



Regional Dialogue: Latin America

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FACT SHEET: Children and Young People

Of the estimated 1.4 million people living with HIV in Latin America in 2009, 36,000 were children. In the same period the number of new HIV infections among children was relatively low, around 4,000, and appears to be declining. Still, children and young people are among the populations most affected by HIV. Young people often lack knowledge about HIV and prevention strategies and face barriers to getting tested. HIV-positive children and children orphaned due to AIDS are confronted with stigma and discrimination and have inadequate access to health and social support services.

Age of consent to HIV testing

Because children under 18 are under the guardianship of their parents or legal representative, in many countries they cannot independently consent to HIV testing or health services. The high age of consent discourages young people from receiving HIV testing and knowing their status.

Progress:

- Some Latin American countries have enacted laws lowering the age an individual may access health services and recognizing a minor's right to privacy and confidentiality, especially in cases involving sexual health. For example in Venezuela, Argentina and Chile, children ages 14 and older may access health services without the consent of their legal guardian.

Access to services by orphans affected by HIV

An estimated 240,000 children have been orphaned due to AIDS in Central and South America. A majority of Latin American countries do not have policies to address HIV-related needs of orphans and vulnerable children.

Progress:

- HIV legislation prevents discrimination in schools for children living with HIV and recognizes their right to education.
- Brazil has a national action plan specifically to provide social and educational support for orphans and other vulnerable children.

Challenges:

- School attendance by orphans ages 10 to 14 is low.

Disclaimer: The use of language that does not discriminate or mark differences between men and women is very important for organizations. However, for the sake of brevity we have adopted the use of the masculine, which should be understood to represent everyone, male and female, clearly encompassing both sexes.

Access to antiretroviral drugs

Most children living with HIV were infected by vertical transmission. In Latin America, the rate of mother-to-child transmission is higher than 2%. Coverage of services for preventing the transmission of HIV to infants in Latin America is comparatively low. At the end of 2009, 54% of pregnant women living with HIV in the region were receiving antiretroviral drugs to prevent transmission to their newborns, only slightly higher than the global coverage of 53% in low and middle-income countries. Additionally, care and follow-up for newborns exposed to HIV is limited; only six countries reported that access to antiretroviral treatment for newborns was 50% or higher (Nicaragua, Panama, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay).

Education about sexual & reproductive health and rights

At 22%, Latin America has the world's highest rate of girls who have sex before age 15. The region also has the highest proportion of adolescent mothers in the world; 18% of births in Latin America in 2007 were to women ages 15 to 19. Therefore education about sexual and reproductive health and HIV prevention for adolescents is imperative. Many countries, however, do not have comprehensive national policies to address sex education.

Progress:

- At the XVII International AIDS Conference held in Mexico City in 2008, Ministers of Education and Health from Latin American and Caribbean countries pledged to make quality sexuality education available in their countries. This includes comprehensive programming to address the prevention of HIV and other STIs; human rights; issues of gender, diversity and sexual orientation; as well as counseling and testing.

Challenges:

- Only Brazil, Mexico and Argentina report condom distribution in middle or higher level schools, or access to condoms for children between 15 and 17 years old.
- Some government-led sexual education programmes promote abstinence as the only form of HIV prevention.
- Only Nicaragua and Paraguay have out-of-school HIV prevention programmes.

Primary Sources

- AIDS Epidemic in Latin America, Prevalence of HIV in Latin America, UNAIDS, May, 2011
- UNAIDS country reports 2010

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