

# AIDS:

## NO TIME FOR COMPLACENCY

By: George Curry  
—Guest Columnist—

The CDC recently reported that the number of newly diagnosed HIV infections among Blacks has declined an average of five percent a year for the past three years. Usually, such a drop would be viewed as good news. But it's not.

Consider this: More than 368,000 Blacks have been infected with AIDS since the disease was first diagnosed almost a quarter of a century ago. That's greater than the population of Miami, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Tampa, Greensboro, NC, or Baton Rouge, LA. Blacks are 12.3 percent of the U.S. population, yet account for 40 percent of AIDS cases diagnosed

Also consider this: By the end of 2004, according to the CDC, more than 200,000 Blacks with AIDS had died. That's greater than the population of Spokane, Wash; Augusta, GA, Little Rock, AK, Salt Lake City, UT, Knoxville, TN, Huntsville, AL, or New Haven, CT.

Numbers get tossed around so frequently that there is a tendency to be numbed by all the figures. But we're not talking numbers—we're talking about people. Real people. Enough to form a midsize city.

But even numbers need to be placed in perspective. Overall, the rate of AIDS diagnosed for Blacks in 2004 was almost 10 times the rate for Whites, and almost three times the rate for Latinos. But when you compare the statistics by gender, the gap is even more startling.

Of women diagnosed with HIV from 2001-2004, more than two-thirds (68 percent) were Black; Whites were 16 percent and Latinos 15 percent. The CDC found that 78 percent of Black females contracted HIV through heterosexual activities.

Among men diagnosed with HIV during that same period, 45 percent were Black, 37 percent White and 16 percent Latino. Almost half of Black men (49 percent) contracted HIV through sex with other men, and 67 percent of them were unaware that they were infected, according to the CDC.

The CDC cites an array of factors—poverty, limited awareness of HIV status, disproportionate rates for sexually transmitted diseases, mistrust and limited access to health care—that help explain the glaring gaps in the numbers.

At some point, however, while acknowledging that those are all legitimate factors, Black people must realize that not enough is being done to lessen the likelihood of Blacks contracting HIV. And when Blacks do contract HIV, they are late finding out, meaning that they run a higher risk of death because of delayed treatment.

Black religious and political leaders must move beyond lip service and consistently organize testing programs. The community must offer realistic sex education for our young people. To support abstinence-only programs for teens when almost half of them acknowledge being sexually active is, in some instances, signing their death certificates. The issue is not whether teens should abstain from sex—few disagree with

that notion—but what to do about those who do not. If we're serious about curbing this epidemic, we must aggressively promote the use of condoms. A report by the Population Action International in Washington, D.C. stated, "The condom is the only technology available for protection from sexually transmitted HIV." It also noted, "Public health experts around the globe agree that condoms block contact with body fluids that can carry the HIV virus and have nearly 100 percent effectiveness when used correctly and consistently."

When I attended an international conference on AIDS in Bangkok, Thailand last year, I noticed how some countries are not squeamish about distributing condoms. They pass them out at major public events, enlist the assistance of taxi drivers and make them easily available in public places without stigmatizing users. Yet, in the U.S., where sex is used to sell everything from automobiles to vacations, we are timid about discussing condoms. Actually, we're not talking as much about condom use as we are about saving lives.

The federal government must play an important role. Elected officials shouldn't be allowed to get away with saying they are interested in HIV and AIDS programs, while slashing funds for them, nor should corporations and foundations.

The Black AIDS Institute in Los Angeles does more than any other organization in the Black community to keep this issue before the public. But Phil Wilson, executive director of the organization, says this year his group has had its income reduced by 50 percent, causing him to cut his small staff. Evidently, in the national rush to help victims of Hurricane Katrina, many contributors are shifting funds away from other worthwhile programs.

This is no time to abandon anti-AIDS activists or to become complacent. (George Curry is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service and BlackPressUSA.com. He may be contacted through his website at [www.georgecurry.com](http://www.georgecurry.com)).



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Ideas expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the publisher or staff. (336) 727-1171 fax (336) 723-1606 e-mail: [acphoenix@triad.rr.com](mailto:acphoenix@triad.rr.com)

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