

HIV Stigma in the Rural South

Satellite Conference and Live Webcast
Wednesday, September 28, 2011
10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m. Central Time

Produced by the Alabama Department of Public Health
Video Communications and Distance Learning Division

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Theory of Stigma

- Blame for being HIV-infected
 - Manifesting as bad reputation, prejudice, ostracism, social isolation, and avoidance
- Stigma is expressed in
 - Conspiracy theories
 - Homophobia

Theory of Stigma

- Denial of a problem
- Distrust of mainstream medicine
- Rejection of programs to reduce STI/HIV risk
- Stigma creates barriers to
 - HIV testing
 - Sex education

Theory of Stigma

- Harm reduction programs
 - Needle exchange
- Stigma also affects funding streams for sexual health
 - Especially in public institutions

Stigma is Local

- Homophobia as a tool for group solidarity



Church sign in Birmingham, Alabama

Stigma is Local



"I am going to Selma. Talk about a place that's underground. The clinic won't put its name on it. No signage, and it's supposed to be the testing center." (HIV specialist)

Selma, Alabama: Home of the Civil Rights Movement and HIV stigma

A. Diagnosis

- The CDC currently recommends opt-out screening in health settings
- The passive acceptance model is meant to alleviate fears of being tested
- Merchant & Waxman, 2010
- And yet:

A. Diagnosis

– Less than one fourth of patients agreed to be tested in an emergency room setting

• Haukoos, Hopkins, Conroy et al. 2010

- Passive screening does not work well
- People are afraid of being tested, or think they are not at risk

– Lyss et al., 2007; Merchant et al., 2008

Overcoming Stigma

- CDC guidelines advocate mass screening
- "Take the test, risk arrest"
- Screening is not value-free
- Testing is associated with being "hunted down"
- The 4 C's are:
 - Compulsory screening in prisons

Overcoming Stigma

- Contact tracing and vengeful partners
- Criminalization of non-disclosure
- Coercion in health settings
- In Alabama, prisoners who are HIV-infected are residentially segregated and wear armbands to signify their disease status

– ACLU/Human Rights Watch, 2010

Overcoming Stigma

- These are human rights issues
- HIV is no different from other serious but treatable STIs
 - Hepatitis B and C
- Yet still is being managed as a pariah disease

B. Prevention

- **CDC recommends:**
 - Mass screening
 - Education
 - Condom distribution
 - Pre- and post-diagnosis counselling
- **Stigma interferes with these goals at all levels**

B. Prevention

- **Education: Who is afraid of Virginia Wolf? Everyone**
- **Public funding for HIV prevention in schools is limited to abstinence education**
- **Condom distribution is an effective structural level intervention that is missing in the most important locations**

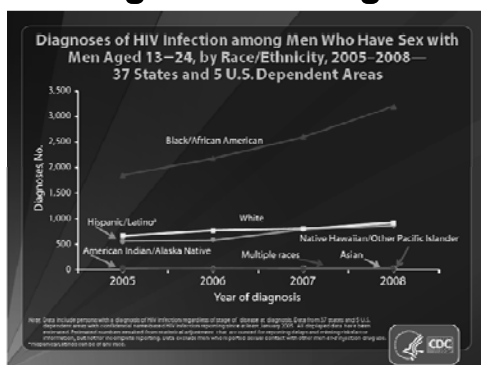
B. Prevention

- Schools
- Doctors' offices
- Church and community health fairs
- Jails
- Public restrooms
- Prisons

B. Prevention

- **Apart from health departments and HIV clinics, I have never seen a free-range condom in the South**
- **Counselling targets the already-stigmatized:**
 - HIV-infected and high-risk people

Young Men and Stigma?



Overcoming Stigma

- **Programs are needed to overcome homophobia among African American women and men**
- **The programs should take account of gender-ratio disparities in local communities and counter the idea that homosexuality is an immoral (white) construct**


Overcoming Stigma

- **Most importantly, all the tools of HIV prevention should be offered to young African American men as a matter of urgency**
 - Condoms in institutional settings and emergency rooms
 - HIV education in communal spaces
 - Post high-school education and training

Overcoming Stigma


- Alternatives to selling drugs
- **In all programs for HIV prevention, young African American men must be valued**
- **The message must clearly be relayed:**
 - We care about your health and wellbeing
 - Change laws that target minorities

C. Access to Care



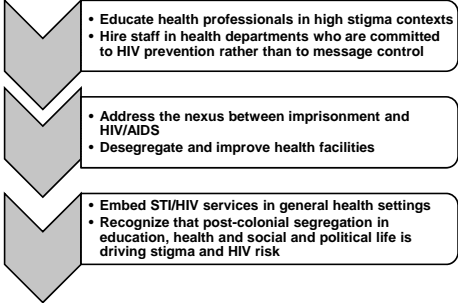
HIV Clinic, Montgomery, AL

Stigmatized Disease = Rundown Locations



HIV clinic in abandoned strip mall

Overcoming Stigma Start at the Top



- Educate health professionals in high stigma contexts
- Hire staff in health departments who are committed to HIV prevention rather than to message control
- Address the nexus between imprisonment and HIV/AIDS
- Desegregate and improve health facilities
- Embed STI/HIV services in general health settings
- Recognize that post-colonial segregation in education, health and social and political life is driving stigma and HIV risk

Overcoming Stigma Start at the Top

- **HIV should be treated as a health crisis, backed up at the health system's disposal**
- **Interventions in resource poor countries, such as Haiti, have worked because of local-global partnerships but also because HIV is perceived to be a whole population crisis rather than a minority issue**