



Latinos and AIDS: Overview

Recent statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that although Latinos make up about 13% of the U.S. population, they comprise 20% of new HIV infections (2000). Latinos also make up 18% of all AIDS cases reported since the beginning of the epidemic in the early 1980's (CDC 2000). Currently, between 110,000 and 170,000 Latinos in the United States are living with HIV (CDC 2000). Unfortunately, many individuals with HIV do not know that they carry the virus, thus spreading the virus to others without even realizing it.

The rapid growth of the HIV virus has devastating effects for the Latino community, particularly for youth. Through June of 1998, Latinos between the ages of 13 and 19 comprised 20% of cumulative AIDS cases for adolescents, and Latinos age 20-24 accounted for 21% of cumulative AIDS cases in their age group (National Pediatric and Family HIV Resource Center, 1999). The numbers of Latinos, including adolescents and young adults, infected with the HIV virus continue to grow. Greater intervention efforts to teach youth about HIV prevention methods must be made in order to keep the rates of infection from increasing. With the rapidly growing Latino population in the United States, it is essential that more preventative efforts target the Latino community. By reaching out to Latino youth, we can save thousands of lives each year and have a brighter future, not only for the Latino community, but also for the entire nation.

History of AIDS in the Latino Community

When the first AIDS cases in the United States were discovered in 1981, white homosexual men were deemed the most at risk population for contracting the virus. Since then, the groups of people most likely to contract the HIV virus have changed dramatically. As scientists discovered more about the disease, they realized that HIV infects people of all races and sexual orientations. HIV has affected every community in the United States, and the virus has had a huge impact on the Latino community.

The history of AIDS in the Latino community shows the rapid growth of HIV infection rates. As early as 1982, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that Hispanics comprised 23 cases of AIDS-related pneumonia (CDC 2000). By 1986, Latinas accounted for more than 20% of women suffering from AIDS (CDC 2000). The next year, the rate of AIDS cases among

all Latinos grew 2.6 times higher than that of whites in the United States (CDC 2000). In 1991, ten years after the first AIDS cases were discovered, deaths caused by AIDS were twice as high for Latinos than for whites (CDC 2000). The CDC reported in 1995 that Latinas had AIDS case rates that were seven times higher than those of white women (CDC 2000). The rapid growth of the AIDS virus in Latino communities has culminated in Latinos comprising 20% of all new HIV infections, although they currently only make up 13% of the population in the United States (CDC 2000).

Although once thought to infect only white males, AIDS has proven that it does not discriminate. The effects of the HIV virus on the Latino community have been devastating. Rates of HIV infection among Hispanics have increased at an alarming rate, and they continue to do so, posing a dangerous threat to the health and future of the Latino community. By educating Latinos, especially youth, about HIV, we take the first step towards preventing the rapid growth of the disease in the Latino community.

Latinas and AIDS

The rates of infection of the HIV virus have grown rapidly over the past twenty years throughout the United States and in the Latino community. Although men comprised the majority of new HIV infections in 1999, the rates among women, particularly women of color, are also rapidly increasing. In 1986, Latinas accounted for more than 20% of AIDS cases in women (CDC 2000). By 1995, Latinas were seven times more likely than whites to contract the HIV virus (CDC 2000). A 1999 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention stated that although Latina and African-American women together comprise less than 25% of all women in the United States, they make up 77% of AIDS cases to date (CDC 1999).

HIV has devastating effects for all Latinas, but particularly for Latina youth. In 1999, women made up 49% of new HIV cases in youth 13 to 24 years old (CDC 1999). Since the beginning of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, Latinas and African-American female youth comprise more than 75% of AIDS cases in girls between the ages of 13 and 24 (CDC 1999).

Most women generally contract the HIV virus from having sexual intercourse with a man who has been infected, usually through intravenous drug use (CDC 1999). Therefore, it is vital that preventative efforts targeting young girls emphasize the use of condoms during sexual intercourse. Studies have shown that many Hispanic women, particularly immigrants, do not use condoms because they do not discuss "safer sex" with their partners (CDC 2000). Encouraging condom use among Latinas is vital in creating effective HIV prevention programs. Also, studies have shown that Latino youth who discussed using condoms with their mothers before ever

having sexual intercourse are significantly more likely to use condoms throughout their lives (CDC 2000). If we take efforts to educate young Latinas about “safer sex” and HIV, we can prevent the high rates of HIV infection from increasing even more.

Diversity and AIDS in the Latino Community

The Latino community in the United States is diverse. It includes people from very different regions of Latin America such as Mexicans, Cubans, Ecuadorians, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, Salvadorans, and Colombians. Although there are some commonalities between Hispanics of different ethnic origins, each group has its own distinct culture. For example, while HIV is a serious health concern for the Latino community as a whole, specific ethnic groups have different issues that must be taken into consideration when determining the best practices for HIV prevention among Latinos.

Latino ethnic groups have different rates of HIV infection and distinct behaviors that put them at risk. For example, the number of sex partners per individual varies based on ethnicity (CDC 2000). In Chicago, the rate of HIV infection for Puerto Ricans is four times that of Mexicans (CDC 2000). As of 1998, Hispanics with AIDS who were born in Puerto Rico were mostly injection drug users while the majority of those born in Mexico or Cuba were men who engaged in sexual intercourse with other men (CDC 2000). Perceptions about HIV also differ among the various Hispanic groups. Studies have shown that Mexicans generally have more misconceptions about HIV than other Latino groups (CDC 2000). Language is another issue; it is most efficient to contact certain Latino groups in Spanish while others prefer speaking in English (CDC 2000).

The Latino community is culturally diverse; however, the HIV virus effects all of the distinct Latino groups. Prevention efforts must be tailored to reach the specific Latino community in any given city. The Mexicans of California have different concerns than the Cubans in Florida or the Puerto Ricans in New York. Prevention efforts must also consider the differences among more recent

immigrant groups such as Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Dominicans. In order to develop HIV prevention programs for the Latino population, cultural differences must be taken into consideration. Considering these differences is the only way to create effective HIV prevention methods for Latinos in the United States.