

About 2 million more HIV positive in SA

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According to statistics released by the Development Bank of South Africa (DBSA), more than 7.6 million South Africans are HIV-positive - 2.2 million more than the department of health's figures for 2007 state.

Of these, about 6.1 million are the economically active people between the ages of 20 and 64, who could contribute to the country's economy.

What makes these statistics more alarming is the fact that the data on which they are based are probably more reliable than the department of health's because they were collected at grassroots level and not based on estimates.

The DBSA's 2007/2008 statistics state that: 7.6 million South Africans are HIV-positive; more than 27 percent of men and women aged between 20 and 64 are HIV positive.

More than 92,000 babies have been infected, either perennially or through mother's milk, in the past year; and the total number of Aids sick by mid-2007 was 1,287,844.

The statistics also nearly says that 722,000 people have died of Aids-related diseases in the past year, bringing the total number of such deaths since 2003 to more than 3.7 million and in 2003, the accumulated total Aids-related deaths stood at just under 1 million.

About 1.2 million of the country's 1.49 million orphans have lost their parents to Aids and this number is expected to increase by more than 336,000 this year alone.

In contrast, the department of health stated last year that there were 5.4 million HIV-positive people in South Africa in 2006. And the Actuarial Society of South Africa (ASSA) estimated in its statistical summary for 2000 to 2015 that there would be 5.6 million HIV-positive people in the country this year.

The ASSA had also estimated that there would be 370,000 Aids deaths in 2008.

UNAids stated in its 2006 Global Report that 18.8 percent of the population of the southern African country was infected, and that 320,000 people died of Aids-related deaths in the country during 2005.

allAfrica.com reported Sunday that the latest DBSA information on one of the biggest killers in South Africa was collected from clinics, local municipalities, development planners, morgues and funeral homes.

Updated annually, the figures are used by the bank to determine funding for municipal projects, such as the upgrading of infrastructure.

Mark Heywood, the director of the Aids Law Project at the University of the Witwatersrand, said the new data, although untested, reflected the fact that the Aids pandemic remained a massive challenge for the country.

"If these figures are accurate, the number of people dying is increasing and the number of people who should be receiving anti-retrovirals, and are not, is increasing," Heywood said.

"The social cost of this is going to be enormous. We are not doing enough as a country and there is a danger that we are becoming complacent because there are now institutions such as the National Aids Council, as well as the fact that the government's approach to HIV and Aids has changed."

The DBSA figures show that South Africa, a country with one of the highest HIV and Aids rates in the world, is reaching the peak of HIV infections and that intervention programmes are beginning to show some success.

Johan Calitz, a senior demographer at the DBSA, attributed the decrease in infections in some regions to the success of nutrition schemes run by NGOs, other non-governmental intervention programmes and the government's roll-out of antiretroviral drugs.

He said the number of infections was expected to "level out" by 2010, but that the death rate would continue to accelerate in the foreseeable future.

"I think it will drop from 2010, and that from 2014 the population will begin to stabilise," he said, adding that this was on the condition that rates of immigration did not increase.

Although the birthrate is declining nationally, and in particular in Gauteng, there is an increase in the total number of HIV-infected babies being born.

Prevalence rates at antenatal clinics have increased to 31.67 percent - up 2 percent from last year.

The good news is that the number of new infections in KwaZulu-Natal - the province worst affected by the pandemic - have dropped dramatically among adults aged between 20 and 59, despite the dramatic increase in the number of its Aids orphans.

Of concern, Calitz said, was the very high percentage of economically active people between the ages of 20 and 64 who were HIV positive - more than 3,5 million women and more than 3.4 million men.

In Gauteng, there has been a marked decline in children under the age of four, down about 21,000 since 2003. Yet, there are about 2,000 more children under the age of four with HIV.

Some of the highest rates of infection now appear to be among men over 50 and women over 40, with the rate among those adults of child-bearing age apparently slowing down due to illness and death.

Malawi which has also been hardly hit by the HIV/Aids pandemic recently reported that its HIV rate had gone down to 12 percent.

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