

"FOR ME, IT IS MY SECOND PANDEMIC"

Experiences of people living with HIV accessing support from Positively UK during COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has had multidimensional impacts on people living with HIV. We report results from a survey of Positively UK service users, the UK's leading peer-led HIV charity, examining how COVID-19 has affected the physical, social and emotional wellbeing of people living with HIV.

METHODS

An anonymous online survey of 245 service users at Positively UK was conducted in June 2020 (response rate=43.6%). Demographic data were collected, as well as data on healthcare access, adherence to antiretroviral therapy (ART), mental health, and social isolation. This was supplemented with routine service user statistics. We present a descriptive analysis of quantitative data and content analysis of free text.

RESULTS

Of those surveyed, 60.0% (n=147) were 45-64 years; 68.0% were male (n=166); and 69.0% were of White ethnicity (n=169). Over 50% (n=126) reported that COVID-19 had impacted access to HIV care, mainly as a result of service closures (n=63), whilst 41.6% (n=102) had struggled to access healthcare more broadly. One-in-five (n=46) stated that their adherence to medication (including ART) had been impacted by COVID-19; poor mental health was the most commonly cited reason (32.1%, n=17). Nearly 60% of respondents (n=138) had experienced mental health issues since the start of the pandemic; 90% (n=219) reported social isolation. This was echoed in the content analysis; loneliness and poor mental health were the most common themes. For some, this new pandemic brought back painful memories of the early days of HIV. Mental health was further impacted by disruptions in healthcare and financial insecurity.

CONCLUSIONS

People living with HIV faced numerous psychosocial challenges as a result of COVID-19, as well as disrupted medical care, all of which negatively impacted mental health. Furthermore, fears of acquisition and stigma around COVID-19 served as potent reminders of earlier experiences of HIV-related stigma and discrimination. Voluntary sector organisations such as Positively UK, which has seen a rise in service use during the pandemic, are uniquely placed to support people living with HIV to maintain their health and wellbeing.

Can't go out, not able to do outreach, no face-to-face contact, only online on Zoom, not being able to see family or friends.

Just uncertainty around continuity of care. No routine bloods are being done so feel anxious about how my health is.

No one seems to understand how another global virus makes you feel when you already have one inside you that makes you a target of hate.

Financially it has been a strain - benefits haven't been enough to cover extra costs during COVID-19, for example, food costs during shortages, buying food online, buying things like masks, sanitiser, gloves.

	Number (%)	
Age (years)	<35	33 (14%)
	35-44	44 (18%)
	45-54	79 (32%)
	55-64	68 (28%)
	≥65	19 (8%)
Gender	Female	77 (32%)
	Male	166 (68%)
	Non-binary	1 (<1%)
Ethnicity	White	169 (69%)
	Black	36 (15%)
	Asian	12 (5%)
	Mixed	19 (8%)
	Other	9 (3%)
Duration of time with HIV (years)	0-5	60 (25%)
	6-10	48 (20%)
	11-20	69 (28%)
	>20	68 (28%)

Table 1: Respondent characteristics

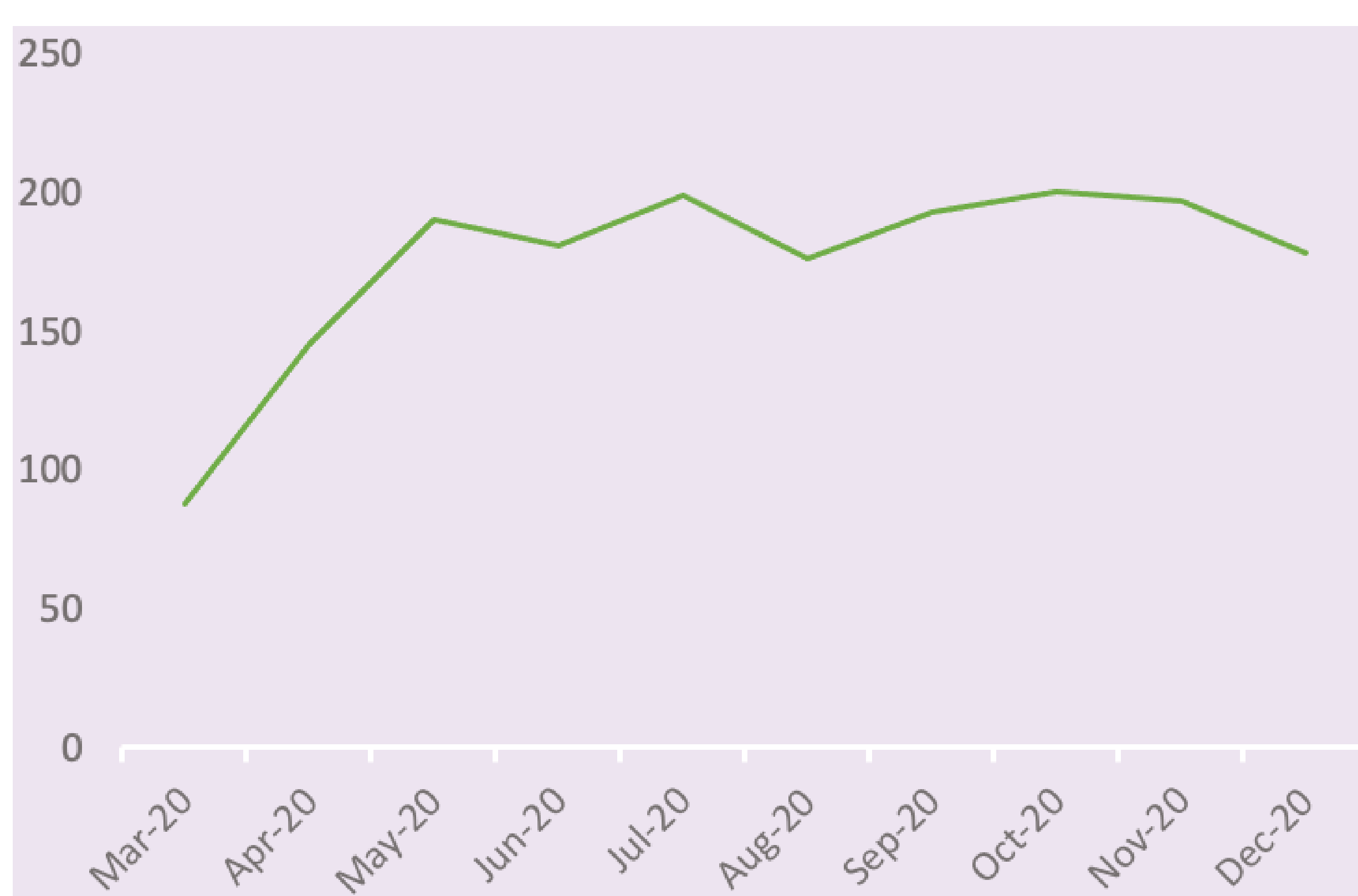


Figure 1: Number of service users seen per month

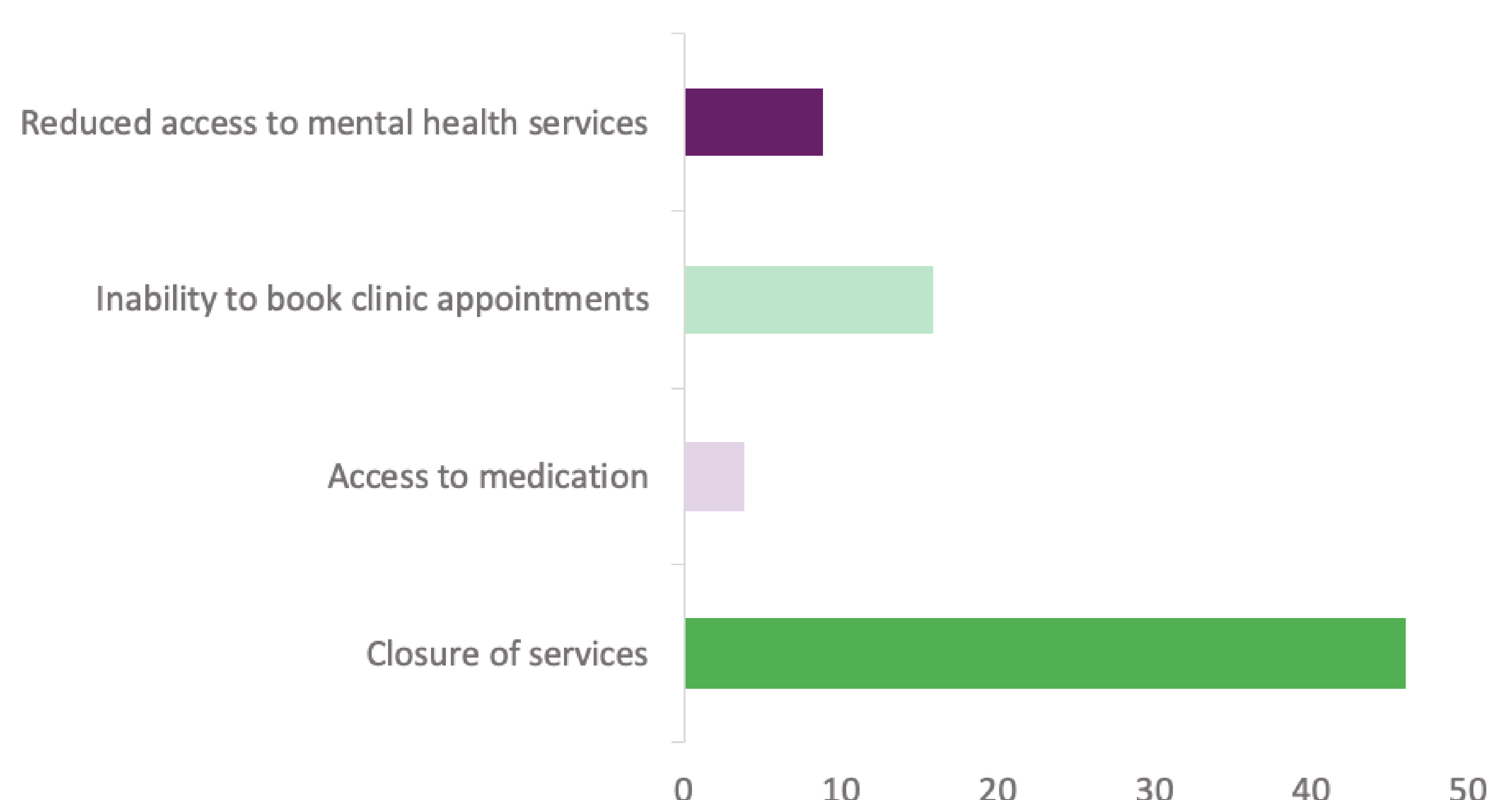


Figure 2: What has impacted your access to HIV care (%)?