

No Time for COMPLACENCY

POLICY REVIEW

2007 FALL ISSUE

Hidden STD epidemic among California youth

TREATMENT COSTS FOR NEW CASES EACH YEAR EXCEED \$1 BILLION

A study just published by researchers at the Public Health Institute's (PHI) Center for Research on Adolescent Health and Development concludes that the annual number of newly acquired sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among California youth is much greater than previously thought. Furthermore, the researchers

“This epidemic is like an iceberg - what you see is just a small part of what you have.”

estimate that the medical costs of treating these STDs acquired each year exceed a billion dollars. The study appears in the September, 2007 issue of the Californian Journal of Health Promotion (<http://tinyurl.com/335kp6>).

Employing rigorous methods developed at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), PHI scientists Petra Jerman, Norman Constantine and Carmen Nevarez conducted two analyses. First, they estimated the number of new cases of eight major STDs (chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, genital herpes, HPV, hepatitis B, trichomoniasis and HIV) among 15-24-year-olds in California in 2005. Estimation methods were necessary because most newly acquired infections are not reported to the state's department of public health. In addition, the direct medical costs of these new cases were calculated for each STD.

The researchers estimated 1.12 million new cases of STDs occurred among California youth in 2005, with a combined medical cost of \$1.11 billion. Over 80% of

estimated new cases involved the three STDs that are not reportable to the state (genital herpes, HPV and trichomoniasis). In addition, the number of estimated new cases for the reportable STDs (chlamydia, gonorrhea, HIV and hepatitis B) exceeded the numbers actually reported to the state health department in 2005.

Of the total estimated medical costs, HIV accounted for 51%, while genital herpes, HPV and trichomoniasis, combined, accounted for 46%. Chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis were associated with just 3% of total medical costs.

According to Dr. Jerman, “These numbers and costs illustrate that the STD epidemic among California youth remains largely hidden. This epidemic is like an iceberg - what you see is just a small part of what you have.”

STD	Reported new cases	Estimated unreported new cases	Total estimated new cases	Medical cost (\$)
Chlamydia	84,186	95,814	180,000	29 million
Gonorrhea	16,788	16,212	33,000	7.5 million
Syphilis	313	67	380	0.2 million
HIV	516	2,384	2,900	560 million
Hepatitis B	41	479	520	0.5 million
Genital herpes*	0	67,000	67,000	38 million
HPV*	0	590,000	590,000	460 million
Trichomoniasis*	0	250,000	250,000	5.3 million
Total	101,844	1.02 million	1.12 million	1.11 billion

Reported cases and estimates are for 2005.

*Non-reportable STDs.

County breakdowns

The study also allocates the estimated numbers of new cases and associated medical costs by region and by county. Full county-by-county breakdowns, and other supporting materials, are available at <http://teenbirths.phi.org>.

California legislative review

Two bills related to adolescent sexual health have passed both houses and, as we go to press, are awaiting Governor Schwarzenegger's signature. The Sexual Health Education Accountability Act (AB 629, Brownley, D-Woodland Hills) requires state-funded or administered community-based teen pregnancy and STD prevention programs to be medically accurate, age appropriate and comprehensive. The Human Papillomavirus Vaccination Act (AB 1429, Evans, D-Santa Rosa) requires health insurance plans to cover HPV vaccination. To check the current status of these bills, go to <http://tinyurl.com/fo2z> and enter the bill number.

National policy review

What do we know from the latest research on abstinence-only-until-marriage and comprehensive sexuality education? What is the current status of national policies in this area? These topics are examined in a policy review by the Guttmacher Institute, available at <http://tinyurl.com/3cs48n>. And as we go to press, House and Senate bills related to continued federal funding of school-based and community-based abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are awaiting final resolution in a House-Senate conference. A Guttmacher Update provides a recent overview: <http://tinyurl.com/28nkts>.

Cervical cancer and HPV project

The California Medical Association Foundation has initiated a project addressing the link between human papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer. The goal of the project is to educate both patients and clinicians about the connection between the HPV virus and cervical cancer with the ultimate aim of promoting strategies that can prevent both cervical cancer and HPV. For more information, including a section on HPV vaccination cost coverage by insurers and other programs, see <http://tinyurl.com/2v5hbs>.

Challenges in youth STD prevention

Challenges to preventing youth STDs include lack of access to preventive medical care, neglect and under-funding of proven public health approaches such as testing and treatment, lack of awareness and communication about STDs and STD prevention, and the conflicts between responsible sexual behaviors and cultural mores and social norms. These and other challenges are discussed in a 2005 report by the American Social Health Association, available at <http://tinyurl.com/3y6e3j>.

STD testing for youth

Testing is a critically important strategy for preventing STDs in youth. To be most effective, testing must occur together with communication with parents, information and education about STDs, a supportive social environment and effective public health programs. The American Social Health Association's position statement on youth STD testing can be accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/2rpt7k>.



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The *No Time for Complacency* Policy Review is a biannual series of reports on the adolescent sexual health policy environment in California. The series is produced as part of PHI's Adolescent Sexual Health Policy Project. Policy Reviews are issued in the spring and fall of each year.

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