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LATIN AMERICA

The number of people living with HIV in Latin America has risen to an estimated 1.8 million. In 2005, approximately 66,000 people died of AIDS, and 200,000 were newly infected. Among young people 15–24 years of age, an estimated 0.4% of women and 0.6% men were living with HIV in 2005.

- Primarily due to their large populations, the South American countries of **Argentina, Brazil** and **Colombia** are home to the biggest epidemics in this region. The highest HIV prevalence has been found in **Belize, Guatemala** and **Honduras**—where approximately 1% of adults or more were infected with HIV at the end of 2003.
- The region's epidemics are being fuelled by varying combinations of unsafe sex and injecting drug use, with the role of sex between men in HIV transmission being a prominent factor. In nearly all the Latin American countries, the highest levels of HIV infection are being found among men who have sex with men (ranging from 2% to 28% depending on the place). The second-highest HIV levels are found among female sex workers (ranging between 0% and 6.3%). Sex between men has been estimated to account for 25%-35% of reported AIDS cases in countries such as **Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala** and **Peru**.
- By far the largest and most populous country in the region, **Brazil** harbours a diverse epidemic which has penetrated all 26 states in the country. Although national HIV prevalence among pregnant women has remained below 1%, a growing share of new HIV infections are among women, and those living in deprived circumstances appear to be disproportionately at risk of infection.
- A 2004 survey in **Brazil** showed that 36% of 15-24 year-olds had had sex before their 15th birthday and that only 62% knew how HIV was transmitted.
- In **Brazil's** cities, the contribution of injecting drug use to HIV transmission appears to have declined—this success could be attributed harm reduction programmes. Official estimates show that three quarters of the estimated 200,000 drug injectors in Brazil now use sterile syringes.
- In **Argentina** most new infections have been occurring during unprotected heterosexual intercourse, with increasing numbers of women acquiring HIV. The male-to-female ratio among reported AIDS cases shrank from 15:1 in 1988 to 3:1 in 2004.
- Injecting drug use and unsafe sex between men continue to provide impetus to the spread of HIV in **Argentina**, especially in the urban areas of Buenos Aires, Cordoba and Santa Fe provinces, where an estimated 80% of AIDS cases have occurred. When tested in the city of Buenos Aires, some 44% of drug injectors were HIV-positive, while HIV prevalence of 7-15% has been found among men who have sex with men in various studies.
- HIV has penetrated rural parts of **Paraguay**, especially along the borders with **Argentina** and **Brazil**.

- **Bolivia's** epidemic remains small and appears to be driven largely by commercial sex and sex between men, much of it concentrated in urban areas. Infection levels in groups of men who have sex with men have reached 15% in La Paz and almost 24% in Santa Cruz. A study in the city of Cochabamba has shown that 3.5% of the surveyed street youths were living with HIV; most had been infected sexually.
- Sex between men appears to be a prominent factor also in **Ecuador's** growing epidemic, where new reports of HIV cases have almost doubled since 2001, reaching 573 in 2004.
- In **Colombia**, HIV initially affected mostly men, so much so that they comprise 83% of all AIDS cases reported to the national health authorities to date. However, a significant proportion of men who have sex with men also maintain sexual relationships with women. As a result, increasing numbers of women are becoming infected.
- HIV in **Central America** is spreading both amongst the most vulnerable groups and, in a number of countries, across the wider population. The virus is being transmitted primarily during unprotected sex.
- **Honduras** is home to approximately one third of the people living with HIV in the sub-region. With estimated national adult HIV prevalence of just under 2%, AIDS is the leading cause of death for Honduran women and is believed to be the second-biggest cause of hospitalization and death overall in the country.
- Sex between men features also in the smaller epidemics of **El Salvador**, **Nicaragua** and **Panama**, where HIV prevalence of 18%, 9% and 11%, respectively, have been found among men who have sex with men.
- In **Costa Rica** sex between men is driving the country's epidemic; men who have sex with men comprise more than two thirds of all reported AIDS cases.
- Adult national HIV prevalence in **Mexico** has remained well below 1%, but the epidemic shows varied patterns across this large country. Almost 90% of officially recorded AIDS cases have been attributed to unprotected sex, about half of them attributable to sex between men.
- Access to antiretroviral therapy in Latin America has expanded considerably, although **Brazil's** achievements on this front remain unique. Under **Brazil's** policy of providing antiretroviral drugs to all in need, people with advanced HIV infection are eligible for antiretroviral drugs via the country's national health system. The number of Brazilians on antiretroviral therapy has continued to increase and reached approximately 170,000 in September 2005.
- Treatment coverage is high also in **Argentina**, **Chile**, **Cuba**, **Mexico**, **Uruguay** and **Venezuela** although the terms under which it is provided are not as favourable as those in Brazil. In **Costa Rica** and **Panama**, where antiretroviral treatment access has improved notably, AIDS mortality appears to be ebbing. But elsewhere, especially in the poorer countries of **Central America** and the **Andean region of South America**, progress has been slower.

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