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Sexual behaviors and biomarkers: Baseline findings

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SEXUAL BEHAVIORS & BIOMARKERS: BASELINE FINDINGS

The Adolescent Girls Empowerment Program (AGEP) is a program for girls ages 10-19 in rural and urban Zambia that aims to find the best ways to improve their social, health, and economic resources. The program involves over 10,000 girls participating in weekly girls' group meetings, receiving health vouchers and opening savings accounts. Over 5,000 girls, unmarried at baseline, are enrolled in a randomized, controlled trial and are being followed over four years—including the two years of the program and two years after. This brief describes the characteristics of these girls at baseline.

INTRODUCTION

Unprotected sex puts adolescent girls at significant risk of HIV, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), early pregnancy and unsafe abortions—all of which have short- and long-term implications both for a girl's health and her schooling, livelihood, and relationship to her family. Sexually active adolescents need information, social support for informed decision-making, and access to services and technologies to maintain their sexual and reproductive health.

- 4.8 percent of 15–19-year-old young women in Zambia are infected with HIV, as compared to 4.1 percent of young men of the same age, according to the 2013-2014 Zambia Demographic and Health Survey (ZDHS). The gender disparity increases in the 20–24-year-old group with 11.8 percent of young women being infected as compared to 7.3 percent of young men. AGEP is operating in three out of the five provinces that have an HIV prevalence higher than the national average of 13.3% (Copperbelt, Central and Lusaka).
- Only 18 percent of never-married sexually active girls ages 15–19 in Zambia have used contraception, according to the 2013-2014 ZDHS.
- 14% percent of never-married 15–19-year-old young women have given birth or are pregnant with their first child, according to the 2013-2014 ZDHS. Among those currently pregnant, only 20% wanted the pregnancy at that time.



Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

3.3% of girls in the AGEP study are living with HIV; 7.5% of girls in the AGEP study are living with herpes simplex virus 2 (HSV-2). (Only 15–19-year-old girls in the AGEP study were asked questions on sexual behavior and tested for HIV and HSV-2.)

	HIV	HSV-2
Urban	4.6%	8.4%
Rural	1.9%	6.2%
TOTAL	3.3%	7.5%

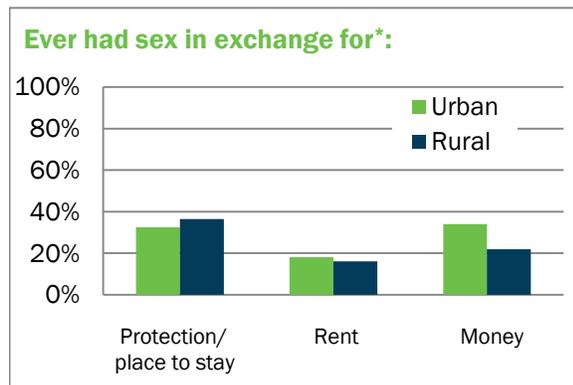
- HIV prevalence for urban girls is more than twice that of rural girls.
- A large percentage of girls and young women in the study are infected with both viruses: 43% of those who were HIV positive were also HSV-2 positive; 19% of those who were HSV-2 positive were also HIV positive.



Transactional sex

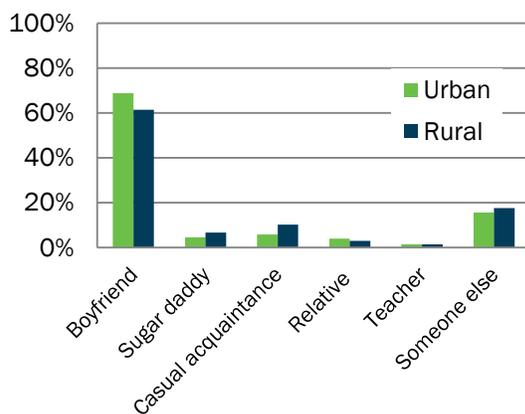
Over a third of the AGEP sample (39% in urban areas and 36% in rural areas) has ever had sex; sex is often transactional and unwanted. Among girls who have reported ever having sex:

- Over two-thirds have had at least one transactional sex experience.
- Two in five girls reported having had sex when they did not want to.



*Among girls who have had sex

Relationship of first sexual partner



First sexual experiences

Among girls who have had sex, first sexual experiences most commonly occurred when the girl was young, in school, and with a boyfriend, and it was unwanted.

- Among girls who have had sex, the average (median) age of sexual initiation was 16 in urban areas and 15 in rural areas.

- 55% of urban girls and 61% of rural girls were still in school at the time of their first sexual experience.
- Although the most common first sexual partner was a boyfriend, only 21% of girls in urban areas and 26% of girls in rural areas reported that their first sexual experience was wanted.
- Just under 40% of girls who reported having had sex, in both urban and rural areas, reported condom use at first sex; those who had a wanted first sexual experience were more likely to have used a condom (47%) than those who had an unwanted sexual experience (36%)

15% of the AGEP sample reported having given birth or were pregnant at the time of the interview.

- Of those who were currently pregnant, 94% did not want to get pregnant at the time that they did.
- 68% of rural girls and 46% of urban girls were in school at the time they got pregnant for the first time. This has serious implication for girls' schooling, as 23% of girls who had ever given birth were in school, compared to 75% who had never given birth.
- Among girls who reported having had an unwanted pregnancy, 77% continued with the pregnancy. Of those who attempted to terminate or successfully terminated the pregnancy, two-thirds had an unsafe abortion.

Contraceptive use among the sexually experienced sample of AGEP girls was very low, with only 5% of girls reporting having ever used a family planning method. The most common methods reported were the male condom, followed by withdrawal, the rhythm method, and injectables.

- Of girls who have had sex in the past year, only 13% are currently using contraception.
- One potential barrier may be access, as 60% of 15–19-year-old girls know where to get a method, but 42% thought it would be difficult or impossible.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

For more information about AGEP, call +260 211 295925 or email agep@popcouncil.org or visit: <http://www.popcouncil.org/research/adolescent-girls-empowerment-program>

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