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New research on COVID-19's impact on young people and HIV in Uganda

As you know from our special issue on the International AIDS Conference (GFO 416), AIDS 2022 was held in Montreal between 29 July and 2 August in Montreal.

The conference program had little detail, and this meant choosing which sessions to attend was somewhat of a lottery. Fortunately, it was nowhere near the size of previous meetings which meant there was less to choose from. The most impressive paper I heard was presented by Brian Ssekajja, a Project Assistant with Reproductive Health Uganda. His paper, 'The Impact of the COVID-19 Prevention Measures on the Lives of Young People Living with HIV/AIDS in Uganda', was thought provoking.

Ssekajja noted that Uganda had the world's longest COVID-19 lockdown, with schools fully or partially shut for more than 83 weeks. This, along with other measures such as curfews, self-isolation, banning of public transportation and gatherings had a significant impact on young people's access to HIV prevention information and services, and, as importantly, on their lives more generally.

He reported on a mixed methods study which included focus group discussions and a mobile web survey. This looked at the impact of prevention measures on young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) among nearly 700 young people in Uganda. All the respondents were between 18 and 30, and they were evenly divided between males and females. The qualitative findings were that support groups were unable to meet. Medical services such as accessing medicines, viral load testing and contraceptives were disrupted; for example, 55% of those needing testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV and/or treatment could not access services.

The lack of credible information was a major stumbling block. Ssekajja found that 34% of males and 29%

of females were afraid of catching COVID-19 infection from health facilities. Additionally, respondents experienced increased stigma and vulnerability across already vulnerable groups.

There is nothing revolutionary in his recommendations, they are all common sense and are:

- HIV prevention, care and treatment services should remain crucial during all times, including in case of a pandemic.
- Prioritize the mental health of young people living with HIV (YPLHIV).
- Combat stigma.
- Address stock-outs, distribution, and adherence issues around antiretroviral drugs ARVs).
- Ensure access to pre- and post-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP and PEP).
- Integrate sexuality education in online learning.
- Provide economic support for young people including those living with HIV

What is significant is that this was a proper study of the impact of COVID-19. We know that young people have suffered, what we have lacked are the data. This country case study is part of a six-country study and will shed light on the uncounted cost of this pandemic. It is research to look out for.

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