

AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Regional Overview

The most recent estimates [and ranges] for HIV in Sub-Saharan Africa, reported by the Joint United Nations Programme on AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization, are presented in the table below.

Parameter	2006	2004
Adults & children living with HIV	24.7 million [21.8-27.7 million]	23.6 million [20.9-26.4 million]
Women living with HIV	13.3 million [11.5-15.2 million]	12.7 million [11.0-14.5 million]
Incident HIV infections	2.8 million [2.4-3.2 million]	2.6 million [2.2-2.9 million]
Deaths due to AIDS	2.1 million [1.8-2.4 million]	1.9 million [1.7-2.3million]

Sub-Saharan Africa still bears the brunt of the global epidemic, with Southern Africa being the epicenter: HIV infection levels in pregnant women are at least 20% in six countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Zimbabwe.

Nowhere is the “feminization” of the epidemic more apparent than in sub-Saharan Africa where well over half (59%) of adults living with HIV in the region are women. In fact, of the 17 million women living with HIV in 2006, globally, 13.3 million were in sub-Saharan Africa.

Profile of the Epidemic

Declines in adult national HIV prevalence appear underway in Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Changes in sexual behaviour are being credited, but these gains must be interpreted cautiously. In Kenya, there are questions about whether the decline is due to the AIDS epidemic’s natural ‘progression’ or due to behaviour changes. New data from Uganda calls for a renewed focus on prevention: a 2004-2005 nation-wide household survey reported that almost one in three men had multiple sexual partners in the past year and only about half use condoms in casual sex. Mortality rates in Zimbabwe are leveling off, suggesting that observed declines in HIV prevalence are indeed due to fewer HIV infections and not due to more AIDS deaths. But infection levels in young pregnant women in Zimbabwe still remain among the highest in the world, so prevention efforts must be intensified to maintain the declining trend.

Generally, women are less informed about HIV than men. In all but three countries in sub-Saharan Africa for which data is available, on average, young men were 20% more likely to

have correct knowledge of HIV than young women. Recent findings published between 2000-2005 revealed that, in 24 countries, at least two-thirds of young women (aged 15-24 years) lacked comprehensive knowledge of HIV transmission. Education levels are highly correlated with knowledge of HIV transmission. Thus, barriers in access to education facing women and girls remain a major concern.

An outstanding feature of South Africa’s epidemic is the astonishing speed at which it has evolved. National adult HIV prevalence of less than 1% in 1990 rocketed to almost 25% within 10 years and the country now has the highest number of people living with HIV in the world (5.5 million). South African women are particularly affected. Almost one in three women, aged 25-34 years, attending antenatal clinics is now estimated to be living with the disease. In KwaZulu-Natal, the country’s worst-affected province, HIV prevalence amongst pregnant women is estimated to be 40%. Having lagged behind most other epidemics in the region, AIDS in South Africa is now taking a devastating toll in human lives.

Prevalence rates above 30% are still recorded in areas of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, and Swaziland. Swaziland’s relentless epidemic saw HIV prevalence among pregnant women soar to 43% in 2004. In parts of Namibia, the epidemic is as intense as it is in some of the worst-affected areas of Botswana, South Africa, and Swaziland. Though some data indicate the epidemics are stabilizing in Botswana and Lesotho, the overall intensity remains severe.

Epidemics in West and Central Africa have remained stable over recent years. National adult prevalence has not yet exceeded 10% in any West African country, though rates within countries vary across locations and sub-populations. In Central Africa, Cameroon is facing one of the more serious epidemics: a national survey confirmed that prevalence stands at 5.4%, and 6.8% of women are HIV-positive.

Access to treatment throughout the region remains below target. Botswana, Uganda and Namibia lead the way, with at least 1/3 of those requiring antiretroviral therapy (ART) actually receiving it. That figure stood at only 10-20% in Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia in mid-2005. At least 90% of people who needed ART in Ethiopia, Ghana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Nigeria, the United Republic of Tanzania, and Zimbabwe (and more than 80% of people who needed ART in South Africa) were not receiving it by mid-2005.

This information has been compiled from the *AIDS Epidemic Update: December 2005*, and updated from the *AIDS Epidemic Update: December 2006* and the *2006 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic*. For more information, please visit the UNAIDS website: www.unaids.org.