

# The Greek Checkpoint "success story" in safeguarding public health: First community-based prevention and testing center in Greece diagnoses 30% of the national 2017 HIV cases

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## Background

During the economic crisis (2010), HIV testing has been severely disrupted with a significant reduction in testing facilities, the introduction of a testing fee and recurrent stock-outs in diagnostics<sup>1, 2</sup>. Moreover, HIV rates were steadily growing and sex among men (MSM) was traditionally the main mode of HIV transmission [apart from an HIV outbreak in the people who inject drugs (PWID) community in 2012], ever since the Hellenic Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (HCDCP) started dealing with HIV surveillance (1980s)<sup>3</sup>. Additional "alarming" facts of the situation were that an estimated 20-30% of HIV+ MSM remained undiagnosed and also Greece was categorized among those countries with a high percent of late HIV diagnosis<sup>4</sup>. Finally, European MSM Internet Survey (EMIS2010) Greek respondents' results indicated that 1/3 had never been tested for HIV before and that 40% did not know whether they could get tested for free<sup>5</sup>. For the above reasons the first community-based, innovative for the Greek standards prevention and testing center "Ath Checkpoint" was created in November 2012, followed by "Thess Checkpoint" in 2014, in an attempt to significantly reduce the percent of undiagnosed individuals and to further promote routine testing, early diagnosis and optimal linkage to care.

## Description

The Ath and Thess "Checkpoint" prevention and testing centre is a joint partnership between the Greek Association PLWHA "Positive Voice" and AHF Europe. The concept is based upon a non-clinical, community-based HIV, HBV, HCV and Syphilis prevention, "peer-to-peer" model counseling and rapid testing facility operating in Athens and Thessaloniki. It is designed both for the general and the most at risk populations, i.e. MSM, Sex Workers (SW), PWID, Refugees, Transgender people etc. Also, the "Checkpoint" coordinates and facilitates the linkage procedure to health care in case of reactive results. "Checkpoint's" salient targets are 1) to reduce the undiagnosed fraction, especially MSM who are disproportionately affected by HIV in Greece, 2) to raise awareness of the beneficial impact of early treatment, thus encouraging early detection, 3) to facilitate early diagnosis and optimal access to treatment and care and 4) to minimize HIV social stigma effects/myths.

## Lessons learned

"Checkpoint's" milestones and highlights up to 2018 are a) in 2015 WHO6 and in 2018 ECDC7 indicated the Greek "Checkpoint" as best practice regarding a holistic approach to HIV, HBV and HCV testing services, b) approximately 73,000 HIV, 13,000 HBV, 15,000 HCV and 3,500 syphilis tests have been performed within the in-premises and outreach testing activities (figure 1), c) approximately 53,000 tests refer to unique beneficiaries, d) 4,5 million free condoms and 300,000 informative brochures have been distributed during streetwork, e) the Greek Checkpoint project has proved to be really cost-effective in HIV detection (compared to other EU similar projects)<sup>8</sup>, f) 90% of reactively-tested beneficiaries was successfully linked to care. Most importantly, approximately 30% of the total new HIV cases reported by the HCDCP for 2017 was "Checkpoint's" diagnoses (figure 2) whereas the respective percentage for MSM positive cases went up to 43.5% (figure 3).

## Conclusions

Community-based, cost-effective, easily accessible and low threshold counseling and testing service had a huge impact to the Greek HIV surveillance procedure since it helped identifying approximately 1/3 of all HIV cases on a national level. The "Checkpoint" initiative is a "success story" in changing the HIV image in Greece and therefore strengthening public health through its testing and awareness-raising activities. Subsequently, policy makers should consider the development of other similar structures which could be complimentary to public health.

## References

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Figure 1. Checkpoint HIV, HBV, HCV, Syphilis tests per year

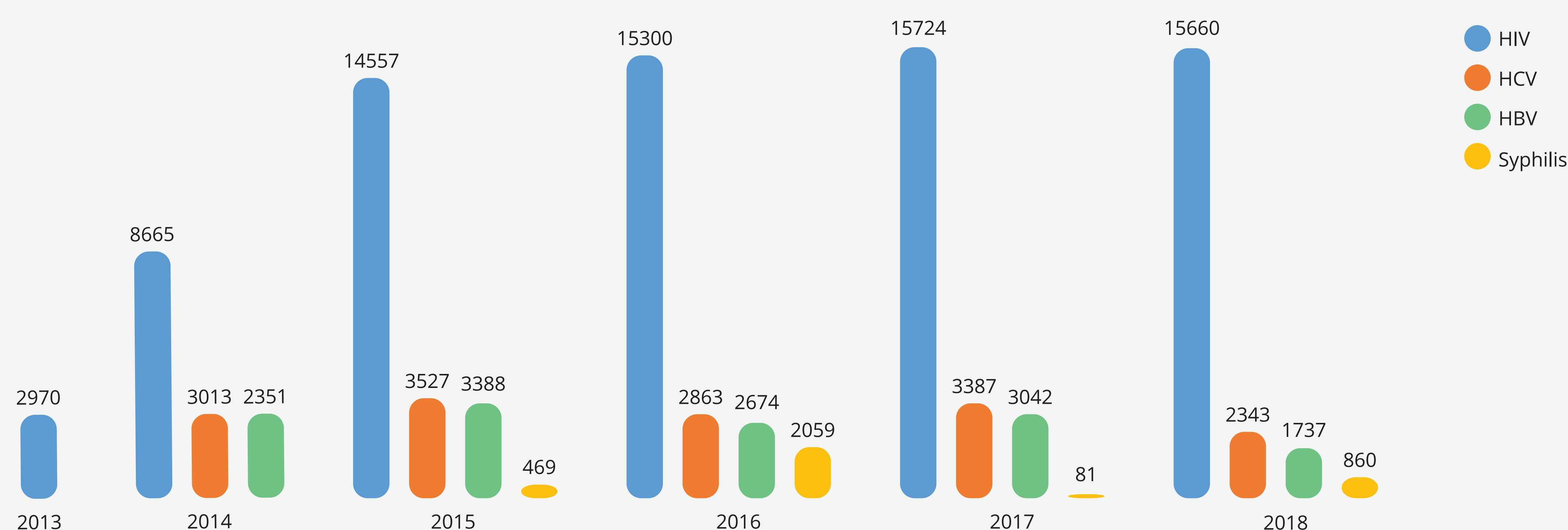


Figure 2. Percentage of Checkpoint HIV diagnoses per year (compared to HCDCP)

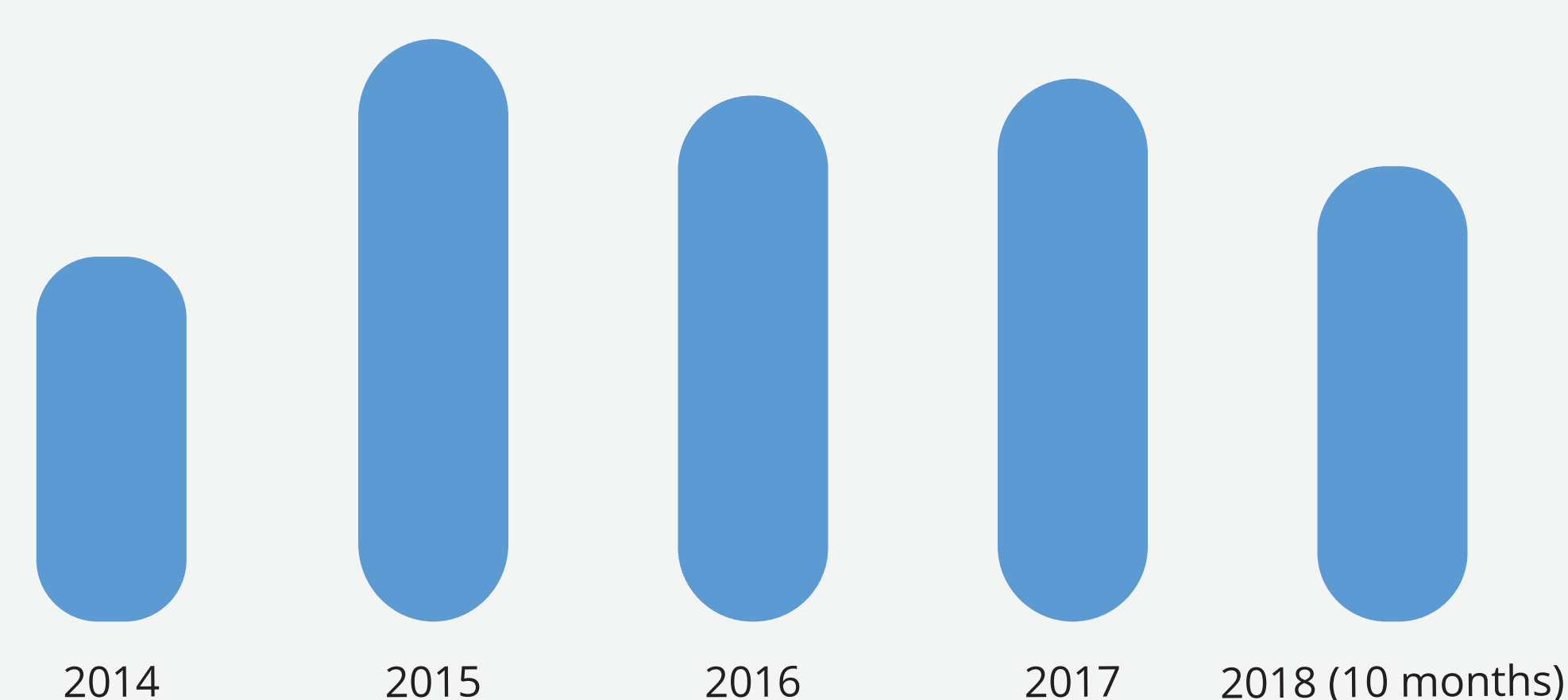


Figure 3. Percentage of Checkpoint MSM HIV diagnoses per year (compared to HCDCP)

