

HIV/AIDS and Young People

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Young people today represent the largest generation of youth in history: nearly half of the global population, the majority of whom live in the developing world, are under 25 years of age. Unfortunately, young people also represent the largest group affected by HIV/AIDS. For example:

- Young people aged 15-24 account for **half of all new cases** of HIV in the world;
- Almost **one third of all people living with HIV** are under 25 years old;
- An estimated **6,000 young people** are infected with the virus every day.

Enhanced vulnerability to HIV/AIDS

Young people's enhanced vulnerability to HIV infection is directly linked to the broader determinants of health such as education, housing, sustainable livelihoods, and social support networks. Moreover, they often lack the skills and resources needed to access appropriate sexual and reproductive health education and services. These are all important prerequisites for empowering young people to better protect themselves against HIV.

Around the world, young people are also facing earlier sexual debut: most become sexually active in their teens, and many before age 15. This is attributable to several factors including the lack of access to sexual & reproductive health information, poverty and high-risk coping mechanisms (such as transactional sex), exposure to conflicting ideas about sexual values and behaviour, and adolescent experimentation and curiosity. Studies also note that young people are less

likely than adults to use condoms with their sexual partners.

The new face of HIV/AIDS

Girls and young women are hit particularly hard by HIV/AIDS, representing 62% of all young people living with HIV. In sub-Saharan Africa, this proportion jumps to 75.8%; and in both North Africa/Middle East and the Caribbean, it exceeds 68%.

The increased vulnerability of girls and young women to HIV infection is due to their added physiological and sociocultural risks. The vaginal lining is more susceptible to tearing than in adult women, increasing the risk of the virus entering the bloodstream. They also lack the power to negotiate terms of sexual relations and condom use, are exposed to harmful cultural practices (such as female genital mutilation), and are vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation (forced sex and consequent abrasions facilitate entry of the virus). Because of economic insecurity, young women may also feel pressured to enter into sexual relationships with older men. As noted previously, young women have even less power to negotiate safe sex than their adult counterparts, and their older sexual partners are more likely to already be infected with HIV. Abstinence is not a viable prevention option for many young women, especially in areas where child marriages are a common cultural practice.

Promise for the Future

The international community has consistently highlighted the importance of HIV prevention among young people in all HIV/AIDS related

commitments to date, including in ICPD+5 (1999)¹, the Millennium Development Goals (2000), and most recently, the UNGASS Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS (2001). The Declaration is unique because it recognizes the specific vulnerability of young people and establishes time-bound targets towards reducing the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS among young people, including, by 2010:

- Reducing global HIV prevalence among youth ages 15-24 by 25% (article 47);
- Ensuring at least 95% of youth ages 15-24 have access to the information, education, and services necessary to develop the life skills required to reduce their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS infection (article 53).

Young people are the greatest hope for turning the tide against AIDS. HIV prevention programs targeting young people are a crucial and effective strategy for making headway against the epidemic; youth involvement in the design and implementation of these programs is also essential. Where HIV/AIDS prevalence has shown signs of falling, the greatest reductions have been among young people. With young people becoming increasingly engaged in HIV/AIDS advocacy and prevention efforts, their role is now primed towards becoming agents of change for a better future.

Additional Resources:

UNAIDS. 2006 *Report on the global AIDS epidemic.*

UNAIDS. *At the Crossroads: Accelerating Youth Access to HIV/AIDS Interventions (2004).*

Kaiser Family Foundation. *Fact sheet: The Global Impact of HIV/AIDS on Youth (2004)*

UNFPA. *State of the World Population 2005: The Promise of Equality.*

Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS
(www.youthaidscoalition.org)

¹ ICPD+5 is the 5-year progress review of the 20-year commitment developed from the *International Conference on Population and Development* (Cairo, Egypt, 1994).

ICAD's mission is to lessen the spread and impact of HIV/AIDS in resource-poor communities and countries by providing leadership and actively contributing to the Canadian and international response. This document was prepared with funding from the Public Health Agency of Canada. The opinions expressed by the authors and researchers do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Public Health Agency of Canada. Ce feuillet d'information est aussi disponible en français.