

Examining the benefits to women living with HIV of a community organisation led research project

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As a pioneering organisation specifically funded to support and advocate for Australian women living with HIV, Positive Women Victoria holds what is arguably the most comprehensive database of women living with HIV in Australia.

Women living with HIV have varied needs, experiences and preferences .

This snapshot of our community enables us to identify demographic trends and gaps in access & uptake of HIV services. It also provides a crucial evidence-base, illuminating the need to apply a gendered lens at all levels of the HIV response.

Women living with HIV in Australia

- 3000 of the 27,000 people living with HIV in Australia are women¹
- Most women are diagnosed during their reproductive years, adding complexity to their experience of HIV & female identity²
- Women are often diagnosed later than men , when HIV has already had a significant and sometimes irreversible impact on their health²



Overseas born women living with HIV

According to data from the Burnet Institute,³ 68% of women living with HIV in Victoria since 1994 were born overseas. Whilst women from Africa make up a significant proportion of this group, their engagement with HIV community support services is limited. Very little research has been conducted on the barriers to accessing community services non-Australian born women face.

What we know about women with HIV

Positive Women Victoria’s predominantly Victorian-based membership is growing and continues to diversify. This reflects the growing diversity of the population of women living with HIV in Australia. While PWV members pre-dominantly nominate Australia & Western Pacific countries as their region of birth (49%), a significant and growing number of our members were born in Africa (31%). This is consistent with Burnet Institute data which shows the most common region of birth for non-Australian born people living with HIV in Victoria was Sub-Saharan Africa (n=33). PWV members are most likely to have been born between 1960 and 1979, but were most commonly diagnosed after 2010. Whilst the majority of our members reside in Metropolitan regions, a large proportion live in regional areas (>14%). Consistent with Burnet Institute data which shows that most women living with HIV live in the North-West Metropolitan region of Victoria (43.7%), the majority of Positive Women members also live in the North West Metropolitan region of Melbourne (37%).



Why we need to know more

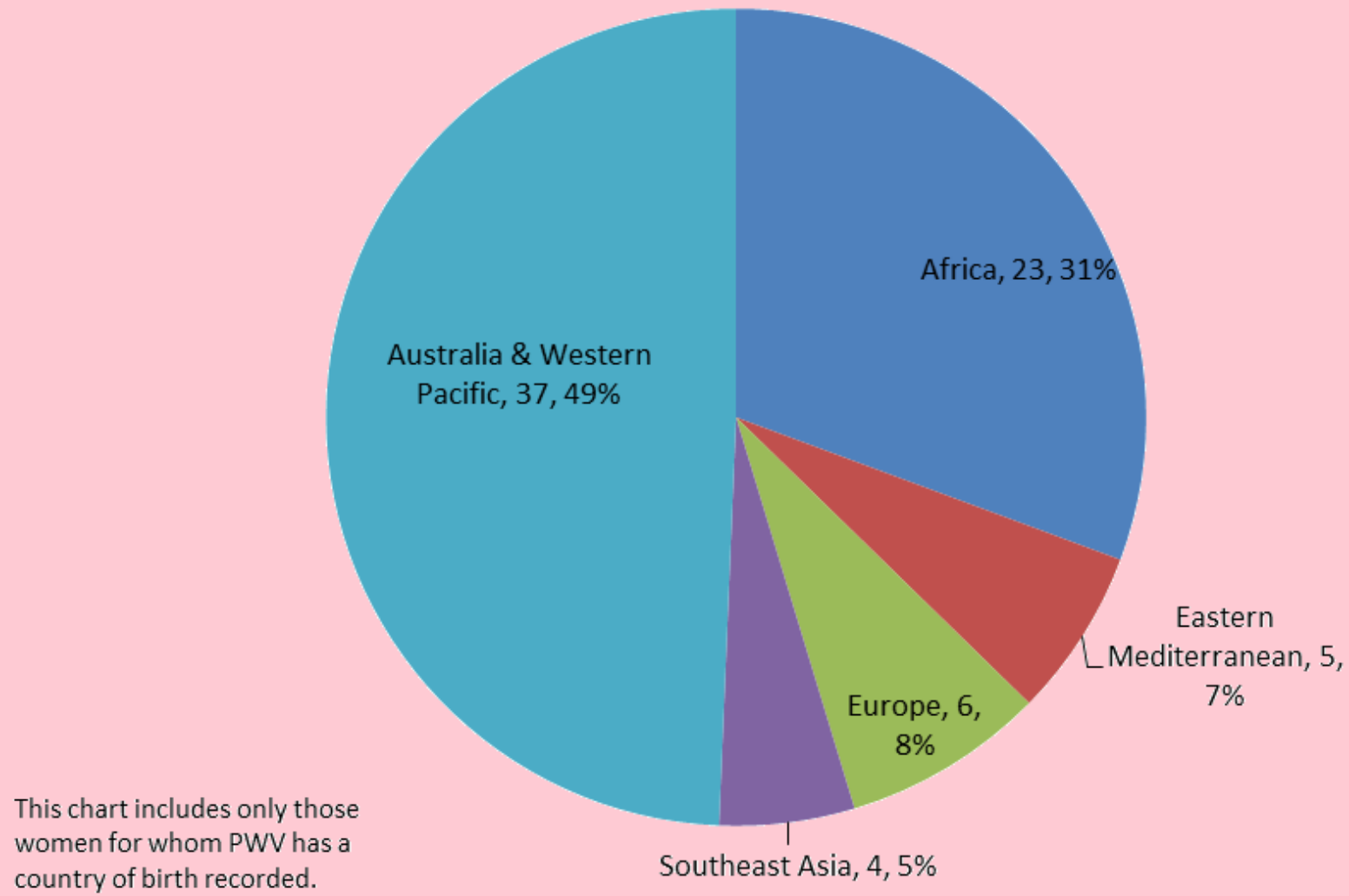
Comparative analysis of data from the Australia-wide Futures Eight Survey suggest that the needs and preferences of women from culturally diverse backgrounds are not being effectively identified despite national cross-sectional research initiatives. Whilst the average age of the 74 Australian women living with HIV captured by Futures8 is similar to PWV’s members (47 years old), there is significant variation in the region of birth of the two cohorts. 68% (n=50) of women surveyed in Futures8 were born in Australia, followed by 13.5% in the UK and Europe (n=10). Only 8% nominated Africa as their region of birth (n= 6).

84% (n=62) of women surveyed in Futures8 indicated their HIV exposure was due to sex with a man despite advances in sexual health literacy in Australia. This echoes the experiences of many PWV members and points to the need to interrogate transmission through both a gender-equity and cultural practice lens.

Conclusion

African-born women are an emerging priority population in the Australian HIV response. Through consultative research, we hope to better understand the intersectionality between cultural and structural barriers that may prevent African women accessing community support services. This will help inform appropriate practice and may also provide us with an opportunity to shed light on transmission pathways mediated by unique cultural or structural factors.

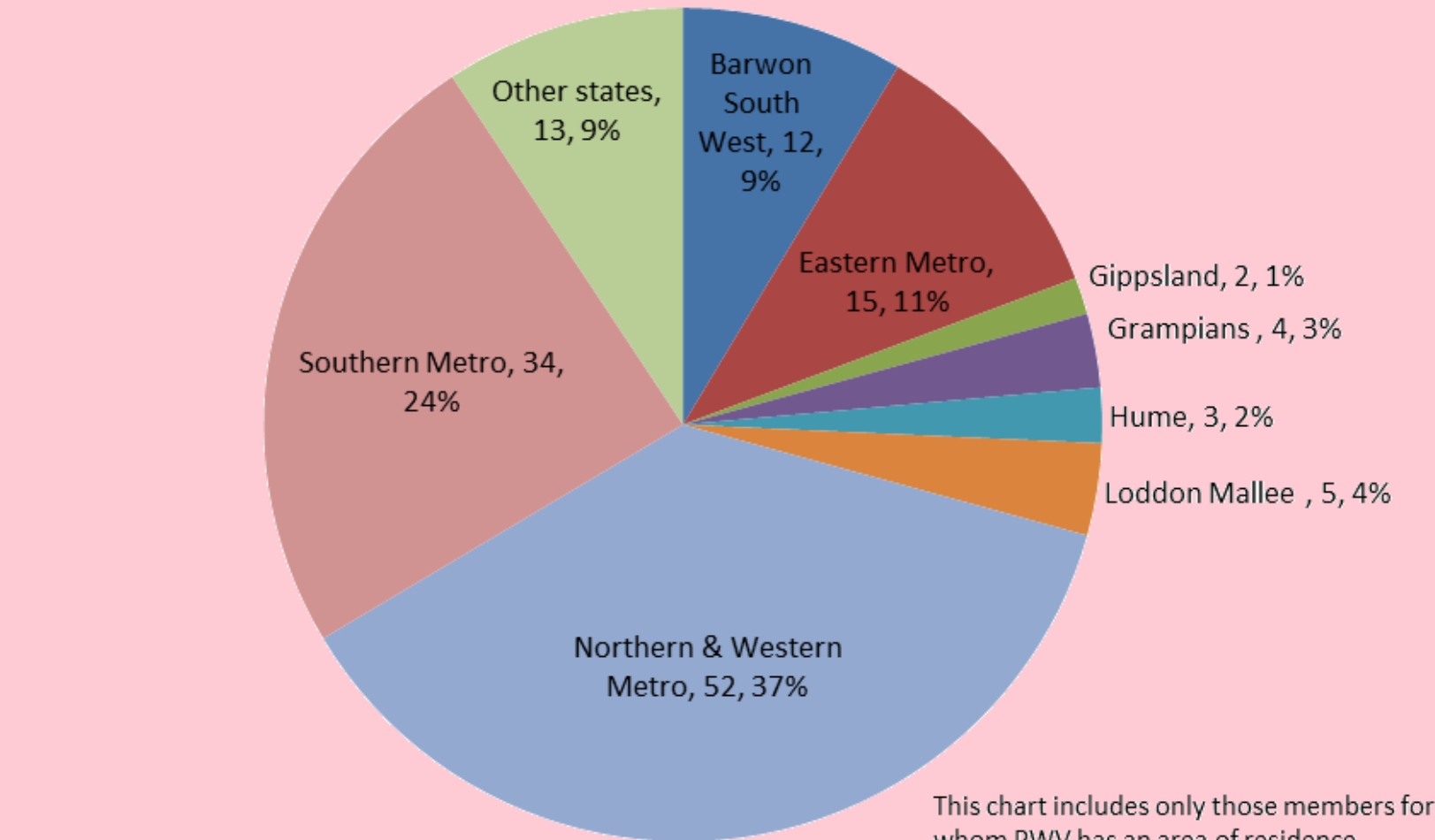
Region of birth



This chart includes only those women for whom PWV has a country of birth recorded.

n=75

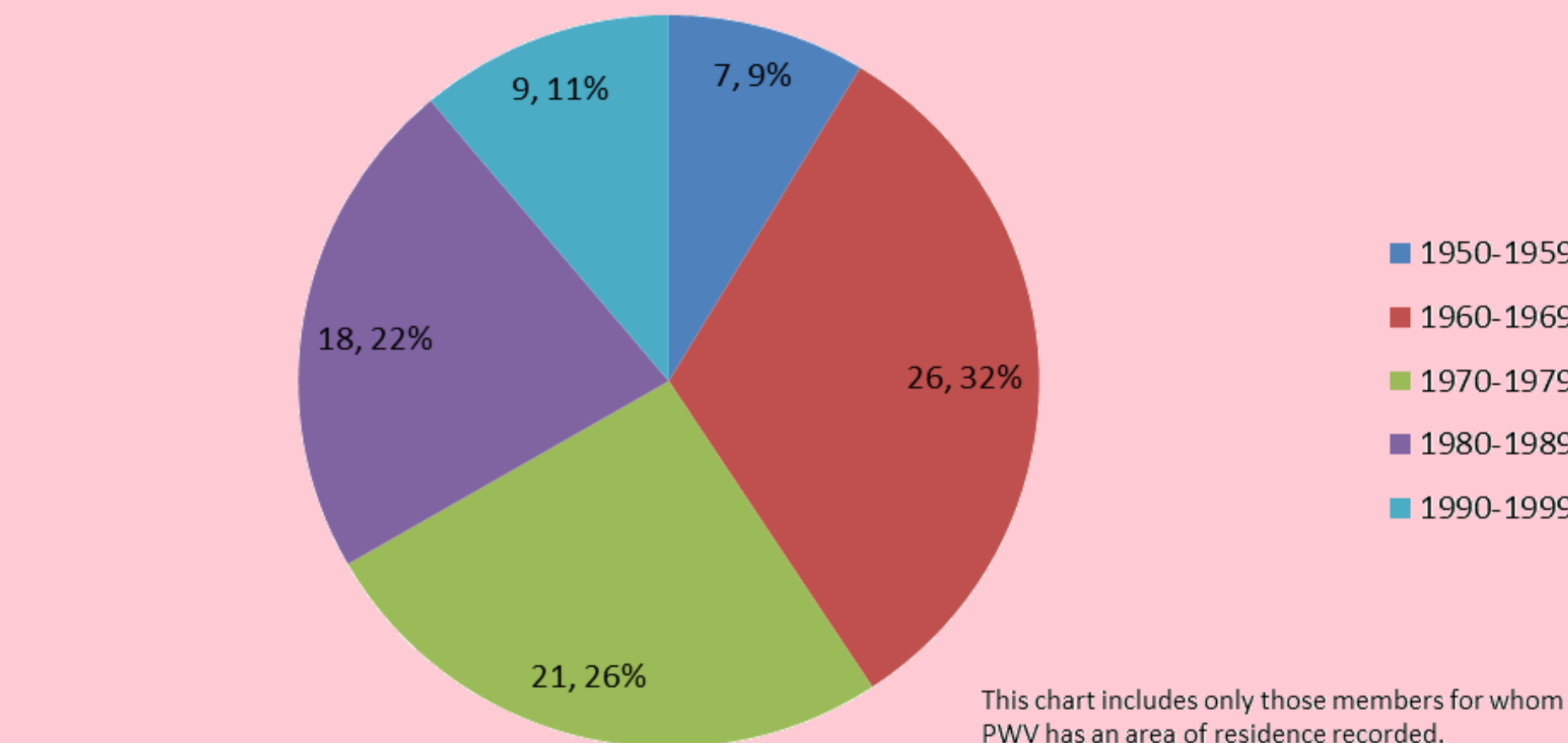
Area of Residence



n=75

This chart includes only those members for whom PWV has an area of residence recorded.

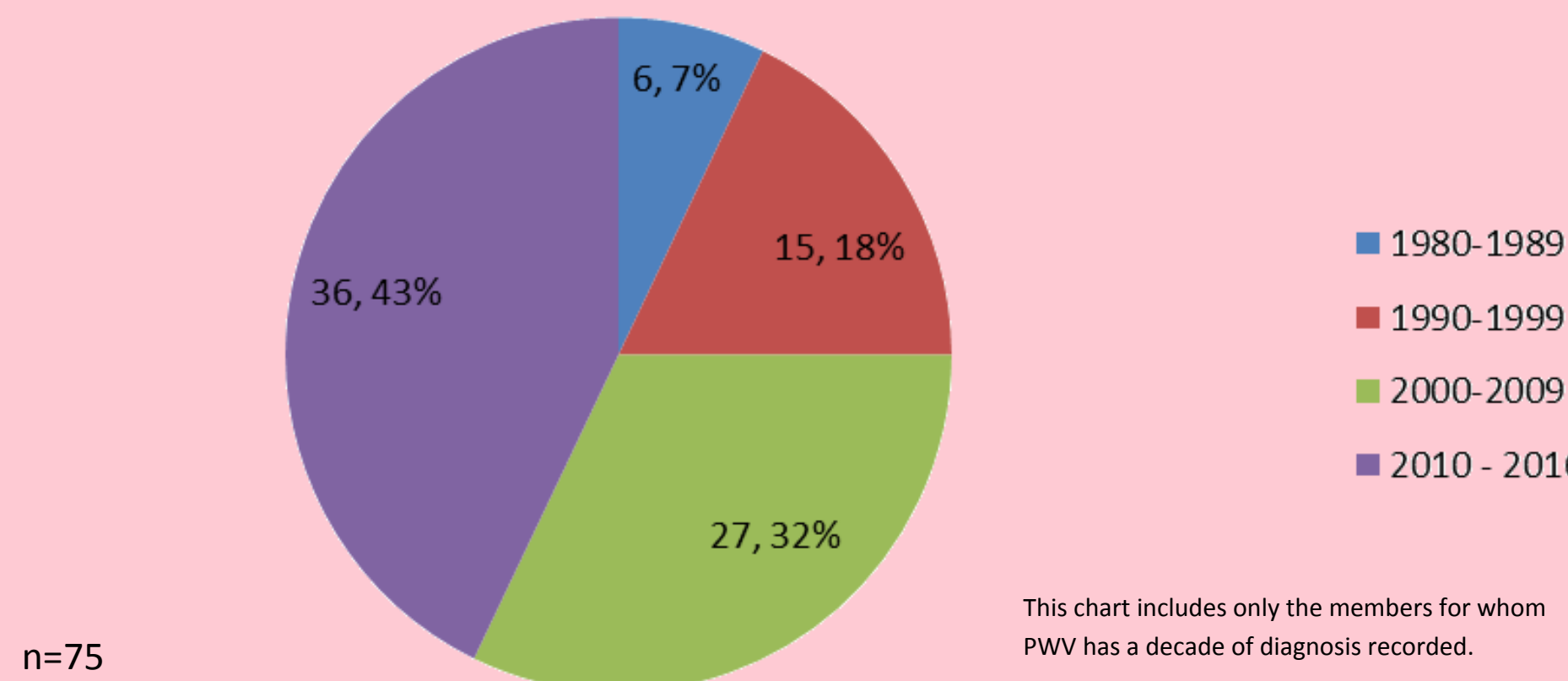
Decade of Birth



n=75

This chart includes only those members for whom PWV has an area of residence recorded.

Decade of diagnosis



n=75

This chart includes only the members for whom PWV has a decade of diagnosis recorded.

References:

1. The Kirby Institute. (2014). *HIV, viral hepatitis and sexually transmissible infections in Australia Annual Surveillance Report 2014*. The Kirby Institute, University of New South Wales, Sydney.
2. Koelmeyer, R., McDonald, K., Grierson, J. (2012). Beyond the data: Distinct features and experiences of women living with HIV in Australia. *HIV Australia, Vol. 9, No. 4*, 8–10.
3. Centre for Population Health, Burnet Institute. (2014). *Victorian HIV/AIDS targeted surveillance report*. The Burnet Institute, Melbourne.

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