

Barriers to Accessing HIV Treatment and Testing Services in Tanzania: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

High rates of HIV susceptibility and consequent infection transmission in Tanzania are associated with barriers to accessing HIV services. The focal goal of this scoping review is to unveil social, economic, and individual barriers to accessing HIV testing and treatment services in Tanzania. Peer-reviewed literature was screened using e-databases, yielding 18 studies that fit the inclusion criteria. The studies found many barriers that influenced Tanzanians' decision to seek testing and treatment services. Scientific literature indicates that diagnosis through testing and following treatment can reduce the risk of HIV transmission and overall prevalence. The barriers in Tanzania were a lack of knowledge about HIV and its treatment benefits, social stigma, and institutional factors. Stigmatization of HIV-positive Tanzanians was the most prominent barrier, leading to fear among other individuals and refusal of testing. Moving forward, a more inclusive approach is needed to gather a holistic perspective. Also, empowering the country of Tanzania and raising awareness regarding HIV is vital to promote the uptake of testing and treatment.

Introduction

Approximately 1.5 million people in Tanzania live with Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), a prevalence of 5.1%, making it one of the most pressing public health issues in the country [1]. Specific populations in Tanzania, such as injection drug users, have disproportionately higher risks of contracting HIV [3]. Reports in the literature highlight that education regarding HIV infections, testing, and treatment is low in the country, specifically among the youth population of Tanzania [2]. Lack of HIV testing exposes individuals undiagnosed to a high risk of acquiring or transmitting the infection [4]. Given that there is an intersection of multiple factors bolstering the prevalence of HIV, a multi-factorial approach is necessary to understand existing barriers in Tanzania. This scoping review identifies the barriers to accessing HIV testing and treatment services in Tanzania.

Methodology

Studies were identified through a systematic search of two electronic databases: PubMed and OVID/Medline that allow a more focused search to be performed. During the search, peer-reviewed articles were screened using key search terms (Table 1). The eligibility criteria were applied to a 10-year time frame (2013-2023) to collect recent and relevant articles according to an inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 2). Broad terms were selected as key search terms to include all articles pertaining to HIV/AIDS in Tanzania across all Tanzanian districts. Duplicate search results and studies that met the exclusion criteria were excluded from the review. Then, the titles and abstracts of the search results were reviewed to determine if the articles addressed the factors influencing access to HIV testing and treatment services. A full-text review was conducted on published studies that were in accordance with the inclusion criteria.

Table 1: Key Search Terms

Concept	Search Terms
Factors	Factors Barriers Influencing
HIV	HIV AIDS human immunodeficiency virus acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
Treatment	Treatment Therapy Testing
Tanzania	Tanzania Tanzanian

Results

As per the key search terms for this review, the search results yielded 365 peer-reviewed research articles. After importing the articles into Covidence, a primary screening and data extraction tool, 42 were identified as duplicate records and were removed. Screening was subsequently conducted, and 18 articles fit the inclusion criteria for this scoping review (Figure 1). A total of 299 articles did not meet the inclusion criteria and were thus excluded. Various factors influencing access to HIV testing and treatment services in Tanzania were examined. Four studies focused on Dar-es-Salaam city and one on Tanzania's Moshi and Rombo districts [5,7,8,12,13]. One study examined the data from national programmes to increase HIV testing and treatment to understand barriers [17]. Another study

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria
Study focused on individuals in Tanzania
Published from January 2013-January 2023
Studies accessible in the English language
Articles discussing the factors influencing access to HIV testing or treatment measures
Studies available in full text
Exclusion Criteria
Unpublished dissertations, pilot studies, and studies conducted outside of Tanzania

discussed HIV patients' perspectives on the perceived barriers and utilized their experiences to inform future steps [13].

Discussion

Multiple studies uncovered several factors influencing whether an individual in Tanzania can seek testing and treatment services [4-17]. These factors included lack of education, stigmatization, and institutional shortcomings regarding HIV/AIDS. This review aimed to understand the nature of these factors and how they contribute to the low rates of HIV testing and treatment. Furthermore, this review recommends the next steps to enhance healthcare services in Tanzania and ways to reduce the HIV prevalence.

Barriers to care

Lack of knowledge

This review indicated that education and knowledge regarding HIV/ Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), the perceived risk of contracting the disease, and the perceived benefits of treatments functioned as barriers to accessing treatment and testing services. The uptake of voluntary

treatment was also a significant barrier [7]. Men and women were more likely to accept HIV testing services in Tanzania if they had adequate knowledge about the disease and prevention measures such as VCT services [8].

HIV Stigma

Stigma is another crucial determinant of whether an individual in Tanzania will seek HIV testing and treatment. Religious organizations hold an important place in Tanzanian culture [2]. Religious misconceptions about HIV fueled stigma, whereby women and men believed that HIV/AIDS was a form of punishment for engaging in behaviours seen as sinful [2,4,10,12,18]. Furthermore, disclosing HIV/AIDS status in Tanzania was found to be correlated with discrimination, rejection, and mistreatment by healthcare workers [2,10]. The community's dread and stigma are perpetuated by environments that do not encourage status-sharing [2]. Tanzanians feared that a positive result for HIV would lead to stigma and discrimination; therefore, they avoided these services [7,9-11,13,14].

Institutional factors

Multiple studies found that system-level barriers hindered access to HIV testing and treatment services. In Tanzania, individuals seeking HIV services value confidentiality [16]. It was reported that some healthcare workers shared patients' HIV-positive statistics with friends and disclosed their confidential information [15]. This disclosure led to the use of derogatory terms to describe HIV-positive patients [15]. Furthermore, medical facilities in Tanzania had a layout that minimized privacy, increasing reluctance to seek these services [15]. Individuals commonly reported that HIV care clinics were only open for 8 hours, which reduced accessibility for most of the Tanzanian population [15]. Studies also showed that there were several healthcare staff issues. For example, the shortage of facilities and staff

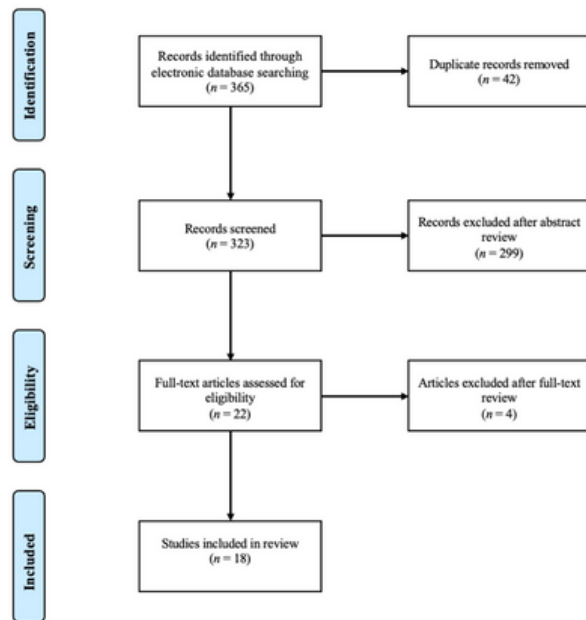


Figure 1: Selection process for the scoping review

HIV testing and counselling in Tanzania is known to be positively correlated with the level of education [4]. As education increases, individuals are exposed to further education regarding voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) services and HIV, which results in increased testing and treatment uptake [4]. A positive attitude towards these services is developed, positively impacting the intention to use these services [5,6]. Similarly, a lack of education about HIV testing among parents/guardians led to a lower uptake of testing services in Tanzania [7]. Many people believed that HIV is the end of life, and the lack of understanding about the benefits of

hindered access to HIV testing and treatment services [13].

Limitations of included studies

This scoping review has several limitations. First, some studies only gathered data from a select number of districts in Tanzania [17]. Therefore, the results regarding accessing HIV testing and treatment services cannot be generalized nationwide [17]. Secondly, some articles relied on self-reported data through surveys [5,17]. These individuals may exhibit health behaviours that are different from the rest of the population living in Tanzania [5,17]. Finally, one study had an opportunistic sample for participant recruitment [18]. This method does not fully represent naturalistic circumstances, and so results may differ from real-world settings [18].

Conclusion

This review has highlighted the range of barriers that impede access to HIV testing and treatment services in Tanzania. As stigma is the most significant barrier, there is a need to focus on reducing the discriminatory impacts of testing positive for HIV. Moving forward, Tanzania should empower individuals, combat common stigmas and raise awareness regarding prevention measures and the importance of HIV testing via education.

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