

Youth and the Global HIV/AIDS Pandemic

As the HIV/AIDS pandemic enters its third decade, HIV continues to spread rapidly. At least 95 percent of all new infections occur in less developed countries, and sub-Saharan Africa is the hardest hit region, followed by the Caribbean.¹ Eastern Europe and central Asia experience the fastest growing HIV prevalence rates, while in eastern and southern Asia, the absolute numbers of infected people are staggering.¹ Finally, experts fear that rising rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in developed nations may signal a rise in unsafe sex, especially among youth.² Throughout the world, almost 6,000 youth ages 15 to 24 are infected with HIV each day, accounting for more than half of all *new* HIV infections.³ As a result, almost 12 million youth are living with HIV or AIDS; 62 percent of infected youth are female.^{2,3}

Across the World's Regions, Youth Face Significant Rates of HIV Infection.

- In sub-Saharan Africa, most new HIV infections occur among people ages 15 to 24 and are sexually acquired. Nearly nine million youth are infected with HIV, and 67 percent of infections occur in young women.³ Prevalence rates exceed 20 percent in several countries in southern Africa, and experts fear rates will rise in West Africa.^{1,2}
- In Latin America and the Caribbean, about 560,000 young people are HIV-infected.³ In Latin America (especially in Mexico, Brazil, and Peru), marginalized populations—such as young men who have sex with men—are most affected.¹ In the Caribbean, infection rates are the second highest in the world, and most new infections occur among women ages 15 to 24.³
- In southern and southeastern Asia, over one million youth are HIV-infected.³ Initially fueled in Thailand and Cambodia by the sex trade and injection drug use, the epidemic has been successfully slowed in both countries. Now, India shows alarming increases in HIV/AIDS throughout its diverse population.^{1,3}
- In eastern Asia and the South Pacific, nearly three-quarters of a million youth are HIV-infected.³ Most new cases are in China, home to one-fifth of humanity, where UNAIDS warns of an “unfolding epidemic of proportions beyond belief.”¹
- Eastern Europe and central Asia have nearly half a million HIV-infected youth, mostly as a result of injection drug use. Rates are rising rapidly in Belarus, Kazakhstan, Latvia, and Russia, as well as in the Ukraine, where one percent of young women and two percent of young men are now HIV-infected.^{1,3}
- Rates remain low, though increasing, in North Africa and the Middle East. Over 160,000 youth in this region are infected.³ Sexual intercourse and injection drug use are the major routes of transmission; and Djibouti and Sudan have large, widespread epidemics.^{1,2}
- In developed nations, nearly a quarter of a million youth are HIV-infected.³ Higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) signal a rise in unsafe sex and highlight the need for renewed prevention efforts, especially among youth.² Leading factors behind the epidemic vary—from injection drug use in Spain, France, and Portugal, to heterosexual transmission in the United Kingdom, heterosexual transmission among disadvantaged women in the United States, and sex between males in Japan, Canada, Australia, and the United States.^{1,2} Nevertheless, each of these factors—heterosexual transmission, injection drug use, and sex between males—plays a part in the HIV epidemic in every industrialized nation.

Young Women and Girls Are Especially Vulnerable in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, but Young Men Are Also at High Risk in Many Regions.

- Of the 11.8 million HIV-infected youth worldwide, over seven million are female.³ The risk of infection for young women is heightened by their immature vaginal tract and easily torn tissues. Young women are also at heightened risk due to their lower status in society, which decreases their ability to negotiate condom use, and to cultural practices that encourage unions between younger women and older men, who are more likely to be HIV-infected.^{1,3}
- In sub-Saharan Africa, female children and young women are especially vulnerable due to cultural practices, such as the “sugar daddy,” and to a myth that an infected man can “cure” himself by having sex with a virgin. In Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, for every infected male, ages 15 to 19, there are five to six infected females the same age.³
- In some cities in India, there has been a worrisome increase in HIV infection among pregnant women.¹
- HIV infection remains more common among young men than young women in industrialized nations, Latin America, Eastern Europe and central Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa. In industrialized nations and in parts of Latin America and Asia, cases occur mostly among young men who have sex with men; in the other regions, cases occur mostly among young men who use injection drugs.³

Youth’s Lack of Information, Skills, and Access to Services Fuel the Epidemic.

- Around the world, the vast majority of youth have little understanding of HIV transmission or how to protect against it.³ For example, in 2001 only 10 percent of 15- to 19-year-old females in Tajikistan, and less than 60 percent in Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan, had ever heard of HIV/AIDS while as many as 98 percent harbored misconceptions about it.² In studies, 95 percent of female Nigerian teens and 93 percent of Haitian adolescents perceived their risk of HIV infection to be minimal or non-existent.³
- Some teens are unable to protect themselves because they lack the skills and power to negotiate abstinence or condom use. In some countries, young brides of older husbands may be even more vulnerable to HIV than are unmarried women. For example, in a study in India, 14 percent of young married women at one clinic were HIV-positive; 91 percent of them had sex only with their husband.³
- Finally, young people face serious obstacles to accessing medical care, including fear their privacy will not be respected, embarrassment, distance to services, and health providers who are reluctant to serve adolescents.³ In Dakar, Senegal, for example, young people visiting family planning clinics were told they were “too young” to receive contraception.⁴

Programs and Policies Can Help Young People Protect Themselves.

- In Brazil, concentrated campaigns led to increased condom use among young men having sex for the first time (up from less than five percent in 1986 to 50 percent in 1999).³
- In Kampala, Uganda, HIV prevalence among pregnant teens fell from 22 percent in 1990 to seven percent in 2000, mostly due to delayed first sex, fewer partners, and increased condom use.³
- In Thailand, HIV incidence among young military recruits declined by 90 percent between 1991 and 1995, after the government adopted a comprehensive HIV/AIDS prevention campaign.⁵

References

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Written by Nicole Cheetham

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2000 M Street, NW, Suite 750 • Washington, DC 20036 USA • Phone: 202.419.3420 • Fax: 202.419.1448 • www.advocatesforyouth.org