

# Fact sheet

Source: 2007 AIDS epidemic update—regional summary

## Caribbean

### Regional overview

- National adult HIV prevalence has stabilized in several Caribbean countries, including the **Dominican Republic** and **Haiti**, where declines have been observed in some urban areas.
- AIDS remains one of the leading causes of death among people aged 25 to 44 years in the Caribbean, but the scaling up of antiretroviral treatment could be reducing the numbers of HIV-positive people progressing to AIDS and eventually dying of AIDS-related illnesses.
- An estimated 28 000 people living with HIV started antiretroviral treatment in the region by end-2006, almost a fivefold increase in under three years.
- Sexual intercourse is the primary mode of HIV transmission in this region, with unprotected sex between sex workers and clients as a key factor in the spread of HIV. The Caribbean epidemics occur in the context of high levels of poverty and unemployment, gender and other inequalities, and considerable stigma—all of which can fuel the spread of HIV, as well as hinder efforts to control the epidemics.
- Young girls in the region are at high risk of HIV infection. An important contributing factor to their susceptibility is the common practice of young girls having relationships with older men, who, by virtue of their age, are more likely to have acquired HIV.
- The scaling up of prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV programmes in several countries, including **Barbados**, **Guyana** and **Jamaica**, has significantly reduced the rate of transmission to infants.
- Sex between men is a significant but largely hidden aspect of the epidemics in the Caribbean. Although little research for this group exists, available data indicate unsafe sex between men is believed to account for about one tenth of reported HIV cases. Men who have sex with men are highly stigmatized and are subjected to social and institutional harassment. Few HIV-related programmes reach them, compounding their exposure to the epidemic even further.
- A recent study in **Trinidad and Tobago** found HIV prevalence of 20% among men who have sex with men, 25% of whom said they regularly also had sex with women.

### Country data and trends

- Although **Haiti** bears the largest HIV burden in the Caribbean, national prevalence has stabilized, with significant gains reported among pregnant women: HIV prevalence went from 5.9% in 1996 to 3.1% in 2004. This trend is believed to be linked to decreasing infection levels in the capital Port-au-Prince and other urban areas, as HIV infections have not declined in the country's rural communities, where condom use, for example, is the exception rather than the norm. Here, a minority of young people report using

condoms with a non-regular partner. In one study, only one in four young women and four in 10 young men said they used protection the last time they had sex.

- There is better news about treatment delivery, where **Haiti** offers strong evidence that antiretroviral therapy can be provided effectively in impoverished settings. While coverage remains low—only 39% of people in need of treatment were receiving it in 2006—one study in Port-au-Prince has shown that among adults who did have access to antiretroviral therapy, 87% were still alive one year after the start of therapy, compared to just 30% of adults who did not have access. Among infected children, 98% were still alive one year after the start of treatment.
- The commercial sex trade is a prominent factor in the **Dominican Republic's** epidemic. Efforts to enable sex workers to protect themselves (and their clients) against HIV infection appear to be successful, especially in the main urban and tourist centres. A 2006 study found that condom use increased from 75% to 94% in 12 months among sex workers who participated in a prevention project in the capital of Santo Domingo. However, gaps remain in the country's efforts to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Despite some 95% of births taking place in public hospitals, four out of 10 HIV-positive pregnant women are not receiving treatment to reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission.
- In **Jamaica**, 90% of pregnant women attending public antenatal clinics are now screened for HIV—a sevenfold increase since 2002—as are more than half the people attending sexually transmitted infection clinics. Of HIV-positive mothers attending public antenatal clinics, an estimated 80% receive antiretroviral treatment to prevent transmission to their babies, compared with 65% in 2005.
- The positive effects of expanded access to antiretroviral therapy in **Barbados**—which was introduced as free in 2002—are evident, with the number of annual deaths attributable to AIDS having decreased by 85% between 2001 and 2006. Similarly, mother-to-child transmission rates have been reduced to under 3%, an achievement comparable to that in industrialized countries.
- **Guyana's** programme to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV is also expanding, with about 94 sites offering such services in eight regions. In a 2006 survey, about 80% of pregnant women accepted prevention of mother-to-child transmission services when offered. Other surveys and studies reveal high levels of prevalence in men who have sex with men, female sex workers and some migrant populations. Overall, the country's epidemic appears to be occurring primarily through unprotected sexual intercourse.
- In contrast to the rest of the region, injecting drug use is the key factor in HIV transmission in **Bermuda** and **Puerto Rico's** epidemics. Very high HIV prevalence is still being found among people who inject drugs in **Puerto Rico**, where the rate of HIV infection (26 per 100 000) is twice that of the United States mainland and where more than two thirds of HIV infections have been among men.
- **Cuba's** epidemic remains the smallest in the region, with national adult HIV prevalence estimated at under 0.1%. Men account for the majority (more than 80%) of reported HIV cases, although new HIV diagnoses in women are increasing—202 in 2006; a 30% increase over 2005. All pregnant women in **Cuba** are tested for HIV, and those that test HIV-positive receive antiretroviral drugs to reduce the risk of transmission to their babies.

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