

# The Reproductive and Sexual Health of Jamaican Youth

Youth, ages 10 to 24, make up nearly one-third (29 percent) of Jamaica's total population of over 2.5 million.<sup>1</sup> Many Jamaican adolescents are sexually experienced, and sexually experienced youth may be at risk for unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. An emphasis on adolescent sexual health education and services can safeguard youth's health and well-being. Non-governmental organizations and government are working to provide age-appropriate family planning services, HIV prevention education, and skills-based sexuality education to support youth in making positive sexual health decisions, yet there is still much to do.

## Many Jamaican Youth Lack Accurate Sexual Health Information.

- In a survey of students ages 11 to 14, less than six percent of girls and 11 percent of boys correctly identified the point during the menstrual cycle when a girl is most likely to become pregnant. One-third of girls and half of boys knew that pregnancy is possible at first sexual intercourse. About 21 percent of girls and 26 percent of boys believed that oral contraceptives could protect against STIs while over 27 and 44 percent, respectively, believed that sex with a virgin would cure STIs.<sup>2</sup>
- Among youth ages 15 to 24, up to 22 percent of men and 40 percent of women did not know that correct and consistent use of condoms effectively prevents many STIs. Over 40 percent of youth did not know that oral contraceptives are highly effective in preventing pregnancy.<sup>3</sup>
- Fear of contraceptive side effects made adolescent mothers in another study fearful of using contraception. The young women had heard fallacies, such as that oral contraceptives could cause infertility, infections, brain damage, and memory loss.<sup>4</sup>

## Jamaican Youth Initiate Sexual Intercourse Early and Often Fail to Protect Themselves.

- Among 15- to 24-year-old youth in one study, 37.7 percent of women and 64.4 percent of men had sexual intercourse prior to age 18. Among 18- to 19-year-olds, 71.5 percent of women and 90.7 percent of men had had sexual intercourse, rising to 89.9 and 97.6 percent, respectively, by age 24.<sup>3</sup>
- Among youth ages 15 to 24, the mean age at first sexual intercourse was 13.4 among young men and 15.9 among young women.<sup>3</sup>
- In a comparative study of 14 nations, Jamaica was one of four in which three-fifths of women ages 15 to 19 were sexually experienced and one of seven in which one-half to three-fourths of men the same age were sexually experienced.<sup>5</sup>
- Contraceptive use at first intercourse increases with youth's age at sexual initiation. Among Jamaican women, use rose from 41 percent of those younger than 14 to 67 percent among women ages 18 to 24; among men, use increased from 17 to 53 percent, respectively.<sup>6</sup>

## Unprotected Sex Results in High Pregnancy and Birth Rates among Youth.

- Jamaica's adolescent pregnancy rate has been among the highest in the Caribbean, and Jamaica's adolescent fertility rate is 112 per 1,000 women ages 15 to 19.<sup>4,7</sup> Over 83 percent of adolescent births are mistimed or unwanted.<sup>7</sup>
- Approximately 40 percent of Jamaican women experience pregnancy at least once before they reach the age of 20.<sup>8</sup>

- About one-third (32.8 percent) of women experiencing pregnancy between the ages of 15 and 24 first conceived while still in school. Only 34 percent of adolescent mothers return to school after giving birth (up from 16 percent in 1993).<sup>3</sup>
- In the late 1990s, Jamaica's infant mortality rate was 24.4 per 1,000 live births; the maternal mortality rate was 120 per 100,000 live births.<sup>9</sup> Globally, maternal mortality rates are twice as high for women ages 15 to 19 and five times as high for women ages 10 to 14 as for women ages 20 to 29.<sup>10</sup>

## Jamaican Youth Are at Risk of STI, including HIV.

- Jamaica's highest infection rate for HIV/AIDS occurs among youth ages 15 to 24.<sup>11</sup> The estimated HIV prevalence rate among youth ages 15 to 24 is as high as 0.44 percent of young women and 0.70 percent of young men.<sup>12</sup>
- In countries such as Jamaica, where a high percentage of young men initiate sexual intercourse prior to age 15, their first partner is often a sex worker.<sup>5</sup> In the mid-1990s, 25 percent of sex workers in Montego Bay and nine percent of those in Kingston were HIV infected.<sup>13</sup>
- The risk factors reported by HIV infected Jamaicans include a history of STI (38.7 percent), multiple sex partners (31.8 percent), and sexual intercourse with a sex worker (23 percent).<sup>14</sup>
- Sexually transmitted infections ranked fourth among the major causes of health center visits for males and third for females. Infection with gonorrhea accounted for 20.0 percent of STI visits; syphilis, 7.4 percent; herpes, 1.7 percent.<sup>15</sup>

## Private and Public Efforts Continue regarding Jamaican Adolescents' Sexual Behavior and Attitudes.

- When peer educators worked with the performing arts ensemble, ASHE, in Kingston, Jamaica, productions helped teens, parents, and teachers discuss sexuality and HIV/AIDS and encouraged positive sexual health attitudes. Surveys before and after ASHE performances indicated a 20 percent increase in knowledge among audience members.<sup>16</sup>
- In the late 1990s, young people underutilized Jamaica's network of private and public health facilities offering reproductive health services.<sup>17</sup> Visits to family planning clinics declined among males and among those ages 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 (down 26, 0.5, and 12.6 percent, respectively).<sup>15</sup> The Jamaican Family Planning Association then encouraged Jamaicans to use the services, intensified advocacy for sex education in schools, and harnessed policy support for family planning.<sup>18</sup>
- A study found that public and non-governmental family planning providers were reluctant to serve clients younger than 16 (legal age of consent in Jamaica). Providers were also more hesitant to provide contraceptives to young women than to young men.<sup>8</sup> To improve services, the Ministry of Health developed a national reproductive health policy favorable toward and supportive of adolescents, which will form the basis of plans of action at the parish level.<sup>17</sup>

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