The Swiss Public Opinion on Drug and AIDS Prevention

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Background

The study presented was conducted within the general mandate to evaluate the Swiss STOP-AIDS campaigns.

As in many other European countries HIV seropositivity rates are rapidly increasing among intravenous drug users. It is estimated that 30 to 50 percent of IVDUs are already infected by the AIDS virus.

Since 1987, clean syringes are sold in pharmacies of most Swiss cantons. By July 1990, only two small cantons (Nidwald and Appenzell Rh.) still prohibit selling syringes without a medical prescription.

However, sterile syringes in exchange for used ones are readily available only in a few places located near major urban drug scenes. Experience shows that drug addicts are willing to take the necessary preventive measures if they have the opportunity to do so.

Especially in the French speaking region of Switzerland local political opposition to needle exchange programs is still quite strong. In the past politicians tended to argue that the public opinion was unfavorable to this kind of AIDS prevention.

There is no tradition of a public debate on the drug problem in Switzerland. This may explain that the messages of the STOP AIDS campaigns “Don’t share syringes” and “Don’t start. STOP AIDS” did not have large media repercussions.

When the STOP AIDS campaign addressed in Autumn 1989 the problem of drug prevention, it was not primarily aimed at present or future drug consumers, but mainly intended to create public awareness of the drug problem and to bring drug prevention into public discussion.

The campaign made use of billboards, TV-spots and newspaper announcements and lasted for about two months.
Objectives

The Study Had Two Main Objectives:

1) to evaluate the visibility and acceptance of the “primary drug prevention campaign” STOP AIDS of the Autumn 1989. In particular, we wanted to know if the STOP AIDS campaign, quite successful in promoting condoms, could still convey another message.

2) to apprehend the opinion of the Swiss population on:
   - the drug problem in general: What are the most important problems relating to drugs?
   - the ways to deal with the problem: What are you proposing to deal with the drug problem?
   - the measures of AIDS prevention among IVDUs: Are you favorable or unfavorable to the following proposed measures such as social assistance to consumers, drug therapies, distribution of sterile syringes?

Methods

The public opinion phone survey took place in December 1989, immediately after the STOP AIDS campaign on primary drug prevention had ended. It was conducted by IPSO a major private applied social science research institution in Zurich.

- Representative sample of 703 Swiss 17 to 70 year old
- Stratified by three linguistic regions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-Samples</th>
<th>Sizes</th>
<th>Weights</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German speaking</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>73.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>French speaking</td>
<td>251</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian speaking</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
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- Acceptance rate: 48%
- Confidence intervals for the entire sample: ± 4%

Figure 1. Methods of the phone survey.