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### Getting Physical: Black men and the AIDS epidemic

Benjamin Ryan



As an idealistic college student in the mid-1990s, Chris Bell threw himself into HIV/AIDS activism, became a peer educator and even took a semester-long course on AIDS. He

got an "A."

Then the 23-year-old African-American man got HIV. Despite having had unprotected sex with a partner, he said the diagnosis came as a surprise.

"The statistics should have warned me," said the St. Louis native, who is now 32 and teaching in Poland while he finishes a Ph.D examining U.S. cultural responses to AIDS. "Namely, the fact that half of all new infections occur in individuals under the age of 25. But I didn't see myself as a statistic. The statistics were abstract and intangible. At least they were until I became one."

When it comes to the domestic HIV epidemic, perhaps no statistics are more alarming than those describing the silent scourge that is devastating African-American men who have sex with men. It's the biggest disaster you may have never heard about, since it's not exactly fodder for the cover of Newsweek. In June 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stunned the AIDS community with a study that found *nearly half* of all urban black men who have sex with men are HIV-positive.

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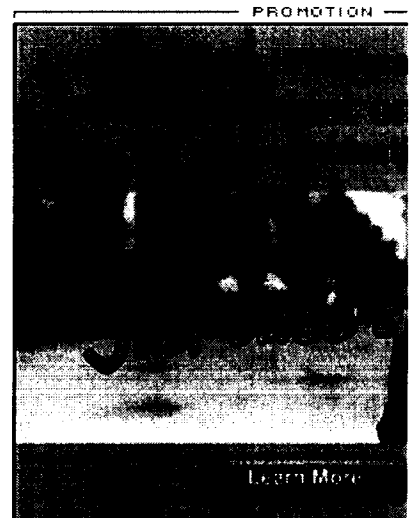
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The study surveyed five major American cities and found that, on average, 46 percent of the black men who have sex with men carried the AIDS virus, compared to 21 percent of white MSM and 17 percent of Latino MSM. Even more worrisome is that a whopping 64 percent of the blacks who tested positive did not know they were infected, while just 18 percent of the Latinos and 11 percent of the white men were similarly in the dark about their HIV status.

Of all new HIV diagnoses reported to the CDC between 2001 and 2004, one out of six was in a black man who has sex with men. Those are vastly disproportionate figures, given that black men make up only 6.5 percent of the U.S. population, and black MSM an even smaller sliver of that percentage.

So what has gone so terribly wrong? How did the rates of infection among black MSM rise higher than those of the general population in sub-Saharan Africa?

"There's been so little attention paid to that population," explained Phill Wilson, executive director of the Black AIDS Institute. "You have a combination of multiple forces creating a perfect storm."

A just-released CDC report attempts to identify those multiple forces. The authors found strong evidence to support two key points: First, since black MSM have higher rates of untreated STDs, including syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia, they are more likely to get infected with HIV as well. Not only do these three STDs – all of which can be usually be cured with antibiotics – make HIV-positive men more infectious, but they can make it

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easier for the HIV-negative partner to pick up the virus as well. (STDs can often have no symptoms, so it's important to have a regular checkup with your doctor to be sure – ask for a full STD screen. If you don't have health insurance, try doing a search on the Internet for "county free clinic" – you may be able to get affordable treatment there.)

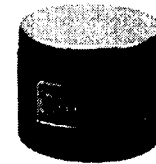
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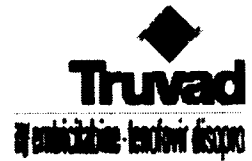
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The second major point in the CDC report echoes the 2005 study's finding – that black MSM often don't know they are infected, and may unknowingly pass along HIV to their partners. African-American MSM get tested for HIV less frequently and later in the course of their infection than whites or Latinos. (To find a free or low-cost testing center near you, go to <http://www.hivtest.org/>)

Next, the study found five major points that, while lacking solid supporting data, may also help explain the staggering statistics. African-Americans might actually have a genetic variant in their immune system that makes it easier for them to get HIV. They are less likely to be circumcised than white men; and numerous studies have suggested that men with intact foreskins are at greater risk for infection. The lack of access to proper health care that plagues the African-American community means that black men are often not receiving antiretroviral drug therapies; with a virus replicating unchecked, men become more infectious.

Chris Bell said he believes HIV prevention messages failed him. Despite recent well-meaning efforts on the behalf of the Kaiser Family Foundation to develop television public service announcements and programming toward black viewers on BET, MTV and other stations within the Viacom network, historically, most major AIDS advertising has targeted those least at risk for HIV – white heterosexuals.

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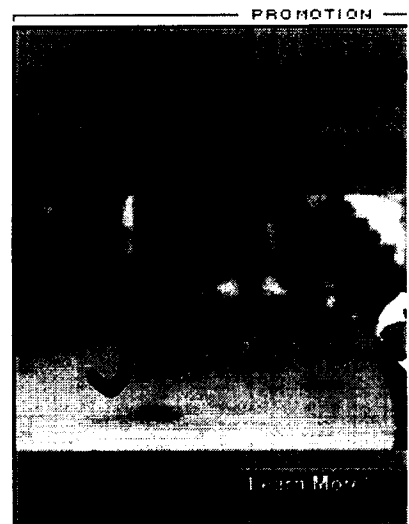
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"I think I missed the messages because I didn't conceive of the fact that the messages were aimed at me," Bell said.

Said Gregorio A. Millet, MPH, a behavioral scientist at the CDC and the lead author of the recent report: "We need to really look into what types of prevention messages would be effective in getting black MSM tested for HIV."

On an optimistic note, Millet added, "Quite a few black MSM are taking care of themselves, are not HIV-positive and are in some ways really taking prevention activities to heart on a day-to-day basis. We need to figure out what are they doing right . . . to see if we could somehow harness those tactics."

Jack McKinney, an African-American pastor at the Pullen Baptist Church in North Carolina, repeats a common refrain found in Millet's study – that black churches are failing to help their congregations fight AIDS, their tongues tied by homophobia.

"I think that the bottom line as to why [AIDS] has been such a struggle across the Christian spectrum, but especially in the African-American church, is the confusion of sin and sickness," he said. "We all have selective lenses when we read the scriptures. The loss of compassion may be one of the greatest modern scandals in the American church."

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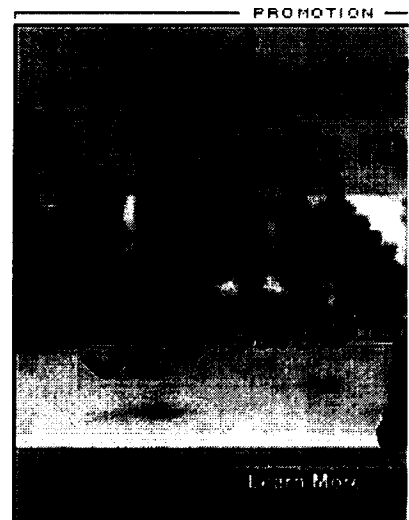
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A final point in the CDC report refers to a 2005 RAND Corporation study that found that dramatically high numbers of African Americans subscribed to conspiracy theories about AIDS. More than a quarter of those surveyed believed AIDS was produced in a government lab, and one in six thought the disease was manufactured to control the black population. According to RAND, black men who subscribed to these beliefs were much less likely to practice safer sex.

Bell laments the more global problems that black men face in this country. "When you're eking out a day-to-day existence that involves negotiating racism, homophobia and a host of other cultural ills, you don't have time to devote to considering your risk for HIV," he said. "People know that condoms save lives, but that doesn't mean that people, including black MSM already dealing with those ills, want to save their lives."

*Benjamin Ryan is a freelance writer specializing in health coverage and an editor at large at HIV Plus magazine. A cum laude graduate of Columbia University, he worked as an HIV test counselor as an undergraduate. He lives in New York City. Contact him at [benjaminryan@gay.com](mailto:benjaminryan@gay.com).*

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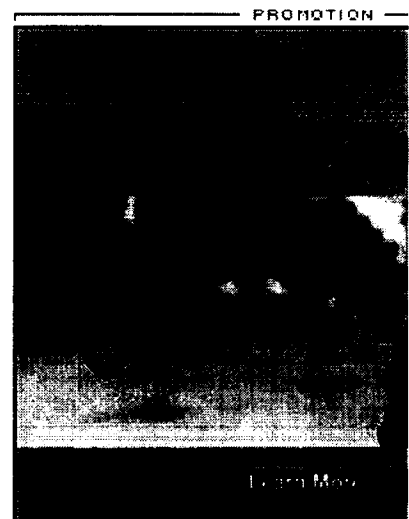
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