

Youth Reproductive and Sexual Health in Jamaica

Youth ages 10 to 24 comprise nearly one-third of Jamaica's total population of over 2.6 million.¹ Early sexual activity, combined with a lack of relevant information, services, and skills to avoid risky situations, place Jamaican youth at risk of unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV, and other threats to their sexual and reproductive health. Violence (including physical and sexual abuse) and substance abuse are also a part of many young people's lives. But effective and innovative programs and partnerships can provide youth with the sexual health information, life skills, and services that they need.

Early Sexual Initiation and Lack of Perceived Risk Put Youth at Risk

- According to the Jamaica Reproductive Health Survey of 2002-2003, among youth ages 15 to 24, the mean age at first sexual intercourse was 13.5 among young men and 15.8 among young women.²
- In a 2001 survey of more than 1,000 adolescents, 73.7 percent of 15-19 year olds and 9.5 percent of 10-14 year olds reported being sexually active.³
- In the same survey, while 86 percent acknowledge pregnancy and STIs as risks of unprotected sex, only 12.6 percent viewed themselves personally at risk.³

Use of Contraception is on the Rise but Adolescent Pregnancy is Still a Concern

- Jamaica's total fertility has been steadily declining since the 1970's. Among Jamaican women ages 15-24, use of contraception at first intercourse rose from 42.7 percent in 1993 to 67.3 percent in 2002. Contraceptive use among young men at first intercourse rose from 21.6 percent in 1993 to 43 percent in 2002.²
- In spite of this progress, the adolescent fertility rate in Jamaica is the highest among nations in the English-speaking Caribbean at 112 births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 19. More than three out of four pregnancies are still unplanned among women 15 to 24 years old.⁴
- Approximately 40 percent of Jamaican women have given birth at least once before they reach the age of twenty.⁴
- In 2003, Jamaica's maternal mortality rate was 87 per 100,000 live births.⁵ Globally, adolescent girls between the ages of 15-19 are twice as likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth as women in their twenties, while girls under 15 are five times as likely.⁶

Youth are at Risk for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), including HIV.

- In 2004, AIDS was the second leading cause of death for both young men and young women ages 15-24 in Jamaica. AIDS was also a leading cause of death among Jamaican children.⁷
- The estimated HIV prevalence rate among youth ages 15 to 24 is one percent,⁴ and more women are infected than men. The male-female infection ratio for AIDS in the 10-19 age group is disproportionate at one male to 2.84 females.⁸

- Among reported AIDS cases where data is available, the main risk factors fueling the HIV/AIDS epidemic are multiple sex partners, history of STIs, crack/cocaine use, and sex with commercial sex workers.⁷
- Overall, about nine percent of female sex workers are infected with HIV.⁷
- The most urbanized parishes have the highest cumulative number of AIDS cases, including Kingston and St. Andrew with 665 cases per 100,000 persons, and St. James with 930 AIDS cases per 100,000 persons.⁷

Youth are Vulnerable to Substance Abuse

- As reported in the National Youth Policy, a majority of students say that alcohol and cigarettes are “fairly or very easy to obtain.” Twenty-nine percent of youth said that they had used alcohol, 11 percent had used ganja (marijuana), 10 percent had used inhalants, and five percent had used tobacco.⁴
- In one national survey of 12-16 year olds, rates of lifetime marijuana use climbed steadily with age from three percent among 12 year olds to six percent in 14 year olds and 13 percent in 16 year olds.⁹
- In the same study, one in four youth had engaged in at least one episode of binge drinking in the month before the survey.

Violence and Physical/Sexual Abuse are a Fact of Life for Many Young People

- Physical and sexual abuse affects roughly one in 10 Jamaican youth.⁴
- In a 2001 study of 1,004 12-16 year olds in Clarendon, 20 percent reported carrying at least one weapon and nine percent reported being threatened or injured with a weapon at school in the 12 months prior to the survey.⁹
- In the same study, 12 percent of boys and 10 percent of girls reported that they had been physically abused by their partners.⁹
- Furthermore, approximately 11 percent of respondents reported having been threatened or harassed to have sex by friends (44 percent), neighbors (17 percent), relatives (16 percent), and family friends (13 percent).⁹
- According to the Jamaica Reproductive Health Survey, approximately 20.4 percent of young women 15-19 years old report having been forced to have sexual intercourse at some point during their life. Overall, one-fifth of Jamaican women have experienced forced sexual intercourse.²

Policies and Programs Seek to Help Young People Lead Healthy Lives

- In 2004 the Ministry of Education, Youth & Culture published a revised *National Youth Policy* demonstrating the government’s commitment to prioritizing youth-focused issues, programming, and projects. A joint effort by both national and international organizations, the revised policy was centered on a holistic approach to youth development.⁴
 - The National HIV/AIDS Policy has been developed through a process that involved the Ministry of Education, Youth and Culture and the Jamaican Network of Seropositives, in association with groups representing young people. The Policy commits to encouraging the participation of all sectors, including youth and people living with HIV, in the national response to HIV and AIDS.¹⁰
 - Jamaica’s Solution to Youth Lifestyle and Empowerment (JA-STYLE), a USAID funded program, seeks to improve health services for young people, implement youth-related health policies, create and disseminate information about healthy behaviors (including information about sexual and reproductive health, violence, and substance abuse), and build the capacity of non-governmental organizations that carry out important work for young people. JA-STYLE supports the Government of Jamaica in implementing the Healthy Lifestyle Policy through the Ministry of Health.¹¹
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*Written by Tara Thomas
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2000 M Street NW Ste 750 • Washington, D.C. 20036 USA • Phone: 202-419-3420 • Fax: 202-419-1448 • www.advocatesforyouth.org