

## Young People and HIV/AIDS

Global population is just over six billion. Of this, one billion young people are between the ages of 15 and 24 worldwide, just beginning their reproductive years, and another billion children are right behind them. This is the largest “youthquake” in history. Most young people live in developing countries least able to meet their needs for education and the sexual and reproductive health care and services that can prevent HIV infection. And in most countries, the topic of adolescent sexuality is politically and culturally sensitive, hampering discussion and service provision.

As a result, six young people are infected every minute with the HIV virus. Half of all new HIV infections worldwide are among young people aged 15-24.<sup>1</sup> Those stricken will likely die of AIDS before they turn 35.

### **Adolescent girls are at highest risk for HIV infection.**

Young girls are least able to negotiate the terms of sexual initiation or condom use, or to protect themselves against sexual violence, exploitation and trafficking.

- Practices such as early or forced marriage and the search for younger “clean” sexual partners by older men increase young girls’ risk of infection.
- Girls often have less access to medical care than boys and men, and may have to ask them for permission to seek care, or for transportation to it and payment for it.

- Of India’s 2 million sex workers, 20 percent are under 15 and nearly 50 percent are under 18. In Cambodia, 30 percent of sex workers aged 13-19 are HIV-positive.<sup>2</sup>
- In western Kenya, one girl in four between 15 and 19 lives with AIDS, compared with one in 25 boys in that age group. In rural Uganda, the ratio is six infected girls to every infected boy, and in Zambia, 16 times as many girls as boys are infected.<sup>3</sup>

### **Young people deserve a special focus.**

- In sub-Saharan Africa, where the AIDS epidemic is worst, half the population is under age 20.<sup>1</sup>
- In many cultures, traditional strictures around sex and marriage are breaking down, increasing sexual activity outside marriage. However, taboos on discussion of sexual matters persist, especially for young people.
- Cultures are being decimated by loss of young people to AIDS. In South Africa and Zimbabwe, where 20 to 25 percent of adults are infected, AIDS is likely to claim the lives of around half of today’s 15-year-olds.<sup>1</sup>

Participants at the International Conference on Population and Development agreed in 1994 that young people must have access to the information, education and services they need to develop skills that will reduce their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS. The targets:

- At least 90 percent of young people should have access by 2005 to preventive methods—male and female condoms, voluntary testing, counseling and follow-up—and at least 95 percent by 2010.
- Infection rates should be reduced in the most affected countries by 25 percent by 2005 and 25 percent globally by 2010.

## Education is key.

Research finds that sex education and counseling do not encourage promiscuity among young people. Failure to educate them, in fact, may be a death sentence.

- Recent surveys in 17 countries on three continents found that more than half the adolescents surveyed could not name a single method of protecting themselves against HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup>
- In sub-Saharan Africa, half the teenage girls surveyed did not realize that a healthy-looking person might be living with HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup>
- Many young people do not see HIV/AIDS as a personal threat. Almost two-thirds of sexually active girls 15 to 19 in Haiti told researchers they ran no risk of infection.<sup>1</sup>
- Surveys show that even a few years of added schooling translate into more frequent condom use.<sup>1</sup>

Education in decision-making and negotiation skills, especially from peers, helps teens to protect themselves from unwanted sexual relationships, exploitation and violence, and to ensure use of condoms when they are sexually active.

- In Albania, peer educators in a UN Population Fund-supported project reached more than 1,500 young people with HIV-prevention messages. Using social marketing, they also sold 1.3 million condoms.<sup>1</sup>
- University students in Nicaragua used posters, T-shirts, leaflets, condoms, and radio announcements in a 2000 HIV education campaign, advocating solidarity with those most at risk.
- Young people with higher self-esteem are better able to avoid risky behaviors involving alcohol, drugs and unprotected sex.
- In Cambodia, the UN Population Fund worked with UNESCO and the Ministry of Health to produce the nation's first HIV/AIDS manual for schools, trained 1,385 teachers to use it and distributed it to all the nation's secondary schools.<sup>4</sup>
- In Port-Au-Prince, Haiti, teenagers learned about AIDS, condoms, family planning and the dangers of drugs and alcohol at a local youth club supported by UNFPA.<sup>1</sup>
- The UN Population Fund supports a program in the Arab States that teaches Boy Scouts how to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. Workshops give training in sensitivity to gender and culture, marriage and family issues, and the roles of ethics and values.<sup>5</sup>
- A five-year project of the African Youth Alliance, a partnership of the Fund and the non-governmental organizations PATH and Pathfinder International, is educating young people about HIV/AIDS and providing job training in four hard-hit African countries: Botswana, Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania.<sup>4</sup>

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4. UN Population Fund, *UNFPA 2000: Annual Report*, UNFPA, New York, 2000  
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