

The Role of Stigma and Discrimination driving the HIV epidemic

Dr J. Carolyn Gomes

Executive Director

Caribbean Vulnerable Communities Coalition



LEPER COLONIES



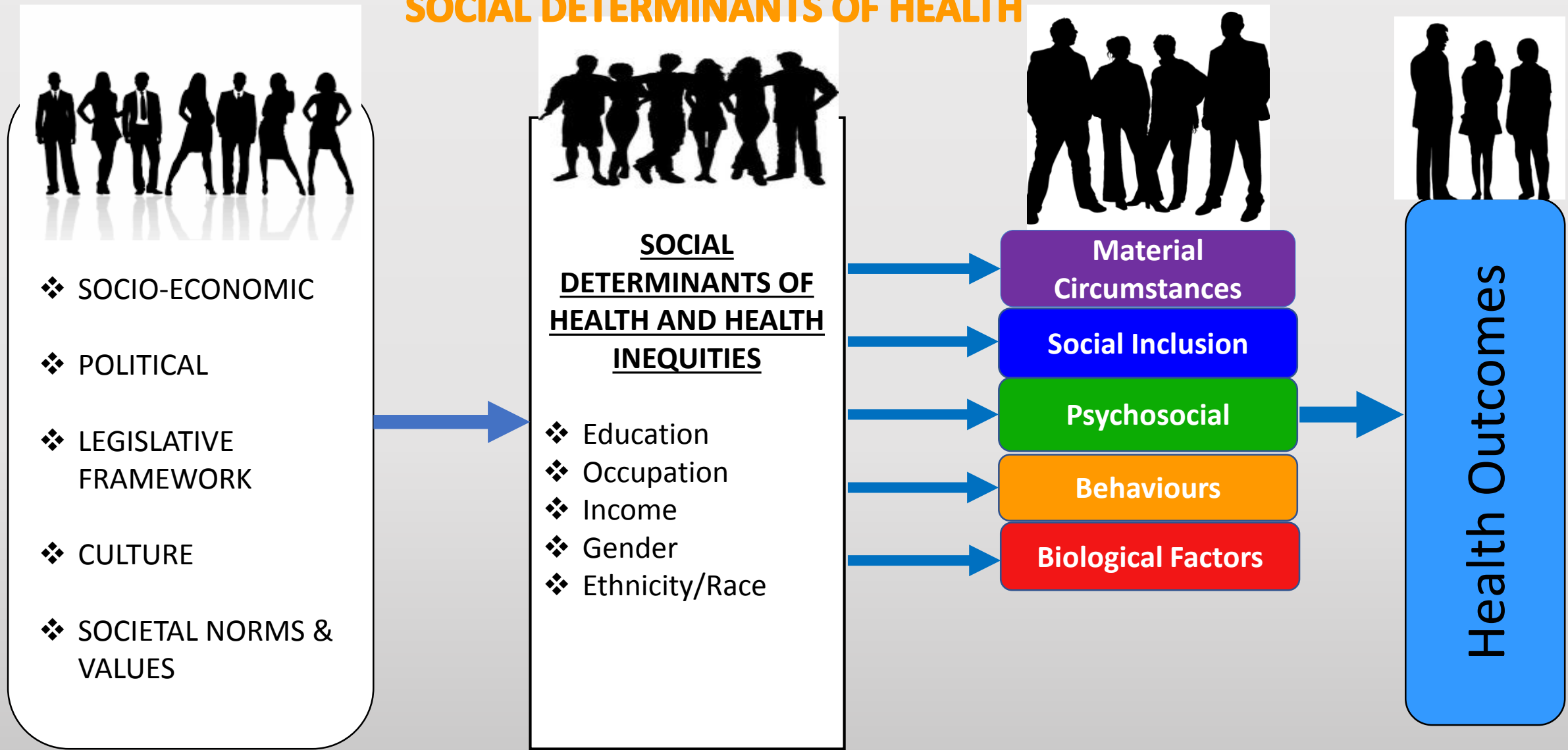
Marginalization (v.2).PNG
Chacachacare - Trinidad



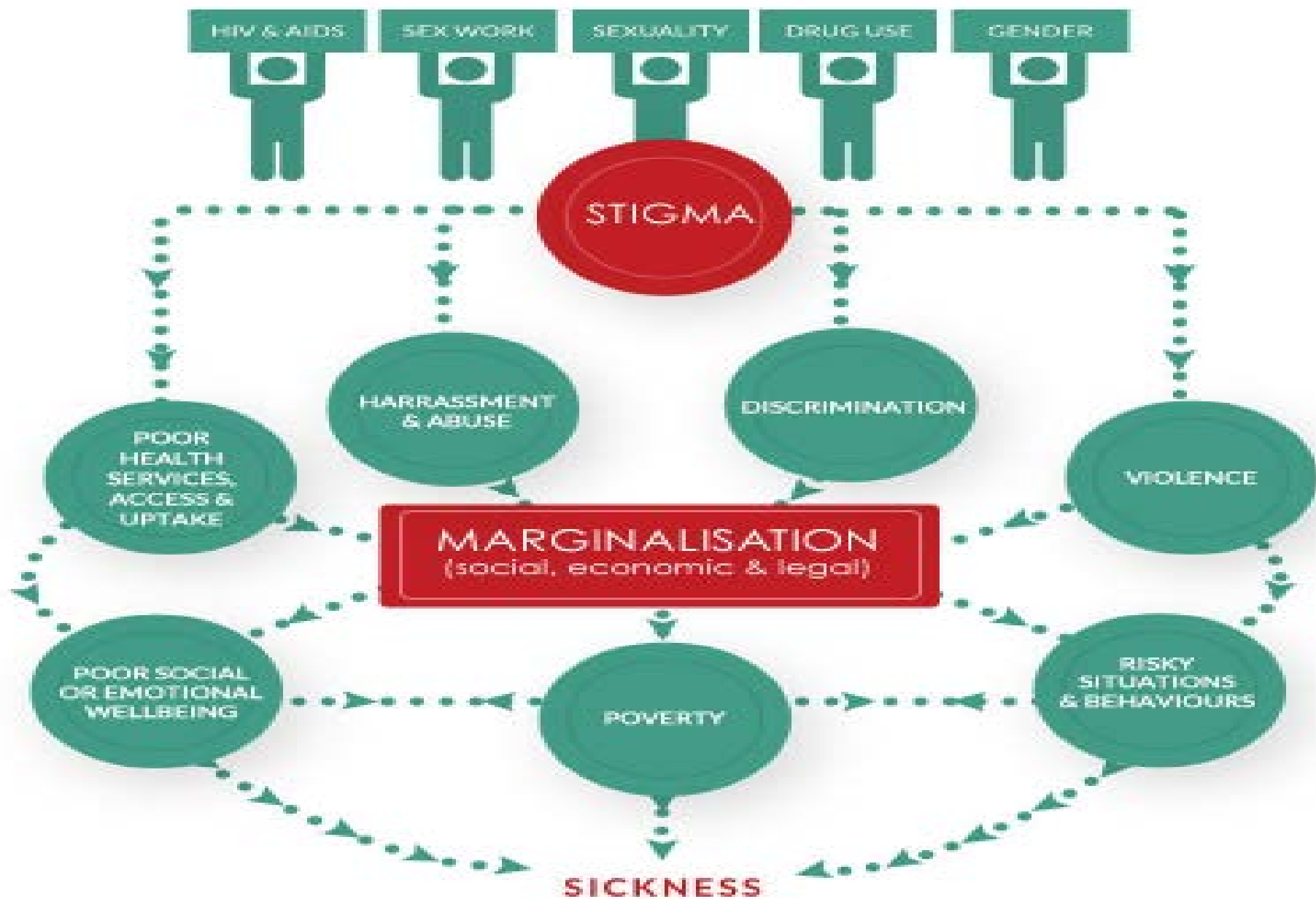
HAWAII



SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH



When Policy Makers don't Consider these Factors the Impact is Reduced and Contributes to Negative Health Outcomes



HIV/AIDS IN THE CARIBBEAN

The CARIBBEAN has

SECOND HIGHEST PREVALENCE RATE IN WORLD

Second only to Sub Saharan Africa

STIGMA & DISCRIMINATION has

Contributed to the Caribbean having one of the only **RISING RATE** of **HIV infections** in the world

Epidemic of Bad Laws is Obstructing the Caribbean HIV Response

HIV transmission: Laws that criminalise HIV transmission or penalize non-disclosure of HIV status increase stigma and discourage people from getting tested or treated for fear of prosecution.

- Trinidad and Tobago and Belize have laws criminalizing HIV transmission
- Three countries — Belize, Dominican Republic and Suriname, have laws which restrict entry to people who are HIV positive
- The absence of a legal framework for protection of PLH and their families is widely acknowledged to restrict the promotion of human rights and actions to address stigma and discrimination
- In most countries, there is no comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation and no Caribbean constitution explicitly provides protection against sexual orientation discrimination

Epidemic of Bad Laws is Obstructing the Caribbean HIV Response

At-risk populations: Laws and practices that criminalise and dehumanize populations at highest risk for HIV make them more vulnerable and drive them away from HIV, harm reduction and health services.

Legislative frameworks that prohibit drug use help reinforce and perpetuate stigma and discrimination. Regional drug laws treat substance use exclusively as a law enforcement issue rather than a public health one.

Ten Caribbean countries criminalize consensual sex between adults of the same sex:

Throughout the English-speaking Caribbean, LGBT people are entirely excluded from family law protections: their unions are not recognized; same-sex partners receive nothing under rules of intestacy; they have no entitlement to maintenance; there is no half-share entitlement in the family home; and they have limited protection from domestic violence. Laws to protect LGBT youth from violence and discrimination are also lacking in the region.

All countries in the English-speaking Caribbean criminalize sex work & Migrant Sex Workers have virtually no protections anywhere.

Epidemic of Bad Laws is Obstructing the Caribbean HIV Response

At-risk populations: Laws and practices that criminalise and dehumanize populations at highest risk for HIV make them more vulnerable and drive them away from HIV, harm reduction and health services.

EVIDENCE IS STARK

In Caribbean countries where homosexuality is criminalised, almost 1 in 4 MSM is HIV-positive, compared to 1 in 15 MSM in countries where it is not.

Epidemic of Bad Laws is Obstructing the Caribbean HIV Response

Women and youth: Laws and customs that disempower women undermine their ability to protect themselves from HIV. Policies that deny youth access to sexual and reproductive and HIV services help spread HIV.

- The prevailing legislation about the age of consent, cultural norms about sex and sexuality and moral barriers make serious risk reduction interventions among youth difficult. In Jamaica, as elsewhere, there is disparity between the age of consent (16 years), actual age of sexual initiation (33% of persons between 15 and 24 reported having sex before 15) and the age at which health care can be accessed without parental consent (18 years), making it difficult to provide prevention interventions and to treat infected and at-risk youth.
- Laws that require parental consent discourage teens from seeking reproductive health and HIV prevention services.

Exclusion from protection

Exclusion from law

The absence of a legal framework for protection of PLHIV and their families is widely acknowledged to restrict the promotion of human rights and actions to address stigma and discrimination;

No Broad Anti-Discrimination Statute

In most countries, there is no comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation and NO Caribbean constitution explicitly provides protection against sexual orientation discrimination

Arbitrary application of laws

Laws and policies used by authorities to repress gays, sex workers, participants in transactional sex, transgender people, cross dressers, street youth, drug users and others using arbitrary interpretations of laws. These laws, policies and practices impede the effectiveness of the HIV response in many countries.

**Adolescents face many challenges in 21st Century Caribbean.
Challenges reflected in regional data.
Statistics paint worrying picture.**

ADOLESCENTS IN THE REGION

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| <p>Early Initiation of Sex</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the Caribbean, 34.1% of surveyed adolescents (22.2% male; 51.9% female) reporting having sexual intercourse before the age of 19. Of that figure, 63.4% (40.3% male; 78% female) had their sexual debut before the age of 12 (CARICOM, 2014). |
| <p>High Rate of Pregnancy</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The regional adolescent birth rate was 65 per 1000 girls 15 to 19 years old, which compares unfavourably to the global indicator of 49 per 1000 girls 15-19 years old (CARICOM, 2014). • Around 20% of women in the Caribbean have had at least one child by the age of 19 & considerable percentage of adolescent girls give birth before the age of 15 (CARICOM, 2014). |

**Adolescents face many challenges in 21st Century Caribbean.
Challenges reflected in regional data.
Statistics paint worrying picture.**

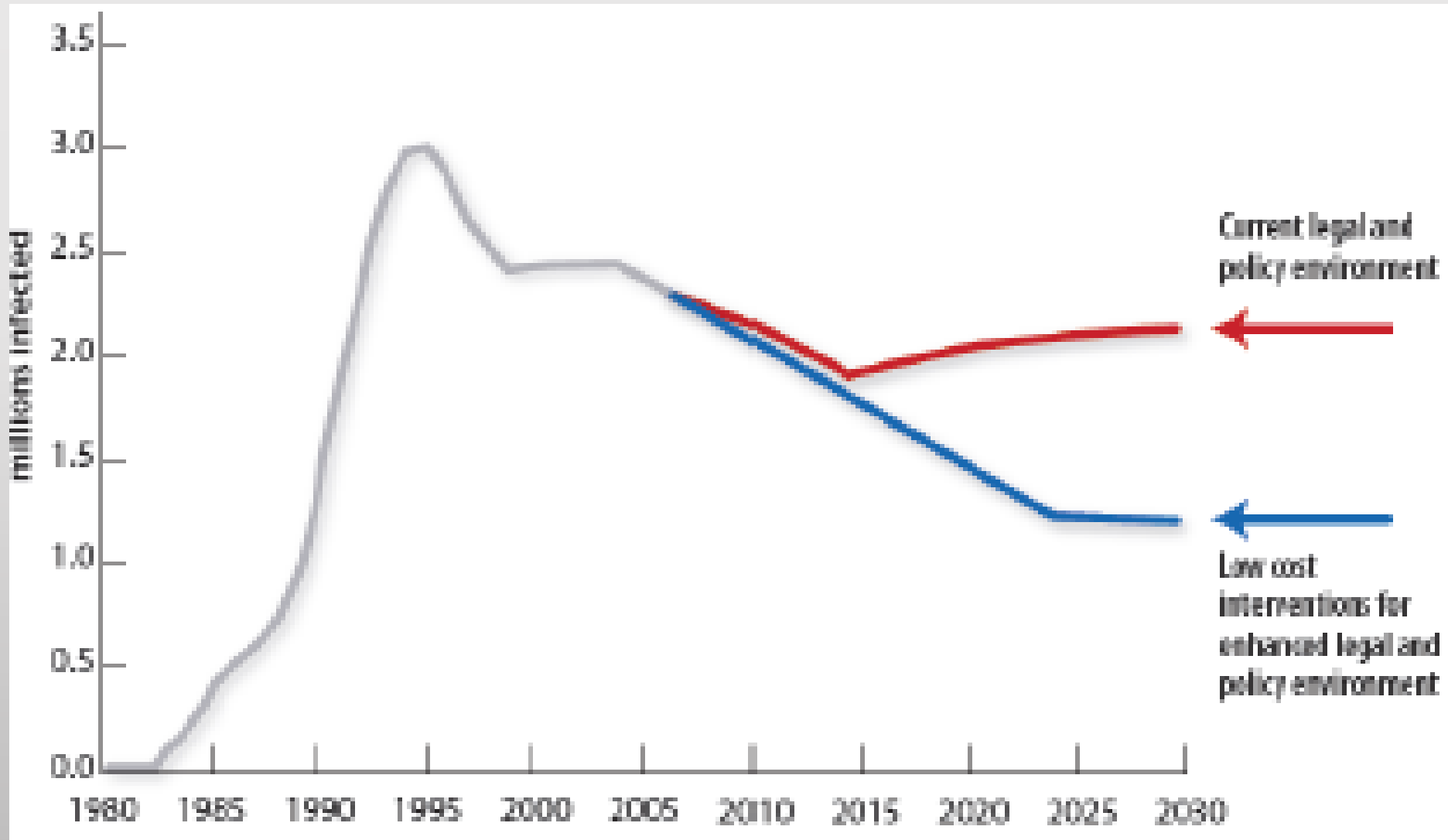
| | |
|--|--|
| <p>High rate of HIV/STI Prevalence</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Across the Caribbean, the number of young women living with HIV is 1.2 times higher than the number of young men living with HIV (UNAIDS, 2014) |
| <p>Declining Knowledge</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• On average in the Caribbean, one out of every three young people aged 15–24 are inadequately informed or unaware of the ways to prevent HIV (UNAIDS, 2014) |

COST TO THE REGION

ADOLESCENTS IN THE REGION

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Forced Sexual Initiation | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Forced sexual initiation affects 38% of adolescents (32% male and 48% female), with those younger than 12 years old demonstrating higher risk of forced sexual debut (43%) than those between 13-15 (38%) and 16-18 years old (37%) (CARICOM, 2014). |
| High Cost to the Society | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The opportunity cost of adolescent girls not growing to their fullest potential in the Caribbean region is 12.3% of GDP (CARICOM, 2014). |

Enforcing Bad Laws Squanders Scarce Global Health Investments



FINDINGS – HIV & THE LAW

- Changes in the legal and policy environment, along with other interventions, could lower new adult HIV infections to an estimated 1.2 million by 2031, compared to 2.1 million if current efforts continue without these broader structural changes.
- Public resources are wasted on enforcing laws that criminalise HIV transmission and dehumanize at-risk populations.
- In contrast, laws that protect at-risk populations are powerful low-cost tools to help ensure that financial and scientific investments for HIV are not wasted.
- Enacting laws based on sound public health and human rights will ensure new prevention and treatment tools—such as PrEP, male circumcision and microbicides—reach those who need them.

Definition of Universal Health Coverage

Health coverage is defined as the capacity of the health system to serve the needs of the population, including the availability of infrastructure, human resources, health technologies (including medicines) and financing.

Universal health coverage implies that the organizational mechanisms and financing are sufficient to cover the entire population. Universal coverage is not in itself sufficient to ensure health, well-being, and equity in health, but it lays the necessary groundwork.

Definition of Universal Access

- Universal access is defined as the absence of geographical, economic, sociocultural, organizational, or gender barriers. Universal access is achieved through the progressive elimination of barriers that prevent all people from having equitable use of comprehensive health services
- **CARIBBEAN LEADERS HAVE COMMITTED TO BOTH UNIVERSAL ACCESS & UNIVERSAL COVERAGE**

Laws & Practices Based on Evidence & Human Rights Can Advance Effective HIV Responses

LOCAL SUCCESS STORY

Working with Sex Workers

Police education and empowerment of sex workers can lead to decreased risk of HIV infection among sex workers.

In Jamaica, respecting and working with the community, cooperating with the club owners, and making public health the priority, rather than enforcing the law, helped reduce HIV prevalence among sex workers from 9% in 2001 to less than 3% in 2016.

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES CALL TO ACTION

In 2016 the World Council of Churches issued a call to action and I can find no better words to leave you with.

Recognizing that

- “The [HIV] pandemic has shed light on the multi-faceted root causes and injustices driving HIV. These include stigma, discrimination, sexual and gender-based violence, gender inequalities and abuse of power and betrayal of trust. Economic disparities promote and perpetuate an environment of social evils in which HIV transmission thrives”

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES CALL TO ACTION

They called for people of goodwill to:

Lead by example:

- In getting tested
- In seeing God in the other & particularly in people on the margins of society
- In living lives which respect the dignity of the weak and vulnerable
- In creating safe spaces of grace in churches and communities where people feel welcomed, protected, affirmed and accepted

By working closely with health care providers

Provide for those in need by:

- Making health care & educational facilities welcoming & safe spaces for those living with & vulnerable to HIV

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES CALL TO ACTION

Use our prophetic voice by:

- Speaking with and for those suffering injustice and exclusion
- Speaking out against stigma and discrimination at every level of society, including, our own churches
- Promoting theology and church practice that affirms a good & holistic understanding of sexuality & human relations.
- Speaking against laws which create vulnerability to HIV
- Advocating for expanded access to comprehensive HIV prevention, treatment, care and support

DO YOU DARE....

- TO DO LESS?
- TO BE ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY?