

Recent data affecting the HIV/AIDS community in the Trinidad and Tobago, and the Rest of the Caribbean

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The twin island republic of Trinidad and Tobago (TT) lies northeast of Venezuela, and is the most southerly island of the Caribbean. The current population, as of September 2015, is approximately 1.34 million, of which 646,000 or 48.4% are male and 687,000 or 51.6% are female.

HIV/AIDS falls in the top 10 leading causes of death in TT during the 1997–2007 Period. The cumulative total of HIV cases for the country was 20,176 and the number of AIDS cases 6,042 since the start of the epidemic in 1983 to December 2008. The largest increase in newly reported HIV cases occurred in the 20–49-year age group, followed by adolescents (15–19 years) in 2008. This was followed by a decline in new infections and deaths between 2008 and 2011. Unfortunately, there has been an increase in the numbers of new infections since 2012, particularly in the 15–19 age group. Hence the new slogan for World AIDS Day up to 2015, “Getting to zero – zero new infections, zero AIDS related deaths, zero stigma and discrimination”. The increase was largely due to early sexual initiation, individuals having unprotected sex, using inconsistent protection, multiple partners and/or not using protection/condoms correctly.

The National HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Program incorporates the youth empowerment programs, voluntary counselling and testing, prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV (PMTCT), and free antiretroviral treatment to manage the infection. There is still, however, a need for information dissemination and education. To this end, the public and private sector, non-governmental organizations, individuals, partnerships and the community are collaborating to build a stigma-free environment. The government of TT provides free antiretroviral therapy to all individuals inflicted with HIV/AIDS. This is also true for the orphan children who acquired the HIV congenitally. As a consequence, the mother to child transmission has dropped drastically.

Approximately 240,000 people in the Caribbean were living with HIV in 2009, second only to the Sub-Saharan African continent. There are many reasons the epidemic has hit the Caribbean so strongly. These reasons include poverty, sexual partners, gender, and prostitution.

The first cases of AIDS/HIV were seen mainly in men; by 1985 both women and men were reporting infections. The first case of AIDS was documented in Jamaica in 1992. Soon thereafter,

infections of HIV were found in homosexual and bisexual men living in TT. The new cases of HIV are occurring in a higher number of women than men, particularly the youth. Many youth in the Caribbean are having sex prior to 15 years old. The younger age can increase the transmission of HIV, in addition to many people having more than one sexual partner.

The Caribbean has joined together to stop the HIV/AIDS epidemic and make defeating the spread of the disease a priority. Pan Caribbean Partnership (PANCAP) unites the Caribbean region and makes a difference in the lives of those with HIV/AIDS. PANCAP realizes the harm of a negative attitude toward people suffering from HIV/AIDS. Taking control of the disease involves changing the negative attitudes and focusing on providing HIV-positive people the care/treatment and education they need.

In spite of improvements being done by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), there are still problems controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS. These problems include limited resources to provide medicine and other resources to those with the disease, as well as problems with technology and communication to provide proper education on the cause(s) of HIV/AIDS to prevent the spread of infection. It's important to remember diseases are complex processes (especially HIV/AIDS) and more medical research needs to be conducted to explore ways to decrease the disease rate among Caribbean countries. Overall, all people who are suffering from HIV/AIDS need to be shown empathy and treated with dignity.