

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

Faculty

Bronwen Lichtenstein, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Criminal Justice
The University of Alabama
Research Fellow
Rural Center for HIV/STD Prevention
Indiana University

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**

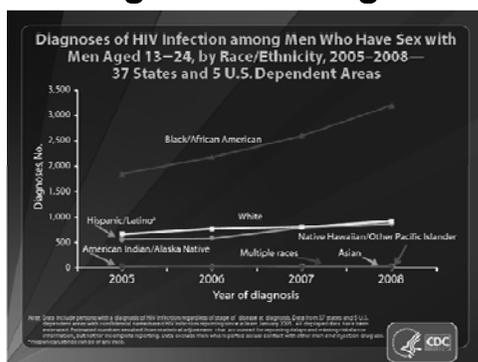
B. Prevention

- 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



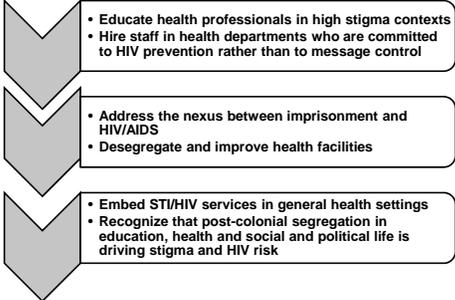
HIV Clinic, Montgomery, AL

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**