

# Black Gay Men's Lives Matter!

New figures released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that nearly 1 in every 2 Black gay and bisexual men (46%) is infected with HIV. Yet, when these findings were made public in June 2005, there was virtually no response or reaction – not from the media, not from mainstream activist groups, not from public health officials. Although appalling, this lack of a reaction is not surprising when the lives of Black gay men are routinely reduced to sex acts and when Black gay men are continuously labeled as sexual pariahs or portrayed in the media as the vectors of disease. Forty-six percent can be interpreted in a number of ways. The Institute for Gay Men's Health chooses to read this number as indicative of this country's shameful inattention at addressing the specific HIV prevention needs of Black gay men, and we challenge this failure!

At this point, it seems prudent that we start with the basics. We must begin to imagine an HIV prevention agenda in a world **where the lives of Black gay men mattered**, an agenda that by necessity would call for social change.

## The Discourse...

There are very difficult conversations that can no longer be put off within mainstream gay and Black communities. We can no longer afford to be silent on the issues that reinforce isolation and promote a compromised self-image for Black gay men. Too much goes unspoken and unchallenged as Black gay men are marginalized or rendered insignificant in these conversations.

If Black gay men mattered, they would be the point of reference as we strategize our HIV prevention responses. We would routinely confront problematic ideas of masculinity. We would begin to expose language that shames and isolates. We would identify when and how overtly moralistic attitudes about sex and drug use negatively impact the lives of Black gay men. Homophobia, in its many guises, would be exposed, rejected, and altered. Similarly, we would unapologetically name systemic racism, class discrimination as well as gender violence when it was happening and point out how it was hurting. We would, for example, question the disproportionately high numbers of Black men held in the criminal justice system. And we would **always** begin our conversations about HIV/AIDS by reaffirming the strengths and resiliencies of all Black gay men.

Funding directed at Black gay men for HIV prevention is certainly not commensurate with the demonstrated level of need, a fact that has been true since the start of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Black gay communities have been shortchanged when it comes to having opportunities to freely create culturally relevant, varied, and home-grown HIV prevention interventions.

If Black gay men mattered, HIV prevention funding and policy-making would be adequately and strategically targeted to Black gay men. Funding initiatives would be flexible and allow for a focus on building community capacity to organize and mobilize. Funding would allow for explicit and real conversations about sexuality and sex; these conversations would be free of moralistic judgments and abstinence-only initiatives. Funders and policy makers would listen to the communities of Black gay men and realize that efforts to combat homophobia, HIV/AIDS stigma, transphobia and racism are critical and legitimate HIV prevention strategies worthy of significant support.

## The Funding...

With few exceptions, the operating paradigm within public health initiatives defines the risk for HIV infection as behavioral or cognitive in nature, usually framed in terms of deficits in individual knowledge, attitudes, motivation or skills. This paradigm makes it easy to justify intervention approaches that pathologize and patronize Black gay men with pre-determined solutions that they were not involved in creating. Moreover, public health institutions have adopted an evidence-based orientation at a time when available evidence has little to do with the interpersonal, social, cultural and environmental realities of Black gay men's lives.

If Black gay men mattered, HIV prevention interventions would be democratically developed and framed in the language of love, intimacy, connection and sex. HIV prevention would honor the knowledge and wisdom Black gay men bring to bear in creating solutions that make sense to their day-to-day realities. We would embrace this knowledge as credible evidence. Moreover, interventions would be:

- Strength-based
- Non-judgmental
- Open-ended
- Sex positive
- Contextualized
- Culturally connected
- Engaging
- Entertaining
- Oriented to reducing harm and promoting wellness.

Stemming the tide of the HIV epidemic among Black gay men must be a shared responsibility. While different communities have different work to do in addressing the impact of HIV on the lives of Black gay men, we cannot afford to get trapped in conversations about who is allowed to work with or on behalf of Black gay men. **We are all accountable for the lives of Black gay men!**

If Black gay men mattered, we would resist the tendency to single-out any one group in assigning responsibility for the wreckage created by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Black gay communities. We would all feel a deep and genuine sense of responsibility for creatively reversing the situation. We would return to the promise of coalition work. And we would share responsibility for coordinating a diverse range of responses that advance an agenda for social change, including:

- National partnerships that combine resources to adequately respond to the epidemic with community level-efforts aimed at challenging the many silences that exist around masculinity, race, sexuality, sex, family, and desire;
- Publications that put the lives of Black gay men back into their family, community, social and sexual contexts;
- Public awareness campaigns designed to make homophobia, sexism, gender violence, racism, class discrimination, and HIV/AIDS stigma socially unacceptable;
- Community forums as well as kitchen table chats that focus primarily on issues determined by Black gay men;
- Steadfastness with national sustained campaigns promoting the message that Black gay men's lives matter; and
- Mobilization and advocacy efforts for and by Black gay men.

The urgency to act swiftly, boldly, and unapologetically has never been more palpable. In our actions however, we must dare to look differently at old issues and underscore our collective work to end HIV/AIDS with courage and hope. **We must do so precisely because the lives of Black gay men do matter.**