

# AIDS and Young People



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## Young people with the disease

Young people are at the centre of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. An estimated 11.8 million people aged between 15 and 24 are living with HIV/AIDS, and half of all new infections—almost 7000 daily—are occurring among young people. In many parts of the developing world, the majority of new infections occur in young adults. About one-third of those currently living with HIV/AIDS are aged 15 to 24.

## Why are young people at such high risk for infection?

Around the globe, youth are at increased risk of HIV infection for a number of reasons, many of which are beyond their control. In many parts of the world, youth do not receive adequate education regarding their sexual health. They may not know about HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, or they may not have access to condoms. Young people, especially girls, may be unable to defend themselves against sexual abuse. It is estimated that over 100 million youth under the age of 18 live or work on the streets, subjecting them to potential involvement in the sex trade, and drug and alcohol abuse.

## What is the impact of HIV/AIDS on young people?

Globally, young people are the most severely affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Young people can be affected either because they are HIV+ or because people in their family or community are HIV+. Affected youth feel the pain of this disease in numerous areas of their lives.

- **Heads of households:** AIDS has left over 13.2 million orphans in the world; over 90% of them live in sub-Saharan Africa. Boys and girls as young as eight years of age are often left to raise siblings and generate a family income when one or both parents die of AIDS. In addition to the pressures of caring for siblings and working to raise money to feed the families, AIDS orphans often face a great deal of discrimination as a result of their parents' death.
- **Education:** Young people affected by HIV/AIDS often lose the opportunity to receive an education. This can occur for

many reasons, including a need to work for survival and a lack of finances to pay school fees. Extra burdens of caring for sick adults may cause children to drop out of school, or achieve inadequate grades as a result of low concentration and performance.

- **Psychological:** The psychological impact on young people affected by HIV/AIDS is rarely given the attention that it deserves. This is the least visible effect, but one of the most significant. Young people affected by HIV/AIDS often suffer from emotional concerns about their futures, loss of parental nurture, and an inability to understand what is happening to them and their families. It is essential that communities and educators be sensitive to the psychological needs of youth infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.
- **Economic:** Children must work to supplement familial income, as more money is spent on health care. Coping with HIV/AIDS in their families and communities, many young people are forced to take on increased responsibility at early ages. Many young people may be required to leave school, care for sick family members, or seek employment.

## Young People: A Force for Change

The future of the HIV epidemic is in the hands of young people. The behaviours they adopt now and those they maintain through their lives will determine the course of the epidemic for decades to come.

Research has shown that when young people are provided with education and skills to protect themselves, in conjunction with access to condoms, they will adopt safe sexual behaviour.

Safer behaviours by young people is having an impact on the HIV epidemic. For example, in Uganda, Thailand and Tanzania, studies have shown that HIV prevalence is falling. In order to successfully combat HIV/AIDS, it is critical that programmes target young people and promote their participation in the planning, design and implementation of activities.

## Get Involved!

There is a world of resources available to individuals and organizations interested in the area of HIV/AIDS and young people. For an overview of articles, books, and web sites, check out ICAD's annotated bibliography on HIV/AIDS and Youth.

*ICAD's aim is to lessen the impact of HIV/AIDS in resource-poor communities and countries. We are a coalition of Canadian international development organizations, AIDS service organizations and other interested organizations and individuals. Funding for this publication was provided by Health Canada. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Minister of Health. Most of the information in this fact sheet is taken from AIDS Epidemic Update: December 2001 (UNAIDS and WHO). Additional copies are available on the ICAD Web site at www.icad-cisd.com. Le feuillet "Les jeunes et le VIH/sida" est disponible en français.*