

Overview

If current trends continue the number of young PLHA could rise from the current estimate of 12.4 million to 21.5 million by the end of the decade. Almost a third of the 40 million PLHA worldwide are between the ages of 15 and 24, with almost 6 000 new HIV infections per day for this age group. Several factors exacerbate the epidemic's impact on young people.

- Youth are particularly vulnerable because of age, biological and emotional development and financial dependence
- Most sexually active young people do not see themselves as being at risk from HIV
- Girls and young women represent a growing proportion of new infections worldwide
- HIV/AIDS prevalence is particularly high in SSA
- High rates of HIV infection among young people occur in countries where young people represent a high percentage of the population, e.g. SSA, with over half of its population estimated to be under the age of 18.
- Life expectancy will fall by 2010 in highly affected countries to levels not seen since the beginning of the 20th century
- The economic development of countries has also been affected and is seen by rising health care expenditures. The GDP of hard-hit nations is also expected to decline

Current Impact

Prevalence and incidence: in regions where the epidemic is related to heterosexual transmission, new infections are higher among girls and young women. In regions where IDU and MSM are the primary modes of transmission, rates of new infections among young men exceed or are equal to those among young women. 76% of young people infected by HIV/AIDS live in SSA as do 90% of the world's AIDS orphans (12.1 million children). Botswana and Lesotho have the highest proportions of infected youth. For example, in Botswana, up to 45% of young women (15-24) and 19% of young men (15-24) are living with HIV.

Nations with young populations: for the most part, high rates of HIV infection among young people occur in countries with very young populations e.g. in Zambia, Malawi, Kenya and Mozambique where over half the population is below the age of 18. The National Intelligence Council has identified a number of countries with "youth bulges" (defined as those countries in which the ratio of 15-29 year olds to 30-54 year olds exceeds 1.27). Over half of the 25 SSA countries with youth bulges have prevalence rates among young males and/or females higher than 10%.

Projected Impact

Prevalence among young people: analysis of US Census Bureau data indicates that if current trends hold, the global total of young people living with HIV/AIDS could rise from the current estimate of 12.4 million to 21.5 million by 2010.

AIDS-related deaths: in the absence of a cure for AIDS, it has been projected that one third of boys now aged 15 will die of AIDS in countries where 15% or more of all adults are estimated to be infected with the virus. Analysis of data from 50 highly-affected countries suggests that a total of 26.7 million people aged 20 to 34 will die from AIDS-related diseases between 1990 and 2010; the majority (59%) of these deaths will be among young women.

Population growth rates: the US Census Bureau estimates that AIDS will result in a negative population growth in several countries (e.g. Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, South Africa and Swaziland) before 2010. Other countries will experience flat growth rates such as Namibia and Zimbabwe.

Life expectancy could drop to below the age of 30 in many hard-hit countries due to HIV/AIDS by 2010.

Broader multi-sectoral impacts: HIV/AIDS also negatively affects the economy, social stability and the structure of many nations.

Adolescent Vulnerability

Awareness and knowledge: although many young people have heard about HIV/AIDS, awareness is not universal. Furthermore, awareness does not necessarily mean that young people are equipped to protect themselves and many still harbour misconceptions about the disease. Surveys in 17 countries revealed that one in two adolescents were unable to name a single method of protecting themselves from HIV infection (with girls knowing less than boys in all instances). Health experts report that youth targeted information varies from region to region. Some heterosexual youth may engage in anal or oral sex believing that these practices do not count as “having sex” and therefore carry no risk.

Other sexually transmitted diseases: being infected with another STD increases the likelihood of acquiring and transmitting HIV. A cross-national survey of STD data in developed countries found that syphilis, gonorrhoea and chlamydia disproportionately affect adolescents and young adults (higher incidence among females). WHO report that age-specific data from developing countries show peak incidence of STDs among those aged 15-29.

Socioeconomic factors: most young people at risk of HIV infection live in the world’s poorest regions. Lack of access to education, economic opportunities and health services can increase their vulnerability. Formal education systems can mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS on young people, although already overburdened educational systems are struggling in the face of the epidemic. It is estimated that around 1 million African children and young people lost their teacher to AIDS in 2001. There has been a decline in school enrolments as some infected students feel pressurised to leave, others quit because they are needed at home to care for sick relatives (especially girls) or are required to engage in income-generating activities. Due to lack of economic opportunity, young women may exchange sex for money, shelter etc. or remain in relationships with partners who are infected for lack of other alternatives. Finally disparities in access health care can heighten young people’s risk to HIV. Many of the worse affected countries lack the resources and infrastructure to deliver HIV-related services such as confidential counselling and testing.

The Most Vulnerable

Young women and girls: in SSA women represent over half of all PWHAs. Among women, peak HIV prevalence is around 25 years, while in men it occurs 10 to 15 years later and generally at lower levels. In Botswana, for example, up to 45% of women aged 15 to 24 are estimated to be HIV positive, about twice the proportion of HIV-positive men in the same group. Cultural, biological and economic factors contribute to women’s increased vulnerability to the virus.

Young gay and bisexual men: because anal intercourse is an effective mode of transmitting HIV, men who have unprotected sex with men are particularly at risk for HIV. Around 5 to 10% of all HIV infections worldwide are due to sexual transmission between men. As homosexuality is outlawed in many countries (e.g. Vietnam), AIDS cases among MSM are not always reported. Moreover, many young MSM may also be sexually involved with women and in this way introduce the infection into the larger population. Risky behaviour among MSM in the developed world may also be on the rise. A recent survey of 23-29 year old MSM in six US cities revealed high prevalence rates among whites (7%), Hispanics (14%) and African Americans (32%).

Young injecting drug users: intravenous injection is the quickest and most efficient route of HIV transmission. Around 10% of HIV infections worldwide are due to IDU.

Children and youth orphaned by AIDS: since the beginning of the epidemic, an estimated 13.2 million children have lost their mothers or both parents to AIDS. In 2000, one child every 14 seconds became an AIDS orphan. USAID has estimated that as many as 44 million children will be orphaned by AIDS by 2010.

Sexually exploited children: the sexual exploitation of children (prostitution, trafficking, forced marriages etc.) also contributes to the spread of the disease.

Prevention: analyses indicate that because most HIV infections occur among young people, HIV prevention directed at youth is crucial. In Uganda and Thailand where national prevention efforts have been most successful, young people are often the first to respond to prevention interventions. Projection models demonstrate that even modest changes in behaviour (increased condom use) can significantly reduce HIV prevalence.