social entitlements, programmatic data from social work practice and data from two cross-sectional clinic-based studies (R1, n=835; R2, n=618), the aim of the paper is to highlight the long-term effects of the stigma faced by PLHIV in the context of increased life expectancy. Administrative data reveal a peak increase of those availing of social entitlements (30% in 2004 to 63% in 2013), with a higher proportion receiving cash benefits that ensures greater confidentiality. Programmatic data from a vocational training program implemented between 2007-2010 showed that just around 15% of those counseled also registered for a course and found employment. Research data suggest a very low percentage of those legally employed (10% in R1, 9.3% in R2) more than 50% being unemployed. The main source of income is represented by social entitlements (over 80%). Since HIV became chronic disease social programs for young people living with HIV/AIDS need to address stigma and discrimination and improve school participation in order to increase their chances of social integration and not favor a biological citizenship.

Keywords: HIV; stigma; Romania; social services.