

Caribbean

Overview

- Nearly three quarters of the 250 000 people living with HIV in the Caribbean are in the two countries of Hispaniola Island, **Dominican Republic** and **Haiti**, but national adult HIV prevalence is high throughout the region; 1%-2% in Barbados, Dominican Republic and Jamaica; and 2%-4% in Bahamas, Haiti and Trinidad and Tobago. Cuba, with prevalence below 0.1%, is the exception.
- Overall, an estimated 27 000 people became newly infected with HIV in 2006 in the Caribbean. Although HIV infection levels have remained stable in the **Dominican Republic** and have declined in urban parts of **Haiti**, more localized trends suggest that both countries need to guard against the possibility of resurgent epidemics.
- Several countries are making inroads against their epidemics, with the benefits of wider access to antiretroviral treatment especially evident in the **Bahamas, Barbados, Cuba** and **Jamaica**. Nevertheless, AIDS claimed 19 000 lives in the Caribbean in 2006, making it one of the leading causes of death among adults aged 15-44 years.
- The Caribbean's largely heterosexual epidemics occur in the context of harsh gender inequalities and are being fuelled by a thriving sex industry, which services both local and foreign clients.
- Sex between men, a hidden phenomenon in the generally homophobic social environments found in this region, is a smaller but important factor, and unsafe sex between men is believed to account for about one tenth of reported HIV cases in the region.

Country developments

- The latest HIV data for **Haiti** estimates national adult HIV prevalence of 2.2%. In Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, and other urban areas, HIV prevalence in pregnant women decreased by two-thirds from 9.4% in 1993 to 3.3% in 2004. But the trend is not evident in rural areas or among young pregnant women (24 years and younger). The declining trends are most likely related to some positive behaviour changes that have become evident. For example, almost all (98%) the female sex workers surveyed in Port-au-Prince reported using condoms the last time they sold sex.
- In the **Dominican Republic**, HIV prevalence in pregnant women has remained relatively stable overall, with national adult prevalence estimated at 1.1% in 2005. The country's epidemic hinges to a considerable extent on HIV transmission between sex workers and their clients, with HIV prevalence in the country's estimated 100 000 female sex workers ranging from 2.5% to over 12%, depending on the locale.
- The balanced approach adopted in **Barbados**—emphasizing both HIV prevention and treatment—is showing encouraging results. HIV infection levels in young pregnant women declined by two-thirds in the early 2000s (from 1.1% in 2000 to 0.6% in 2003). At

the same time, the introduction of antiretroviral treatment in 2001 has led to a steep decline in AIDS-related death rates since the late 1990s—from 34.2 per 100 000 people (older than 16 years) in 1997-1999 to 17.2 per 100 000 people during 2003-2005. However, AIDS is still a significant cause of premature death among adults, mainly because many people still opt for treatment only after they have become severely ill.

- **Guyana's** antiretroviral therapy programme, which reached more than half the people in need by mid-2006, may yet reverse the rising trend in AIDS-related deaths seen there in recent years. In 2005, AIDS still ranked among the leading causes of death among 25-34 year-olds in this, the second-poorest country in the Caribbean.
- National HIV adult prevalence in **Jamaica** appears to have stabilized, and was estimated at 1.5% in 2005.
- By far the smallest epidemic in the region is in **Cuba**, where both national adult HIV prevalence and prevalence among people seeking treatment for sexually transmitted infections was below 0.1% in 2005. Overall, about 80% of HIV diagnoses have been among men, with unsafe sex between men the main risk factor for HIV transmission. Despite intensive and successful efforts to control the epidemic, the number of people diagnosed with HIV has increased since 1996. After the introduction of locally-produced antiretroviral drugs in 2001, annual AIDS mortality rates fell by 72% and opportunistic infections declined by 76%, while average survival time after the diagnosis of AIDS rose from a little more than one year to five years.
- In contrast to the rest of the region, injecting drug use is the most important risk factor for HIV transmission in **Bermuda** and **Puerto Rico's** relatively small epidemics.

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