

The New York Times, January 11, 2001

The Quiet Scourge

By Bob Herbert

The AIDS virus is surging like a prairie fire through black communities in the United States.

The epidemic is not getting anything like the attention it deserves. The Centers for Disease Control now believes that one in every 50 black American men is infected with H.I.V. That is an astonishing statistic.

AIDS is the leading cause of death for African-Americans between the ages of 25 and 44. While blacks are just 13 percent of the U.S. population, more than half of all new H.I.V. infections occur among blacks. Blacks are 10 times more likely than whites to be diagnosed with AIDS, and 10 times more likely to die from it.



This would be a good time for black Americans to say, enough.

The disease is concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods, where AIDS orphans have become ubiquitous. The suffering caused by the disease is all but unbearable. In some cases, entire families are being wiped out. You can

put away the notion that AIDS is a disease that primarily affects gay white males. That story has changed. Black women, for example, are becoming infected at a frightening rate. They account for 64 percent of all new infections among women in the U.S.

One in every 160 black women is believed to be infected with H.I.V. By comparison, one in 250 white men is infected, and one in 3,000 white women.

Alarms should be clanging from coast to coast. The idea that black Americans would submit quietly to this level of devastation from AIDS — as if no lessons had been learned from the pandemic in Africa — is repellent.

“It’s an overwhelming problem in the African-American community,” said Dr. Helene Gayle, who heads the H.I.V. programs at the Centers for Disease Control. “It has continued to increase along a trajectory that we had talked about for a long time.”

There are myriad factors contributing to the spread of H.I.V. and AIDS among blacks. Information about the threat of AIDS has not been disseminated widely or effectively enough, particularly among youngsters who feel they are invulnerable. Joe Pressley, an official with the New York AIDS Coalition, told me about a 15- year-old girl who said: "Don't tell me nothin' about no AIDS because that won't impact me. And if I was to get it, all I'd have to do is take a pill in the morning and I'll be O.K."

Intravenous drug users spread the virus among themselves by sharing needles, and pass it on to their partners through sexual contact. Other types of drug use can lead to poor judgment about sexual behavior, including the practice of trading sex for crack and other substances.

Dr. Gayle mentioned the higher rates of other sexually transmitted diseases among blacks and noted that they help fuel the spread of AIDS. And the extremely high rates of H.I.V. infection among black men — drug users and men who have sex with both men and women — have made black women especially vulnerable to infection from heterosexual contact.

Many blacks are poor and lack access not only to health care information and preventive services in general, but even to necessary treatment once they fall ill.

There was widespread denial in the black community for years about the spread of AIDS among African- Americans, in part because of the powerful stigmas attached to AIDS, homosexuality and IV drug use. Enormous numbers of blacks with the virus suffered in silence and shame, unable to tell their families or even their ministers.

At the same time, the attention of the wider public and the bulk of the services related to H.I.V. and AIDS were geared to the community of white gay men, which in the beginning was the epicenter of the problem.

Some voices are now being raised in opposition to this raging epidemic in the black community. The consciousness of the black clergy is slowly being elevated. Politicians are beginning to speak out. But voices here and there are not enough. Nothing less than a mighty chorus is needed to cope with this overwhelming tragedy — a chorus comparable in its seriousness of purpose to the civil rights movement.

Julian Bond, chairman of the N.A.A.C.P., has been trying to get out the following, absolutely crucial message: "This has become a black disease. Stop thinking about this as something that happens to somebody else. Because it happens to us."