

HEALTH

AIDS awareness could spur decline in birth rates

By Emory Curtis
Special to Sentinel-Voice

The past weeks have been a statistical mixed bag for Black Americans.

First the bad news: Blacks are one eighth of the U. S. population and more than half of new HIV infections.

The good news: The rate of out-of-wedlock births among Black women has declined to its lowest rate in 10 years.

That half of all new HIV infections are Black seems to be striking a nerve among black

leaders, organizations and churches who are beginning to speak out about behaviors that could lead to HIV and AIDS and are starting to help those with the immune system-destroying illnesses.

Blacks, like many other Americans, nudged the AIDS epidemic to the side, considering it a gay disease. And since homosexuals were already persona non grata with the black community, its leaders turned their backs on the AIDS problem.

The disease is spread via needles used by drug users was also not taken seriously enough, though it should have considering AIDS was devastating central Africa before it became widespread in America in 1981. The Africans infected with HIV were heterosexual non-drug users.

It is believed that Ugandan truck drivers who patronized prostitutes on their long northern trips were the major carriers of HIV. They picked it

up along the way and brought it back to Uganda where it quickly spread among the urban Ugandan middle class.

The latest UN report on AIDS and HIV says more than one-in-four Zimbabweans between the ages of 15 and 49 are infected with HIV or suffering from AIDS.

More women of child bearing age are infected with HIV in Africa than anywhere else.

In East Africa, 40 percent of the children 15 years of age

or less have lost their mother or both parents to AIDS.

The heterosexual transmission of HIV is more devastating than its spread through homosexual intercourse. Besides the partner getting infected through heterosexual intercourse, the mother can transmit HIV to children, especially if they are breast-fed.

Messages touting ways to reduce the risk of HIV and AIDS could have a damper effect on out-of-wedlock

births, thus reducing bed hopping.

The messages might also lead to longer-lasting relationships and eventually more marriages.

Pairing children off early could lead to a higher birth rate.

The earlier couples pair off, the more children they are likely to have, statistics show. The children are also more likely to grow up in a two-parent household, according to statistics.

Blacks need to prepare better for their retirement years

By Jeanette Takamura
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Breakthroughs in science, medicine and technology, combined with healthier lifestyles, better working conditions, improved quality of care, and the Social Security, Medicare and Older Americans Act programs, Americans are experiencing unprecedented longevity.

The projections of older Americans in the future force us to design policies for a population that will be grayer than ever.

America is blessed with the gift of longevity. The statistics speak for themselves:

— Approximately 46 million Americans are age 60 and over, with people 100 years of age and older the fastest growing population segment in our country.

— By the year 2030, the size of the population age 85 and older is projected to reach 8.5 million.

— One of every nine baby boomers will live at least 90 years of age.

— In less than 13 years, the vast majority of the nation's 77 million baby boomers, born

between 1946 and 1964, will begin to join the ranks of our older Americans.

The older population of the 21st century will not only be much larger, but far more diverse, especially regarding ethnicity, culture and rural versus urban dwellers.

For example, minority populations who experience significant health disparities are projected to represent 22 percent of the elderly population in 2020, up from 15 percent in 1996.

As America's minority elderly community experiences tremendous growth, it will become even more important to remove cultural, ethnic, racial, socioeconomic and language barriers reducing access to vital health, home and community-based and eldercare services.

In 1996, Blacks represented 7.9 percent of people 65 and older. Studies have shown that black families tend to place

greater emphasis on care for their elders at home rather than placing them in nursing homes if they become frail or disabled. Blacks say policy makers, community leaders, healthcare professionals and families need to work closely with them to develop options that will allow the practice to continue.

Help is available. More information is available about managed care plans.

Efforts are also being made to empower seniors to protect themselves against fraud and understand the tightened standards for Medicare and Medicaid health care providers. The National Long Term Care Mentoring Program provides assistance to states in developing more extensive programs in home and community-based care.

Minority populations suffer from certain diseases at a higher rate than white Americans. Older blacks have a higher death rate than older whites

from the leading causes of death among older Americans: heart disease, cancer and stroke.

Through the Initiative to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health, the Clinton Administration pledged to eliminate the gaps in six health status areas between racial and ethnic minorities and white Americans by 2010. Key areas include diabetes, cancer, stroke, cardiovascular disease and influenza and pneumococcal vaccinations.

Here are some things for


black seniors and their families should consider: becoming an informed consumer; finding a compatible health care provider; understanding the

importance of healthy living. Jeanette Takamura is assistant secretary for Aging, Department of Health and Human Services.

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those assembled that the \$1.4-billion loan assistance figure "wasn't set lightly. We have calculated it as a goal to be met, and we will do it."
"Yes, this is a very ambitious goal," she added in conclusion. "But it's an achievable goal. We and the National Urban League have a mission that we share—creating economic development that leads to personal empowerment and community economic empowerment."
"This is the time. If we don't do it now, we will have missed an opportunity not likely to come our way again."

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