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CARIBBEAN

The AIDS epidemic claimed an estimated 24,000 lives in the Caribbean in 2005, making it the leading cause of death among adults aged 15-44 years. A total of 300,000 people are currently living with HIV in the region, including 30,000 people who became infected in 2005.

- Estimated national adult HIV prevalence surpasses 1% in **Barbados, Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Suriname**, 2% in the **Bahamas, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago**, and exceeds 3% in **Haiti**. In **Cuba**, on the other hand, prevalence is yet to reach 0.2%.
- The region's epidemics are driven primarily by heterosexual intercourse, with commercial sex a prominent factor, against a backdrop of severe poverty, high unemployment and gender inequalities.
- The overall share of reported HIV infections attributed to sex between men is approximately 12%, but homophobia and the robust socio-cultural taboos that stigmatize same sex relations mean that the actual proportion could be somewhat larger. Injecting drug use is responsible for a small minority of HIV infections currently; only in **Bermuda** and **Puerto Rico** does it contribute significantly to the spread of HIV.
- New HIV infections among women are surpassing those among men. In **Trinidad and Tobago** HIV infection levels are six times higher among 15-19 year-old females than among boys of the same age. In many countries, sexual activity begins comparatively early—when surveyed, fully one quarter of 15-29 year-old women in **Barbados** said they had been sexually active by the time they turned 15.
- **Haiti's** epidemic, one of the oldest in the world, could be turning a corner. Overall, the percentage of pregnant women testing HIV-positive shrunk by half from 1993 to 2003/2004—from 6.2% to 3.1%. The trend has been most pronounced in urban areas (where HIV prevalence fell from 9.4% in 1993 to 3.7% in 2003/2004), and especially among 15-24 year-olds—which suggests a significant slowing down of new HIV infections could be occurring in the country's cities. However, **Haiti** still has the largest number of people living with HIV in the Caribbean.
- In the **Dominican Republic** HIV infections levels in pregnant women have been declining since the late 1990s, with overall HIV prevalence in pregnant women roughly stable at 1.4%. Low HIV infection levels of 3-4% found among commercial sex workers in Santo Domingo probably reflect efforts to encourage consistent condom use and other safer behaviours among them.
- HIV-infection levels have declined in **the Bahamas**, amid indications that improved HIV prevention efforts could be responsible for part of that trend.

- In **Barbados**, new HIV diagnoses among pregnant women decreased by half between 1999 and 2003 (with prevalence falling from 0.7% to 0.3%). Wider access to antiretroviral treatment cut AIDS deaths by half in 1998-2003, a trend also witnessed in **Bermuda** in 2000-2002.
- In **Jamaica**, most HIV infections are occurring in urban areas, with Kingston, St. Andrews and St. James worst-affected. HIV prevalence among pregnant women has remained at 1-2% since the mid-1990s, although recent HIV surveillance at antenatal clinics suggests that prevalence might be declining slightly in parts of the country.
- As in Jamaica, unprotected heterosexual intercourse is the driving factor in the **Trinidad and Tobago's** epidemic, where estimated national adult HIV prevalence edged past 3% in 2003.
- Just under 2% of adult **Surinamese** were living with HIV at the end of 2003. New registered HIV cases have increased three-fold since the mid-1990s, however much of that trend may be due to increased testing.
- **Cuba's** epidemic remains by far the smallest in the Caribbean. However, new HIV infections are on the rise, and **Cuba's** preventive measures appear not to be keeping pace with conditions that favour the spread of HIV, including widening income inequalities and a growing sex industry. At the same time, **Cuba's** prevention of mother-to-child transmission programme remains highly effective. All pregnant women are tested for HIV, and those testing positive receive antiretroviral drugs.
- While universal access to treatment is being achieved in Cuba, and coverage is relatively high in the **Bahamas** and **Barbados**, access to treatment is poor in three of the worst-affected countries in the Caribbean. About one third of people in need of antiretroviral treatment were receiving it in **Trinidad and Tobago** in September 2005, as were a mere 12% in **Haiti** and 10% in the **Dominican Republic**.

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