

# YOUNG PEOPLE AND HIV

## **Introduction**

HIV/AIDS poses a serious threat to youth, both in the United States and throughout the world. Researchers cite an adolescent tendency towards high-risk behavior coupled with insufficient education efforts as the primary reason for the recent increase in transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases in young people. In order to stave off the growing complacency surrounding HIV/AIDS, the tremendous strides made in treatment must be matched by an aggressive prevention campaign targeting youth.

## **Facts about Youth and HIV**

### *The Big Picture*

- HIV infection is the 7th leading cause of death among 15-24 year olds in the United States.
- Half of the 40,000 new HIV infections in the US are among people under 25. About 25% are in people 21 or younger.
- Every hour, two young Americans become newly infected with HIV.
- Based on a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study, prevalence for HIV within a given sample was 50% higher for young women than young men, ages 16-18.
- 60% of all AIDS cases in young men and 47% of AIDS cases in young women under the age of 24 are sex-related.
- Though AIDS incidence is declining, due in part to improved prevention and more effective medication, the number of newly diagnosed HIV cases in young people is not comparably declining.
- 84% of Americans believe HIV prevention is equally or more important than a youth-focused anti-smoking campaign.

## **Factors Exacerbating the Risk of HIV Infection in Young People**

### *Sexual Activity in Young People*

- According to a national CDC survey, half (48.4%) of all high school students had had sexual intercourse during their lifetime.
- Black students (72.7%) and Hispanic students (52.2%) were more likely than white students (43.6%) to have had sexual intercourse.
- 16.0% of students had had sexual intercourse with four or more sex partners during their lifetime.
- 7.2% of students had initiated sexual intercourse before 13 years of age.
- Among currently sexually active students, nearly half (44.2%) reported that neither they nor their partner had used a condom during last sexual intercourse.

### *Sexually Transmitted Diseases*

- Because nearly 60% of all AIDS cases in youth are sex-related, an appreciation of the dimensions of STD infection in youth affords insight into the youth AIDS epidemic. Sexually transmitted diseases “facilitate transmission of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection,” and thus make individuals more susceptible to HIV infection.

- Of the 12 million new STD infections annually, an estimated 8 million of these occur in young people under the age of 25.
- By the age of 21, approximately one in every five young people has received treatment for an STD. There are many others who simply go untreated. Seven out of ten sexually active teens have never been tested for an STD.
- A Kaiser Family Foundation nationwide survey of high school students found that 47% of students do not recognize that individuals with an STD are at greater risk of contracting HIV.

### *Teenage Pregnancy*

- Because 78% of teenage pregnancies are unplanned, teen pregnancy may indicate high risk behavior (drug or alcohol abuse, unprotected sex) that raises the likelihood of HIV exposure.
- 1 million teens become pregnant in the United States annually, more than most other developed nations.
- Unplanned teen pregnancies account for about 1/4 of all accidental pregnancies annually.
- Teenage mothers are less likely to receive high quality health care, leading to poor health for mother and child.

### *Complacency*

- The advent of powerful new anti-retroviral therapies has misled young people into assuming AIDS is no longer a threat. Adults "...in their 30s and 40s remember people dying left and right at a time when it was impossible not to know someone who was ill or who had died. Kids just haven't seen that," remarked Matt Baney, the director of St. Vincent's HIV Center in Manhattan.
- Even as young people engage in high-risk behavior, only 10% of teens who contract HIV undergo testing and learn of their HIV-positive status.

### **What are the Next Steps in Prevention?**

- A balance of prevention messages incorporating both abstinence and condom/microbicide use must be offered. While the only sure way to avoid sexually transmitted HIV is abstinence, this is often an unrealistic goal. Prevention messages must support and encourage condom use and other risk reduction models for sexually active people.
- Outreach and education is critical in order to encourage STD treatment and HIV testing among young people. Free or low-cost testing in a teen-friendly environment helps induce teens to undergo testing. According to the CDC, many teenagers who are HIV-positive remain unaware of their status because symptoms can take years to develop. Teens are often unaware they need medical care for their sexual health, and often hesitate to seek out such care because of confidentiality concerns.
- Substance abuse education in schools must address the association between drug and alcohol use and sexual activity. A Columbia University study found that teens who use drugs and consume alcohol are several times more likely to have sex, engage in it at ages as early as middle school, and have multiple partners.

### *Comprehensive Sexual Education in Schools Must Be Supported.*

- Young people spend much of their time in school, and are often influenced more by teachers and peers than their own parents. Prevention efforts must take advantage of this by offering comprehensive sexual education to students.
- Education that "...goes beyond 'just say no'" is critical. A nationwide study reported that teenage girls feel unequipped to say 'yes' to a relationship without saying 'yes' to sex.

- Young, disadvantaged women and women of color would benefit from prevention programs which work dually to educate and enhance self-esteem.
- Prevention efforts must target young gay men of color. According to the CDC, a greater proportion of gay men of color between the ages of 13-24 are diagnosed with HIV/AIDS than gay white men. The tendency for many men of color who are bisexual or who have sex with men not to identify with the gay white community and the stigma of homosexuality in communities of color may be the basis behind this trend.
- Studies conducted by the World Health Organization have proven that sexual education in schools neither increases sexual activity in youth nor does it lead to first intercourse at an earlier age.
- On the contrary, sexual education “leads to either a delay in the onset of sexual activity or to a decrease in overall sexual activity.” Furthermore, such programs increase safer sex practices among already active young people, increasing condom use and reducing the number of partners.
- According to a recent survey, Americans overwhelmingly support junior high and high school sexual education programs. Dr. Helen Gayle, director of the CDC’s National Center for HIV, STD, and TB Prevention notes the need for reinvigorating prevention programs, “You have to continue to get the message out as each new generation becomes sexually active.”
- The anonymity and popularity of the internet suggests that the web will be a vital tool for disseminating comprehensive sex education to the youth market. *U.S. News and World Report* described the internet as a comfortable place to find reliable information about sex and relationships.
- The entertainment industry and the media have a responsibility to communicate safe sex messages when portraying sexual content. A Kaiser Family Foundation study examining sexual innuendo in the media found that “two-thirds of prime time TV shows and 56% of all TV shows have sexual content” while “few shows offer ‘responsible sexual messages about contraceptive use, abstinence, or protection against sexually transmitted diseases.’”

### *Programs Must Also Target Young People Outside the Conventional School System*

- CDC’s MMWR reported that students at alternative high schools, those at risk for dropping out, and expelled students are more likely to engage in high risk behaviors. 88% of students at alternative high schools reported having sexual intercourse, and 54% reported not using a condom during their last encounter. Half of the nearly 9000 students surveyed reported having intercourse with four or more partners.
- The rate of HIV for young people applying for Job Corps or military service are 2 and 8 times higher, respectively, than rates seen in most adolescent health clinics.
- Several community-based programs have proven successful in stemming the transmission of HIV. It is important that these programs receive funding and support, as they may be better able to reach disadvantaged youth.

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