



## The G7's HIV/AIDS response wanes precisely when global leadership is required

When G8 leaders came together in 2002, Canada committed to defeat HIV/AIDS. Today, the G7 must reinvestigate its effort to end the pandemic.



We have a responsibility to share our concerns with G7 states, and encourage them to work together to avoid the global collapse of the HIV/AIDS effort, writes Julio Montaner. *Unsplash photograph by Bermix Studio*

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Twenty-three years ago, the G8 sherpas visited me in my office in Vancouver in advance of the 2002 G8 Summit in Kananaskis, Alta. They were curious about the success of our strategies to manage and control HIV/AIDS. To my surprise and delight, a key outcome of that summit was the launch of *the G8 Africa Plan*. It committed the G8 to support inclusive and peaceful development of Africa with the primary objective to combat HIV/AIDS, which was devastating the continent. Last week, Canada once again hosted the G7 meeting (G8 minus Russia) in Kananaskis. Sadly, at a time when we are so close to defeating HIV/AIDS, the G7 appears to be renegeing on its 2002 commitments.

While the world has made substantial progress on HIV/AIDS since 2002, the G7's recent retreat came at a critical time. In 2023, new HIV infections across Canada were up by 35 per cent, and the Public Health Agency of Canada estimates this will be even higher in 2024. Other western countries such as the [United States](#) and [United Kingdom](#) are also seeing increases in new HIV infections.

Meanwhile, the U.S. administration has decided to cut funding and support to key agencies and programs responsible for domestic and international

HIV/AIDS control, and complementary programs such as food support, family planning, and TB and malaria control.

The U.S. cuts are devastating. The Kaiser Family Foundation estimates that 80 per cent of all U.S. Global Health Awards and 71 per cent of all HIV Global Awards have been terminated. UNAIDS estimates that between 2025 and 2029, permanent cuts to HIV programs supported by the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief would lead to an additional 6.6 million new



Dr. Julio Montaner is executive director and physician-in-chief at the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. *Handout photograph*

infections globally, and 4.2 million AIDS-related deaths. This would set global control of HIV/AIDS back by a decade, with overwhelming social, economic, and security implications. Of further concern, the U.K., Germany, France, and Canada are also looking at cutting foreign aid.

This all comes at a time when we know how to treat and prevent HIV/AIDS, and end the pandemic. Globally, antiretroviral therapy has been rolled out to prevent the progression to AIDS, AIDS deaths, and HIV transmission under the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS's Treatment as Prevention (TasP) strategy. Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which is more than 90 per cent effective in protecting against HIV infection, is now also available. Furthermore, TasP and PrEP are cost-averting.

UNAIDS endorsed the TasP strategy in 2010, and the United Nations followed suit in 2015 with the goal of reducing AIDS deaths and new HIV infections by 90 per cent by 2030, which would end HIV/AIDS as a public health threat. To achieve this ambitious goal within five years, we must meet the UN 95-95-95 Target calling for 95 per cent of people living with HIV to be diagnosed, 95 per cent of them on antiretroviral treatment, and 95 per cent of the latter virologically suppressed by December 2025.

Six months away from the UN 95-95-95 Target deadline, UNAIDS reports that 86 per cent of people living with HIV globally were diagnosed, 89 per cent of them were on antiretrovirals, and 93 per cent of them were virologically suppressed at the end of 2023. As a result, by 2023, worldwide AIDS-related deaths decreased to about 800,000 per year, and new HIV infections decreased to about one million per year. The UNAIDS 2024 Global AIDS Update estimated that a full 19 key target countries in the world's South were within reach of the 95-95-95 Target.

Still, due to rising HIV incidence in key countries and U.S. program cuts, HIV/AIDS control in Canada and around the world is now threatened. Prime Minister Mark Carney has called for cost-effective, nation-building projects to improve the lives of Canadians and demonstrate leadership. Redoubling efforts to defeat HIV/AIDS in Canada by 2030 certainly fits the bill.

It will save lives, prevent AIDS deaths, improve quality of life, prevent transmission, and save money. We have a proven, six-point plan to ensure that Canada meets the UN 95-95-95 Target so that we stay on track to end HIV/AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. It includes fully funding access to antiretroviral therapy and PrEP for all in need, harmonizing risk reduction policies across the country, and enhancing social, legal, and medical supports for priority populations.

Beyond these Canadian efforts, we must act globally. We have a responsibility to share our concerns with G7 states, and encourage them to work together to

avoid the global collapse of the HIV/AIDS effort. The math is simple: the U.S. contribution to global HIV/AIDS programs is estimated to represent 57 per cent of the total provided by donor countries. Therefore, G7 leaders should double their respective contributions. In doing so, they would lead by example and avert a major global health and security crisis. We can do so now or pay a higher toll in terms of suffering, disease, death, insecurity, and money in the not-so-distant future. This would be a legacy-building initiative, entirely consistent with a key priority of Canada's G7 presidency to protect our communities and the world.

Finally, we must consider the wise words of former U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell. In 2003, he said: "HIV/AIDS is not just a health and humanitarian issue. If left to rage, it tears the fabrics of societies, undermines governments and devastates economies. It can destroy countries and destabilize entire regions. Unless we act, millions will die. No country is immune; all countries are vulnerable."

His words were true then and are true today. Failure to act will have grave global consequences.

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