



making 1 billion count



state of world population 2003

investing in adolescents' health and rights



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United Nations Population Fund
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chapters

1	overview of adolescent life	I
	Introduction	I
	Why Is Reproductive Health Important?	2
	Adolescent Reproductive Health and Poverty	3
	A Changing World	5
	Education and Employment	8
	Ensuring a Better Future: Investment in Youth	10
2	gender inequality and reproductive health	15
	Early and Child Marriage	15
	Changing Norms, Difficult Challenges	17
	Parental and Family Support	20
	Sexual Violence and Trafficking	20
	Female Genital Cutting	21
3	hiv/aids and adolescents	23
	Contributing Factors	23
	Regional Differences	25
	Impact of AIDS on Young People	26
	Social Marketing of Contraceptives	26
	Services for HIV/AIDS Prevention and Care	27
4	promoting healthier behaviour	29
	Where Adolescents Get Their Information	30
	Sexuality Education in Schools	30
	Peer Education and Peer Counselling	33
	Reaching Out-of-school Youth	35
	Mass Media, Entertainment and Sports	35
5	meeting reproductive health service needs	39
	Early Pregnancy	39
	Unmet Need for Family Planning	40
	'Youth-friendly' Health Services	41
	Programme Achievements	42
6	comprehensive programmes for adolescents	45
	Adolescent Girls Project	45
	African Youth Alliance	46
	Adolescent Reproductive Health Initiative	47
	<i>Geração Biz</i> , Mozambique	48
	Kidavri Network for Adolescent Skills	49
	Coordination Concerns	49
7	giving priority to adolescents	51
	Policy Environment	51
	Rights-based Programmes	52
	Mobilizing Community Support	53
	Involving Young People in Programming	53
	Resources	55
	The Costs of Failing to Act	56

contents

notes	62
--------------	-----------

sources for boxes	69
--------------------------	-----------

indicators	
Monitoring ICPD Goals: Selected Indicators	70
Demographic, Social and Economic Indicators	74
Selected Indicators for Less-Populous Countries/Territories	78
Notes for Indicators	80
Technical Notes	81

graphs and tables	
figure 1	
Adolescent Population by Region, 2003 and 2050	2
figure 2	
Peak of Demographic Window of Opportunity, Selected Regions	6
table 1	
Percentage of Adolescents Living in Cities, by Sex and Age, Selected Countries	7
figure 3	
Percentage of Women Giving Birth by Age 20, by Level of Education	9
table 2	
Per Cent of Adolescents Employed in 2000, by Age, Sex and Region	10
table 3	
Consequences of Under-investment in Adolescents	11
table 4	
Young People 15-24 Living with HIV/AIDS, by Sex, December 2001	23
figure 4	
New HIV Infections in 2002, by Age Group	24
figure 5	
Unmet Need (UMN) and Use of Family Planning, Ages 15-19, by Region	41

photo captions and credits	84
-----------------------------------	-----------

editorial team	84
-----------------------	-----------





1 overview of adolescent life

Introduction

The largest generation of adolescents in history—1.2 billion strong—is preparing to enter adulthood in a rapidly changing world. Their educational and health status, their readiness to take on adult roles and responsibilities, and the support they receive from their families, communities and governments will determine their own future and the future of their countries.

Nearly half of all people are under the age of 25—the largest youth generation in history. *The State of World Population 2003* report examines the challenges and risks faced by this generation that impact directly on their physical, emotional and mental well-being. Today millions of adolescents and young people are faced with the prospects of early marriage and child-bearing, incomplete education, and the threat of HIV/AIDS. Half of all new HIV infections occur in people aged 15 to 24. The report stresses that increasing the knowledge, opportunities, choices and participation of young people will enable them to lead healthy and productive lives so that they can contribute fully to their communities and to a more stable and prosperous world.

Today's adolescents and young people have diverse experiences given the different political, economic, social and cultural realities they face in their communities. Yet there is a common thread running through all of their lives and that is the hope for a better future. This hope is bolstered by the Millennium Development Goals agreed to by world leaders in 2000 to reduce extreme poverty and hunger, slow the spread of HIV/AIDS, reduce maternal and child mortality, ensure universal primary education and improve sustainable development by 2015.

Within the framework of human rights established and accepted by the global community, certain rights are particularly relevant to adolescents and youth and the

opportunities and risks they face. These include gender equality and the rights to education and health, including reproductive and sexual health information and services appropriate to their age, capacities and circumstances. Actions to ensure these rights can have tremendous practical benefits: empowering individuals, ensuring well-being, stemming the HIV/AIDS pandemic, reducing poverty and improving prospects for social and economic progress. Addressing these challenges is an urgent development priority.

Investing in young people will yield large returns for generations to come. Failing to act, on the other hand, will incur tremendous costs to individuals, societies and the world at large.

Investing in adolescents' health and rights will yield large benefits for generations to come.

In every region, there is a need for positive dialogue and greater understanding among parents, families, communities and governments about the complex and sensitive situations facing adolescents and young people. The report examines such factors as changing family structures and living conditions, rapidly changing norms and social behaviours, the growth in orphans and street children, the impact of urbanization and migration, armed conflict, the lack of education and employment, and the continuing toll of gender discrimination and violence.

Just as they need guidance, young women and men need supportive relationships and institutions that respond to their hopes and concerns. By taking concerted and comprehensive action to address the challenges faced by adolescents and young people, governments can meet their commitments and international development goals, and give greater hope to the world's largest youth generation.

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is working with a wide range of partners and with young people themselves to address the needs of adolescents and young

people in a way that is culturally sensitive, locally driven and in line with international human rights standards.

Adolescence is a growth process. Guiding children as they grow to adulthood is not and never has been a job for parents alone. In traditional rural communities, the extended family and established systems of hierarchy and respect govern the transition. But in all developing countries, the certainties of rural tradition are giving way to urban life, with its opportunities and risks, its individual freedoms and its more complex social demands and frameworks of support.

In the rapidly changing urban environment, young people derive most of their information about the world, what to expect and how to behave, from their peers, and increasingly from mass media. The tension between parents, who tend to see them as children in need of protection, and the outside world, which makes demands on them as adults, reflects the central dilemma of modern adolescents.

The ages from 10-19 are rich in life transitions. How and when young people experience these vary greatly depending on their circumstances. At age 10, the expectation in most societies is that children live at home, go to school, have not yet gone through puberty, are unmarried and have never worked. By their 20th birthday, many adolescents have left school and home. They have become sexually active, married and entered the labour force.¹

While there is little comparative research, differences within and between societies are more pronounced with

regard to adolescents, and generalizations may be less useful than with other age groups—some societies barely recognize a prolonged transition to adulthood; in others, adolescence seems to extend from late childhood into the 20s.

Moreover, we know far less in a systematic way about adolescents than about other age groups and even less about early adolescence, from 10 to 14, than about the later years, 15-19.

While information on young people is starting to improve,² there is little reliable data on the strongest influences on their lives: their peers, their families, and their communities.

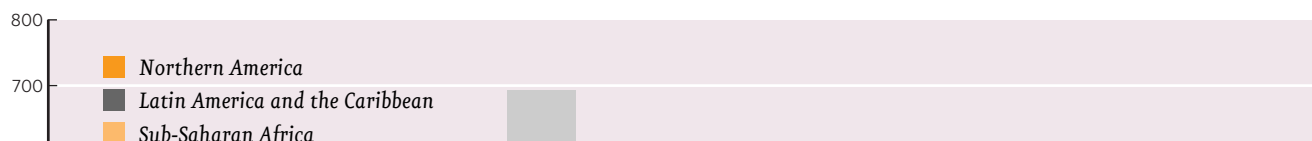
Policy makers, communities and families need to create policies, programmes and guidance to give the largest number of the young the resources they need to contribute to their societies.

Why is Reproductive Health Important?

Sexual and reproductive health has been defined by the international community as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well being, and not just merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes.³ It is an essential component of young people's ability to become well-adjusted, responsible and productive members of society.⁴

Subsequent chapters of this report detail the major issues involved in ensuring adolescents' rights and meeting their needs in relation to sexual and reproductive health.

Figure 1: Adolescent Population by Region, 2003 and 2050



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