

Primetime Reports the HIV Epidemic Among Blacks ... A Decade Too Late

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Consider this: As early as October 1986, the Centers for Disease Control reported the "cumulative incidence of AIDS among blacks and Hispanics was more than three times the rate for whites." By 1996, more AIDS cases were found among blacks than any other ethnicity.

However, a 2004 study by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation—a non-profit devoted to researching and promoting public health issues—studied all news stories about HIV/AIDS in the US from 1981-2002. Only a pittance—a mere 3 percent—even mentioned racial minorities. How can this be?

If you tuned in to ABC News on Thursday night, you may have been surprised at the explanation for this given by reporter Terry Moran in *Out of Control: AIDS in Black America*. "We simply weren't paying attention," he admitted early in the show. It was a troublesome and frank admission to underscore an hour of fairly decent reporting. However, some key components of this story were not introduced—and that is also disturbing.

Here are the grim statistics: Blacks account for about 13 percent of the American population, but, an alarming 54 percent of all new HIV infections. Nearly 70 percent of the new HIV/AIDS cases among women are black. However, by large, black men who have sex with men remain the largest target group—a recent CDC report suggests about half of black gay and bisexual men in some cities might already be infected. "AIDS in America is a black disease no matter how you look at it," says Phil Wilson, the prominent activist and executive director of the Black AIDS Institute, who was interviewed in the special.

It's fairly simplistic to assume that network television could digest this epidemic within an hour and "deal with the complex social, cultural, political and spiritual issues around HIV/AIDS without sensationalizing those issues," Keith Boykin, the black gay political commentator and activist.

However, Primetime tried to be fair and offered five reasons why AIDS was out of control in black America—ignorance among people in power, government failure, the ratio of black women to black men, discomfort around men who have sex with men and higher numbers of sexual partners.

On the plus side, a number of black leaders were interviewed, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Bishop T.D. Jakes. Their interviews were among the best parts of the special because their **willful ignorance has helped spread the disease**.

Jackson was visibly uncomfortable about his silence regarding HIV and tried to deflect the argument. "Every football coach has fumbled the ball," he shrugged, which certainly will go down as one of the sound bites of the decade.

Jakes, a popular Dallas-based televangelist, also had a pithy remark: "The Apostle Paul didn't write about HIV or AIDS. So we don't know how to navigate those waters." Jakes almost seemed uncomfortable around the issue, and, the producers were clear to point out that he routinely almost never mentions HIV or safe sex in his sermons that are delivered to tens of thousands.

A number of other prominent black clergymen were interviewed, such as the Rev. Calvin O. Butts III of New York City's Abyssinian Baptist and Boston's Rev. Eugene Rivers. Both concede that the black church has not done enough—which is a major admission.

However, Rev. Butts is shown preaching that the community needs to stop "all the promiscuity that is characteristic of American heterosexual and homosexual behavior." Promiscuity does not cause HIV and, unfortunately, preaching that it does and ignoring safe sex and testing has been par for the course among many black clergy.

Speaking of the interviewed subjects-Rev. Rivers was an odd choice. Although he spoke eloquently on the church's need to become more proactive-"The conspiracy of silence on this sexual, moral and cultural crisis is suicidal"-the producers were strangely silent on why Rivers has become a prominent voice in the AIDS epidemic. That's because he is an outspoken critic of gays and was a huge supporter of the president's Federal Marriage Amendment.

These asides should not suggest that the Primetime special was totally off-target. Even though it devoted more attention to the threat of black women becoming infected, it did focus considerable energy on one of the primary factors in spreading HIV among blacks: Fear around men having sex with men and homophobia. The reporter, Terry Moran, provided enough statistics on infections, but it would have been stronger if they drove home the point that male-to-male transmission was more prevalent.

Up until now, the majority of the media have demonized black men in the HIV crisis-"as though brothas somehow invented HIV on their own and chose to infect black women", observes Keith Boykin. This program did not necessarily go there. A number of HIV positive black women were interviewed-only one or two spoke of the need to practice safe sex.

The late Peter Jennings was seen interviewing a round table of positive black men. One of the men related a chilling anecdote about his own history; he had been married and living on the "down low" and knew of his HIV positive status for a full year before telling his wife. Jennings didn't say anything but his arched eyebrow spoke volumes.

That was the major question remaining after watching Out of Control: AIDS in Black America: With all the information that is readily available, and, so many black men and women that are infected, why do so many of us continue to practice unsafe sex? At the close of the special, Terry Moran offered a few suggestions. He said that the tide could turn by challenging a popular culture that too often celebrates misogyny, irresponsibility, and anti-gay bigotry. That's a start.

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