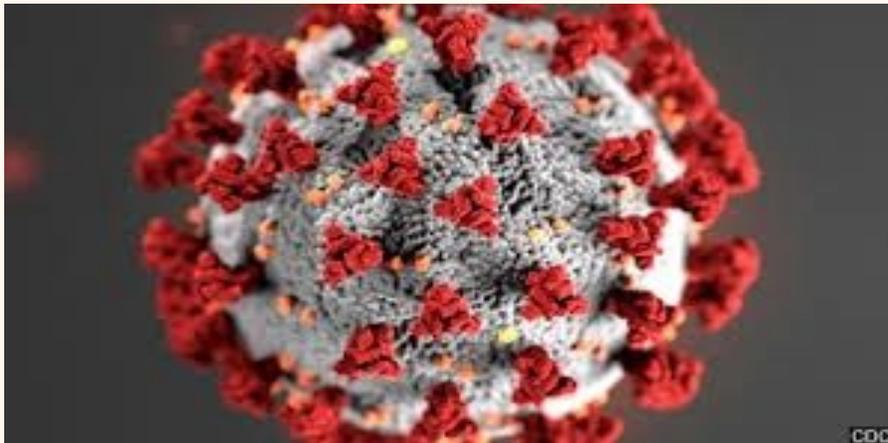


COVID-19: The unseen crisis in adolescents, young people living with HIV and other young key affected populations



COVID19 is a global crisis. However, it threatens to disproportionately affect low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), causing immense social and economic devastation over the months and potentially years to come, as indicated by [\(UNDP, 2020\)](#).

A glance at the global HIV/AIDS epidemic

Globally, 75 million people have acquired HIV and over 32 million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses since the start of the HIV/AIDS epidemic [\(WHO, 2018\)](#).

Despite all efforts, our world today continues to be immensely challenged by HIV/AIDS. It is the leading cause of death among young people in Africa and the second leading cause globally (Avert, 2019). An estimated 1.7 million individuals acquired HIV worldwide in 2018, with 30% of the new infections among young people [\(UNAIDS, 2019\)](#).

How is COVID-19 affecting young people living with HIV and young key affected populations?

The COVID-19 pandemic endangers the health of all, with the most vulnerable communities often being the last in line for support. Among these are adolescents and young people living with HIV and young key affected populations, including young people who use drugs, young people from the LGBTIQ+ community and young sex workers. From the HIV epidemic, we learned that young people living with HIV and young key affected populations have a wide range of unique challenges that put their mental health, well-being and even lives at risk. Moreover, the COVID-19 outbreak and global measures taken against it are an added burden to their lives; in LMICs especially, this threatens increased violations of their human rights. In this blog post, we address the additional challenges that COVID-19 is bringing to us as young people belonging to these key and vulnerable groups.

1-The lockdown effect

Economic challenges

The lockdown measures in some countries, which require everyone to stay home, means that income losses are expected to exceed US\$220 billion in LMICs, according to UNDP. This will add additional barriers for young people living with HIV and young key affected populations. We have had a long battle with stigma and discrimination – it leads to unstable family structures and even rejection by families, resulting in people having to leave home and become independent at an early age. There are no support mechanisms, resulting in increased exposure to abuse and exploitation. In addition, physical distancing means that young sex workers including transgender sex workers are without clients, impacting their source of income. Who will provide food and shelter to young key affected populations and how will they survive a lockdown?

Access to healthcare challenges

Public transportation is banned in some countries due to the lockdown. Even if healthcare providers are ready to welcome young people, how will young people reach them.

Accessing required healthcare services (including antiretrovirals, post-exposure prophylaxis, pre-exposure prophylaxis, tuberculosis medicine and harm reduction) is very challenging. Young people need to travel to distribution centres to access healthcare, and this is becoming complicated in the context of physical distancing and harassment by police. Young people who use drugs need to travel to methadone centres on an almost daily basis, which poses more risks and problems. A lack of access to opioid substitution treatments has led to young people experiencing excruciating withdrawal symptoms, damaging their physical and mental health.

Concurrently, COVID-19 is expected to have a huge impact on the economy of countries, especially LMICs, which is likely to negatively affect the availability of necessary services and lifesaving treatments. This is particularly true in under-resourced hospitals and fragile healthcare systems that are already overburdened in more than several countries

Impact on community service

Many civil society organizations have had to suspend delivery of health and mental health services – services that are crucial to getting through this extremely challenging period. However, peer educators in some contexts are showing high engagement by committing to maintaining a minimum level of services on a volunteer basis; they often put their own lives at risk by sticking to outreach activities with a lack of effective protection against COVID-19.

This exceptional humanitarian crisis is forcing organizations to be very adaptive and innovative in order to reach people who have specific needs with adequate services.

Mental health matters

Lockdown is key to breaking the COVID-19 transmission chain. However, it could negatively impact mental health. Not everyone is safe at home. People living in conflictual environments or those obliged to share small housing spaces with family members or others endure additional stress. Suicides have been reported

from around the world by people who previously had no such tendencies, and this could be attributed to lockdown.

Although young people living with HIV and young key affected populations are resilient and have a strong coping ability, they need constant psychological support during this tough period. Free and anonymous online counselling can help people who need to speak about their problems and perhaps help them figure out solutions.

2-Stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings

Stigma and discrimination have been always present across the world, taking many forms and violating the most fundamental human rights that are protected by international treaties, national laws and constitutions. It is driven by negative beliefs, feelings and attitudes towards young people living with HIV and young key affected population communities. This can impede their use of health services and may lead to young people living with HIV and young key affected populations being more hesitant to seek healthcare services if they suspect they have COVID-19.

3-Punitive laws and social norms

Several countries have laws criminalizing the LGBTIQ+ community, sex workers and people who use drugs. Social norms, stigma and discrimination will leave behind young people living with HIV and young key affected populations and discourage them from seeking any support, whether medical, financial or nutritive.

What we want

1-Respect our rights and recognize our unique challenges

Restrictive, stigmatizing and punitive measures will lead to significant human right abuses affecting more vulnerable communities. All governments, in collaboration with ministries of health, should make efforts to ensure that young people living with HIV and young key affected populations are still able to access required healthcare services despite the current crisis.

2-Think beyond the immediate impact of COVID-19 and its healthcare challenges

COVID-19 is more than a health crisis. It's also a social and economic crisis that will greatly affect LMICs and leave behind vulnerable communities.

3-Keep us informed

As young people, we need clear, youth-friendly messages about COVID-19. Understanding the pandemic and advances in prevention and treatment will help us stay safe.

4-Fight all forms of stigma and discrimination

This includes stigma and discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity and HIV status. Respect and accept young people in their diversity, including young people who use drugs and young sex workers, to ensure good healthcare for all. Embrace heterogeneousness. Show solidarity and kindness. And prioritize support for the most vulnerable populations to take action and protect themselves and others from COVID-19.

Our message

We have survived social stigma, living with HIV and other injustices. It's about time that we put an end to young people facing stigma and discrimination for who they are and limiting their access to critical health services. It is imperative to go back to the drawing board and ensure that all the solutions for fighting the COVID-19 pandemic are inclusive.

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