

HIV infection rates African American Males

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Written by Louis Weisberg

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The number of new HIV infections in Wisconsin continues to rise, and young African-American gay and bisexual men continue to be disproportionately affected by the epidemic, according to a new report.

The Wisconsin Department of Health Services' 2011 HIV surveillance report found that new infections in the state increased 19 percent last year over 2010. At the end of last year, 6,550 people were reported to be living with HIV or AIDS in the state. In addition, the health department estimated another 1,750 infected people living in Wisconsin who were unaware of their HIV status.

The report showed that Milwaukee County continues to be the epicenter of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Wisconsin, reporting 53 percent of the new cases last year. But "new cases of HIV were diagnosed in more than half of Wisconsin counties last year," said Mike Gifford, executive director of the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin.

"The report demonstrates the critical need for expanded access for an increasing number of HIV patients to the health care and medications they need to keep or regain their health as well as aggressive prevention programs targeted toward people most at-risk for contracting HIV," Gifford said in a statement.

Continuing an alarming, nationwide trend, young African American men who have sex with men experienced the greatest increase in both the proportion and number of HIV cases. They also experienced the largest decline in the median age of diagnosis.

Reported cases of HIV in black gay and bisexual men under the age of 30 in Wisconsin tripled between 2002 and 2011. Last year, they accounted for one in five new HIV cases in the state, compared with just 6 percent in 2002. Half of the black men diagnosed with HIV infection last year were younger than 24.

One in three black men between the ages of 15 and 59 who has sex with men is estimated to be HIV-positive – a prevalence rate that's three times higher than that of gay and bisexual Hispanic men in the state and six times higher than for white gay and bisexual men. It's more than 500 times higher than the adult population of Wisconsin as a whole.

Although the resurgent HIV epidemic among young African American men who have sex with men is not unique to Wisconsin, the problem in Milwaukee is so disproportionate that it's attracted attention from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC sent a team of epidemiologists to Milwaukee in 2009 to investigate.

At that time, researchers found evidence suggesting that the increase was fueled by a preceding rise in syphilis cases. The presence of syphilis makes it easier to spread and acquire HIV, due to abrasions on the genitals.

The investigation also found possible social and environmental factors, including closed sexual networks and unusually high intergenerational sexual relationships (older men are more likely to be infected).

In the wake of the CDC's findings, new prevention funding was allocated for agencies in Milwaukee. Some of the money is to fund old prevention strategies such as HIV testing, while some is allocated for new approaches.

But Gary Hollander, executive director of Diverse & Resilient, said there's a significant lag time. "Most of the programming associated with the new funding was launched in the past six months, some is still in development," he said. "Most of the program partners at the Center for AIDS Intervention Research, the AIDS Resource Center of Wisconsin, the 16th Street Community Health Center and Diverse & Resilient have implemented new programs in the past year to address this issue, but we will not likely see the results of these changes immediately."

“The issues associated with HIV transmission among young African American gay and bisexual men are really complex and reflect a whole lot of behavioral and socio- economic issues,” Hollander added. “The issue is a lot more intractable than people had hoped it would be.”

Hollander said the higher rates of infection among young gay and bisexual African Americans is not the result of riskier sexual behavior in that population.

“They are likely not engaging in more unprotected sex than their heterosexual peers,” Hollander said. He explained that high rates for any STD generally stem from a lack of relevant sex education, limited access to appropriate healthcare and a higher prevalence rate of that STD within a given population.

“Unprotected sex in a community where 1 in 3 has HIV is going to have a different outcome than unprotected sex in a community where 1 in 1000 has HIV,” Hollander said.

Social stigma against HIV and against gay and bisexual men in the African American community deters them from disclosing their sexual behavior to their partners and from seeking medical assistance, Hollander added.