

## Are Young People in the Philippines Taking Chances with HIV/AIDS?

*Asia-Pacific Population & Policy summarizes research on population and reproductive health for policymakers and others concerned with the Asia-Pacific region.*

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**T**he first AIDS case in the Philippines was diagnosed in 1984. Since then, the number of AIDS cases and detected HIV infections has climbed slowly but steadily. By the end of 1995, 234 AIDS cases and 470 HIV infections had been reported to the Department of Health. Testing has been limited, however, and the number of HIV infections is undoubtedly much larger than reported.

As in most Asian countries, early infections were often associated with overseas travel or contact with foreigners. By 1990, however, it was clear that the epidemic was spreading among the Filipino population.

A number of factors contribute to the potential for a serious HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Philippines. For one thing, there is a substantial commercial sex industry. Although the National HIV Sentinel Surveillance System has detected only very low levels of HIV infection among sex workers, the system has found much higher rates of syphilis infection. This is cause for concern because syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases not only spread through the same routes as HIV but also greatly enhance the chances of HIV transmission between sexual partners. The low level of condom use reported by commercial sex workers heightens this concern.

Secondly, reports have suggested that many young men in the Philippines engage in premarital sex with girlfriends and acquaintances. Early AIDS cases were as-

sociated with men having sex with men, but more recently heterosexual transmission has increased in importance. Finally, injecting drug use may provide an avenue for HIV transmission among a small number of young people.

A national Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS-II), conducted in 1994, makes a substantial contribution to the information available on risk factors that could produce a serious HIV/AIDS epidemic among young people in the Philippines. This issue of *Asia-Pacific Population & Policy* reports on key findings from the survey. More detailed information will be published in a full report.

### **ABOUT THE SURVEY**

YAFS-II was the first nationally representative survey of youth in the Philippines that covered both men and women. An earlier Young Adult Fertility Survey (YAFS-I), conducted in 1982, included only women.

The University of the Philippines Population Institute conducted YAFS-II with a network of nine regional research centers throughout the country. The project was supported by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The East-West Center's Program on Population collaborated in the survey, with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

YAFS-II was a household survey covering men and women age 15 to 24. A to-

tal of 10,879 young people were interviewed, with separate questionnaires for men and women and for married and unmarried respondents. In addition to these questionnaires, a sealed-envelope questionnaire covering highly sensitive issues was given to a subgroup of respondents. Screening data were also collected on all households visited and on the 959 sampled communities.

The survey covered many subject areas. Several sequences of questions were designed to elicit information on sexual experience, both directly and in the context of questions about dating. Additional questions explored condom use and attitudes toward condoms, knowledge of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and levels of concern about infection.

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## A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE

Ninety-five percent of all the young people covered in the survey had heard of AIDS. As would be expected, younger respondents were slightly less likely than older respondents to have heard of the disease. Still, a full 90 percent of 15-year-olds had heard of AIDS. Controlling for age, awareness of AIDS tended to be lower in rural areas, among respondents with less education, and among those with no regular exposure to the mass media. There was no gender difference in AIDS awareness.

Although awareness was nearly universal, knowledge of AIDS was more limited. When respondents who knew about AIDS were asked how it is acquired, 85 percent correctly identified at least one sexual mode of transmission, and 25 percent correctly identified at least one non-sexual mode. The most frequently mentioned transmission mode was commercial sex, cited by 66 percent of these respondents. Twelve percent could not identify a single correct mode of transmission, and 26 per-

cent gave at least one incorrect answer, such as having contact with the belongings of an infected person, kissing, or using public toilets.

An overall assessment of AIDS knowledge identified five characteristics associated with a good understanding of the syndrome and its transmission routes. These were age, family wealth, education, being single, and discussion networks.

Discussions about AIDS appeared to be an important factor in promoting knowledge—so important, in fact, that such discussions nullified the direct effect of media exposure. Young people who talked about AIDS with three or more different types of people (such as friends, partners, parents, or teachers) had a much better understanding of the disease than those who discussed it with only one type of person or did not discuss it at all. Women were more likely to have discussed AIDS with a variety of people—most young men had only discussed it with their male friends.

Most young people felt that they themselves were at little or no risk of HIV infection. Only 12 percent thought that they were at some personal risk. Even men who had visited commercial sex workers tended to believe that they had little or no chance of contracting HIV. Among single men who had paid for sex during the 12 months before the survey and had not used a condom, only 29 percent thought that it was likely or very likely that “someone like them” might become infected.

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## SOME YOUNG MEN ARE TAKING CHANCES

The risk of contracting AIDS depends largely on two factors—sexual activity and injecting drug use. In the Philippines, sexual transmission is the more serious concern. The YAFS-II survey showed that few 15- or 16-year-olds had

engaged in sex, but sexual activity increased steadily with age. Among 24-year-olds, 55 percent of men and 23 percent of women had engaged in premarital sex.

Most of the men and women who were sexually active before marriage reported that their only partner was their future spouse. However, men were almost 20 times more likely than women to have had sex before marriage with at least one additional partner.

Reports of premarital sex tended to be higher among men who lived in urban areas and men who were Catholic. Among 23- and 24-year-olds, men with a high-school or college education were more likely to have engaged in premarital sex than were men with only an elementary education.

The survey results suggest that the longer men remain single, the greater their risk of exposure to HIV infection. By age 24, 22 percent of single men reported having had sex with a girlfriend or acquaintance during the 12-month period before the survey, and 8 percent reported having visited a commercial sex worker. Among all single men, 13 percent reported having had only one sexual partner, another 10 percent reported two or more partners, and 3 percent reported five or more partners.

Modeling studies have shown that even such small groups of sexually active individuals can greatly accelerate the spread of HIV. This is particularly true when men have sex with commercial sex workers and also with other partners. The YAFS-II survey results provide convincing evidence of such overlapping sexual networks.

Thirty-nine percent of married men reported having had at least one sexual partner before marriage other than their future wife. Seven percent reported five or more premarital partners. As with single men, there was significant overlapping of sexual contacts. Seven percent of married respondents reported

premarital sex with their future wives, other girlfriends, and commercial sex workers. Although few married men reported having visited a commercial sex worker during the 12 months before the survey, 16 percent reported having had an extramarital affair at some time during their marriage. Reported levels of extramarital sex were higher in rural areas than in urban areas.

Men who visit commercial sex workers face a particularly high risk of infection. Surveys in the Philippines have sporadically detected low levels of HIV in commercial sex workers, but these levels are expected to increase over the next few years.

Eight percent of the men interviewed during the YAFS-II survey had paid for sex at some time in their lives. The percentage that reported having ever paid for sex increased steadily with age—from 0 percent at age 15 to 17 percent by age 24. Men in urban areas were more likely to have paid for sex than men in rural areas, and men with a high-school or college education were more likely to have paid for sex than men with only an elementary education.

Among those who had visited a commercial sex worker during the 12 months before the survey, 26 percent had paid for sex monthly or more frequently, 22 percent occasionally, and most of the remainder only once. Almost half reported changing sexual partners each time they paid for sex, while another quarter reported visiting the same partner repeatedly. The average number of paid sexual partners over 12 months was 2.5.

Male homosexual and bisexual behavior has been strongly associated with the HIV epidemic in many countries. Among sexually experienced young men covered by the YAFS-II survey, 7 percent reported having had sex with other men, but only 1 percent reported exclusively male sexual partners. Another 9 percent gave inconsistent information or failed to answer this question.

Most of those reporting some sexual experience with men had predominantly female sexual partners.

Injecting drug use has not yet made a substantial contribution to reported HIV infections and AIDS cases in the Philippines. However, 2 percent of the YAFS-II survey respondents reported that they had tried injectable drugs. This finding probably understates the true level of drug use. It suggests some limited potential for HIV transmission through needle sharing among drug users.

### **WHEN MEN TAKE CHANCES, THEY PLACE WOMEN AT RISK**

YAFS-II survey results indicate much lower levels of sexual risk-taking among young women than men. Among all single women, only 2 percent reported ever having had sex. Unlike their single male counterparts, virtually all single women who reported any sexual experience had had only one partner. Thirty-five percent of married women reported having had premarital sex, but nearly all of these had only had sex with their future husbands. Only 4 percent reported ever having had an extramarital affair.

Survey results showed no differences in levels of premarital sexual activity between rural and urban women or women with different levels of education. However, Catholic women were more likely to have experienced premarital sex than were non-Catholics.

Given existing differences in social expectations, women are more likely than men to underreport their premarital and extramarital sexual experience. Even taking this tendency into account, however, results from the YAFS-II survey strongly suggest that single and married women are at risk of HIV infection primarily through the previous and current sexual activities of their partners.

### **FEW USE CONDOMS**

Proper use of condoms can substantially reduce the risk of HIV infection. YAFS-II survey results showed that knowledge of condoms was high, but actual condom use was extremely low.

When asked about their knowledge of family planning methods, 69 percent of the men interviewed mentioned condoms without prompting, and another 18 percent reported that they knew of condoms after being prompted. Among the women, 62 percent reported knowledge of condoms without prompting and another 25 with prompting. Among sexually active men, 98 percent had heard of condoms, but only 58 percent of those who knew about condoms were aware that condoms could help prevent AIDS.

Only 23 percent of sexually active men reported that they had ever used a condom, and far fewer (4 percent) reported having used a condom during their most recent sexual experience. Married men and sexually active single men were equally likely to have ever used a condom. Several other factors were associated with having ever used a condom:

- Residence: urban men were much more likely than rural men to have ever used condoms
- Education: among 23- and 24-year-olds, men with at least a college education were three times as likely to have used condoms as men with only an elementary education
- Population education in school: classes on family planning and sexually transmitted diseases had a strong positive influence on condom use
- Regular exposure to mass media
- Knowledge of AIDS: men with the greatest knowledge of AIDS were more likely to have used condoms than men whose knowledge of AIDS was poor or moderate

Condom use is particularly important for men who visit commercial sex workers. Men who had paid for sex were more than twice as likely as other men to have ever used condoms, but the rates of condom use for this group were still low. Only 27 percent of those who had recently visited a commercial sex worker reported using condoms all or most of the time, 20 percent reported using condoms some of the time, and 50 percent said that they never used condoms at all.

In the Philippines, condoms are available in drugstores, supermarkets, and private clinics. The government family planning program, however, has an explicit policy against supplying condoms or other contraceptives to unmarried people. When asked during the survey, nearly all sexually active men said they knew where they could obtain condoms. Most mentioned drugstores as a source, but a sizable minority—even of unmarried men—also mentioned government health centers.

Men were asked how long it took to travel from their home to the nearest source of condoms. Not surprisingly, rural men reported more than twice the travel time (49 minutes) reported by urban men (22 minutes). In both urban and rural areas, men with only an elementary education reported more than twice the travel time (67 minutes) reported by men with a college education (33 minutes).

When asked how they felt about using condoms, 90 percent of sexually active men expressed some negative attitudes. The most commonly expressed negative attitude (by 58 percent) was that condoms make sex less pleasurable. Nearly half (47 percent) said that they would be embarrassed to buy condoms at a store, and sizable minorities stated that condoms were too expensive to use regularly (34 percent) or that condom use was against their religion (32 percent).

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## SUMMARY AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

YAFS-II survey results indicate that a substantial minority of young men in the Philippines are at a heightened risk of HIV infection. By the time they reach age 24, almost 40 percent of Filipino men have had sex with at least one partner other than their wife or future wife, and 3 percent have had five or more sexual partners. Almost 10 percent have visited a commercial sex worker.

Young women appear to be taking fewer chances. Less than 10 percent of single women have had sex by age 24, and most married women have only had sex with their husbands. If these results are accurate, women in the Philippines are primarily at risk through the premarital and extramarital activities of their sexual partners.

Awareness of AIDS is high, but knowledge of how the virus is spread is somewhat limited. Similarly, the perception of risk is low. There appears to be a strong perceived association of HIV with commercial sex and multiple sex partners. Young people do not seem to realize that sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend also entails a potential risk. Even among young men engaging in commercial sex without condoms, only one-third felt that “someone like them” might be likely to contract HIV.

The low level of reported condom use is of particular concern. Although most young people are familiar with condoms in the context of family planning, only a little more than half of the young men interviewed knew that the proper use of condoms could prevent HIV transmission. Only 23 percent of sexually active young men had ever used a condom.

The policy implications of these findings are clear. Future efforts in AIDS education need to stress the possibility of risk in any sexual encounter. YAFS-II survey results showed large differ-

ences in knowledge about AIDS among education groups, suggesting that AIDS information programs need to target young people who do not have high levels of formal education. The large percentage of respondents who said that they had discussed AIDS with their friends suggests that peer education approaches may be particularly effective.

Young people are not likely to change their behavior if they do not consider themselves at risk. Expanded efforts are needed to inform young people of the risks of unprotected sex, perhaps through AIDS education and awareness campaigns. Among those young people who, nevertheless, engage in risky behavior, every effort is needed to encourage the proper and consistent use of condoms.

Although condoms are widely available through commercial outlets, the official policy limiting condom distribution at government clinics to married couples may very well be inhibiting their use. Condoms need to be made more widely available in rural areas and possibly in neighborhoods where the less-educated tend to live. Given reported low levels of condom use among men having sex with men, any program designed to slow the spread of HIV should also focus on condom use among male homosexuals and bisexuals.

Numerous social and religious barriers remain in the Philippines that inhibit open discussion of risk behaviors, promotion of condom use, and training in the skills required to protect oneself from HIV. To avoid a serious epidemic, these barriers must be overcome and effective prevention programs put into place.

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Dr. Lita Domingo passed away on 1 October 1996 after a long illness. A Professor with the University of the Philippines Population Institute, she was one of the principal investigators of YAFS-II. This issue of *Asia-Pacific Population & Policy* is dedicated to her memory.