

Organization's Role and Activities

- Prolepsis Institute is a nongovernmental organization, active in the field of medical research, health promotion, environmental and occupational health since 1990. We strongly support the belief that health is a fundamental, nonnegotiable and inalienable right for every human being. Prolepsis: www.prolepsis.gr
- Prolepsis works on the promotion of HPV vaccination among Roma communities and migrants/refugees in Greece.
- We participate in the EU project titled 'Reducing Inequalities in Vaccine uptake in the European Region – Engaging Underserved communities – RIVER EU'. RIVER EU will improve access to vaccination services for children and adolescents in selected underserved communities, specifically reducing inequity in measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) and human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccines. RIVER-EU will work with eight target communities over the course of the 5-year project. River EU: <https://river-eu.org>
- Prolepsis works with health professionals and health promoters (migrant key representatives) to promote HPV and MMR vaccination among children and adolescents with migrant background. Our settings include schools and migrant associations.
- Prolepsis also implements a national project titled 'Healthy and Strong Roma women in Greece'. We perform cervical cancer screening and HPV vaccinations in Roma women.

Overview of Displaced Populations

- At the crossroads of Europe and the borders with the EU, Greece continues to receive a large number of migrants and refugees yearly. According to the UNHCR in 2024, 54.417 people arrived from sea and 7.702 from land. In 2024 over 13,000 children arrived by sea, marking a 50% rise compared to 2023. The number of unaccompanied and separated children also doubled, reaching 3,000 in 2024 compared to 1,490 in 2023.
- It is estimated that there are around 265.000 Roma people in Greece.
- There are no reliable statistics concerning HPV infection in displaced populations in Greece.
- According to ICO/IARC Information Centre on HPV and Cancer (2023), Greece has a population of 4.60 million women ages 15 years and older who are at risk of developing cervical cancer. Current estimates indicate that every year 697 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer and 282 die from the disease.
- About 2.8% of women in the general population are estimated to harbour cervical HPV-16/18 infection at a given time, and 52.3% of invasive cervical cancers are attributed to HPV-types 16 or 18.
- Among 2,417 women undergoing a gynecological examination the prevalence of HPV was 43.9% while high risk HPV accounted for 31.3% (Argyri et al., 2018).

Cervical Cancer Prevention and Control

- HPV vaccination in Greece until March 2022 targeted only 11-13 year old girls. Currently, there is a gender-neutral vaccination policy introduced and the recommended age of administration decreased to 9-11 years old. HPV vaccination in Greece faces several challenges. Covid-19 caused significant disruptions to the vaccination program which despite ongoing catch-up is still low. In the absence of registries, it is hard to provide a safe estimation of HPV vaccination in Greece. Most studies estimate that HPV vaccination is between 40% and 50% for ages between 9 and 18 years old.
- There are no particular policies for promoting HPV vaccination in Roma children or migrant/refugee children. HPV vaccination is in the national vaccination schedule, provided for free to people who have a National Security Number. Provisions for non documented migrants have not been made. Organized efforts to vaccinate Roma children with the HPV vaccine are limited and mainly concern local efforts and NGO driven programs.

Barriers to Access and Implementation Among These Populations

RIVER EU has focused efforts on identifying system level barriers that make HPV vaccination difficult for disadvantaged populations. Based on the WHO building blocks for health systems, the obstacles migrants and refugees face in Greece when accessing vaccination services including HPV vaccination were identified. Upon consultation with key stakeholders, tailored interventions were designed to address the following most important barriers: Limited access to vaccination services; Language difficulties; Insufficient coordination of health services; Insufficient training of health care professionals and insufficiently skilled in providing tailored care and information; Lack of or insufficient delivery of information; Lack of awareness raising initiatives about vaccine preventable diseases.

HPV vaccination among ROMA women faces significant challenges mainly related to system level barriers (access to vaccination services). There is also a lack of awareness among Roma communities concerning the importance of HPV vaccination as well fear towards the vaccine and mistrust towards the health system.

The Way Forward

Through transferability analysis RIVER EU is adapting successful interventions to local contexts addressing important system level barriers. Interventions focus on: culturally appropriate training of health care professionals; tailored information materials; creating synergies with community leaders; working with schools. In Roma communities targeted awareness raising about HPV, culturally appropriate education and facilitating access to vaccination services and on site vaccinations are effective strategies to increase HPV vaccination uptake.

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