

Zambia

Ensuring better evidence
for adolescent HIV and health
policies and programming





Adolescents and young people in Zambia face significant sexual and reproductive health challenges. In 2021, 6,400 new HIV infections occurred among adolescents (10-19 years),¹ and only 60% of adolescents living with HIV are on treatment.² One out of three adolescent girls (15-19 years) have given birth,³ and one out of five young women (18-24 years) experienced sexual violence before the age of 18.⁴

1 <https://data.unicef.org/>

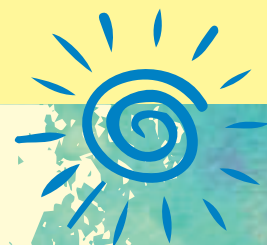
2 (see full study): <https://www.unicef.org/zambia/hiv-aids>

3 CSO. Demographic and Health Survey Key Indicators, in Demographic and Health Survey, 2019, The DHS Program: Central Statistical Office, Lusaka.

4 <https://www.unicef.org/zambia/reports/violence-against-children-zambia-study>

In partnership with the Ministry of Health, in 2020-2021 UNICEF coordinated an extensive review of peer-reviewed articles and grey literature on adolescent health to contribute to better-informed policies and programmes for adolescents. The review synthesized evidence on adolescents and young people's use of HIV, sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence and mental health services, the risk factors that contribute to poor health outcomes, promising interventions, and evidence gaps.

The review found that despite their many needs, adolescents use HIV and sexual and reproductive health services less frequently than adults and, overall, have poorer health outcomes. Poverty, limited availability of and access to services, stigma, and lack of family or community support constrain adolescents and young people's use of services. Some sub-groups, such as adolescents with special needs and mental health concerns, lacked sufficient data for review, indicating the need for better evidence generation and data collection to inform programming.



your
mental
Health
is the
Priority



The review also found that adolescents benefited from a range of interventions:

- Safe spaces for adolescents to openly discuss issues and deepen understanding of their rights and available services
- Peer supporters who provided reliable **health information and psychosocial support**, especially for adolescents with HIV who rely on peer support for treatment adherence



- Supportive **relationships with parents**
- Respectful and responsive health services
- Creative and **innovative use of media and other platforms** to create demand for services and transform harmful social norms
- Multisectoral interventions** with clear referral pathways
- Assistance gaining **vocational skills and livelihoods**



The review findings were shared widely, including at a national adolescent health research and best practices symposium, organized by UNICEF, the Ministry of Health, and partners. Recommendations from the symposium included:

- Community leaders, schools, parents and healthcare providers need to **work collectively, alongside adolescents**, to provide support and services for adolescents.
- Adolescent responsive health services** require knowledgeable, supportive healthcare providers who promote HIV, sexual and reproductive health, and gender-based violence services to adolescents.
- Peer support** needs to be scaled up and institutionalized in schools, health facilities and communities.
- Adolescents living with disabilities, in correctional institutions, young refugees, young key populations and other marginalized groups require **targeted, differentiated interventions**.
- Further evidence** is needed on the impact and sustainability of economic empowerment interventions and the burden of mental health issues and feasible responses.

The review also promoted **routine and disaggregated tracking** of adolescents' use of sexual and reproductive health and HIV services. UNICEF collaborated with the Ministry of Health and other members of the National Monitoring and Evaluation Taskforce to revise district data collection tools and train District Health Information Officers and Adolescent Health Focal Persons from five of ten provinces on the revised tools. District health management teams now routinely consider sex- and age-disaggregated data and how social determinants influence adolescents and young people's use of services in making budget and programming decisions.

The review findings and emerging disaggregated data were used to inform the new National Adolescent Health Strategic Plan (2022-2026). The Strategic Plan:

- Includes **data-informed decision making** at all levels of healthcare and institutionalizes convening the Adolescent Health and HIV Research and Best Practices Symposium.
- Explicitly articulates **programming for adolescents with disabilities** across all key programme areas.
- Strengthens integration** and cross-sectoral programming to respond to the multiple determinants of adolescent health and development.
- Emphasizes the participation** of adolescents and young people in co-creating and implementing programmes alongside technical experts.

Each year the UNICEF Executive Director sets aside 7% of regular resources for innovative programming for the most vulnerable children and adolescents. In Zambia, these funds contributed to evidence-driven policies and programmes that address adolescents' critical sexual and reproductive and HIV needs.

collectively
support
targeted
interventions

