

HIV and Young People

[Source: UNFPA – Mary Otieno (motieno@unfpa.org)]

Overview

Young people remain at the centre of the AIDS epidemic in terms of increasing rates of infection, vulnerability, impact and potential for change. Though they have grown up in a world changed by AIDS, they still lack comprehensive and correct knowledge about how to prevent HIV infection. The importance of preventing HIV infections among young people has been a consistent message in all AIDS-related commitments to date, particularly ICPD+5, the Millennium Development Goals, the Declaration of Commitment made at the 2001 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS (UNGASS), and the General Assembly Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS in 2006. However, research now shows that where young people are well informed of HIV risks and prevention strategies, they are changing their behaviour in ways that reduce their vulnerability.

RED FLAGS

- ▶ Comprehensive knowledge of HIV and how to prevent it is low (34% and far below 2010 global target of 95%) even among youth in highly affected countries, calling for scaling up of comprehensive sexuality education in both schools and community settings.
- ▶ Use of condoms among young people having sex with multiple partners is far from universal, especially among young women.
- ▶ While young people in countries with concentrated epidemics are at much lower risk of HIV infection overall, they make up a large proportion of most at risk population with 95% of all new HIV infections among young people in some regions like Asia.
- ▶ A review of the UNGASS country reports indicates that while many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, South and South East Asia, Caribbean and all countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America included programmes for young people in their national strategy, many do not report on activities that are targeted towards young people. And, no funds are earmarked for programmes for young people in most countries regardless of their inclusion in the multi-sectoral response.

KEY MESSAGES

- ▶ To ensure an HIV-free generation, there is need for creation of a supportive policy and programme environment, comprehensive, evidence-based prevention strategies; promotion of responsible sexual behavior, including the use of condoms for dual protection; youth-specific HIV and sexuality education; mass media interventions; and the provision of youth-friendly health services for the prevention, treatment care and support of HIV. It is also critical to reduce the risks of unsafe injecting drug use -through needle and syringe exchange programmes as part of a comprehensive harm reduction programme.
- ▶ Evidence shows that sex education delays the onset of sexual activity and encourages safer and more responsible behavior, such as using condoms. Sex education also reduces the risk of unplanned pregnancy.
- ▶ Compelling evidence now shows that male circumcision is an additional, important strategy to prevent HIV among adolescent boys and young men particularly in countries where HIV prevalence is high and circumcision is low. However, noting that circumcision does not offer absolute protection and therefore should never replace other known methods of HIV prevention but always be considered as part of a comprehensive HIV prevention package.
- ▶ Increased advocacy is needed for the removal of current social, cultural, legal and policy barriers that hinder young people's access to information, skills, services and meaningful participation.

KEY DATA

- ▶ The absolute number of young people living with HIV has dropped from 5.7 million in 2001 to 5 million in 2009, and so has the prevalence among young people in many countries. Nonetheless, an estimated 890,000 young people were newly infected with HIV in 2009, accounting for 41 of new HIV infections among adults aged 15-49, with 79 percent of these infections occurring in sub-Saharan Africa.
- ▶ In 41% of UNGASS country reports reviewed in 2010, less than 30% of young women with more than one sexual partner used a condom at last sex.
- ▶ In Asia, over 95% of all new infections among young people occur amongst most-at-risk adolescents. Central and South America has had minimal change in the epidemic in recent years which is mainly concentrated amongst men who have sex with men. And, in the Caribbean, The Bahamas has the highest HIV prevalence with 3.1% of young women and 1.4 % of young men HIV infected. Paid for unprotected sex between men and women is the main mode of transmission in the Caribbean.
- ▶ Trends show that HIV prevalence in 33 countries (22 of them in Sub-Saharan Africa) is declining among young people aged 15–24. And in 16 out of 21 countries most affected by HIV in the world, a decline in prevalence of 25% has been noted mainly because young people are choosing to wait longer to become sexually active; they are having fewer multiple partners; and have increased the use of condoms among those with multiple partners.
- ▶ Ten countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Kenya, Ethiopia, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Cote d'Ivoire, Tanzania, South Africa) show a statistically significant decline in HIV prevalence of 25% or more either among young men or young women between 2000 and 2008. And, seven other countries (five of these African) appear on track to reach the UNGASS target of a 25% reduction in prevalence.

Q&A

1. **Why focus on young people?**
Young people are at the centre of the global AIDS epidemic. Since the majority of HIV infections are sexually transmitted, it is important to link HIV and sexual and reproductive health information and services. Young people are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection for social, political, cultural, biological and economic reasons.
2. **Why is it so important to partner with youth in order to prevent HIV? Don't adults know best?**
Experience shows that HIV programmes are more effective when youth are treated as partners, and young people have a right to participate in programmes that affect them.
3. **Does providing sex education to young people encourage engagement in sexual activities or promote promiscuity?**
No. Research clearly shows that information about sex and sexuality does not increase sexual activity or reduce the age of sexual initiation among young people. In fact, it does the opposite. Young people who receive age appropriate, accurate sexual health information regarding abstinence, condom use, sexual development and other related topics—be it from parents, teachers or other caring adults—are more likely than those who learn only about abstinence to delay sexual initiation and to use condoms for dual protection when they do have sex.

For further information, visit: <http://www.unfpa.org/hiv/people.htm> and <http://www.unfpa.org/public/iattyp>