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Swift Rise Seen In H.I.V. Cases For Gay Blacks

By LAWRENCE K. ALTMAN

Young gay black men in six cities are becoming infected with the AIDS virus at the rate of almost 15 percent a year, according to a new study by federal researchers, who found the rate "alarming" and called for expanded prevention efforts.

The same researchers reported in February that H.I.V., the AIDS virus, infects 30 percent of young, gay black men.

The new research, released yesterday, relies on a newer blood test to identify people who have been infected only recently. The researchers found that in the six cities, black gay men ages 23 to 29 had a 14.7 percent annual rate of new infection compared with 2.5 percent among white gay men and 3.5 percent among Hispanic gay men of the same age. For the age group overall, the new infection rate was 4.4 percent.

The findings mean that for every 100 young black gay men who were not infected at the beginning of the year, nearly 15 would be infected by the end of the year.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted the study from 1998 through 2000 in six cities: Baltimore, Dallas, Los Angeles, Miami, New York and Seattle. While health officials cautioned that rates of new infections might not necessarily hold true elsewhere, they said the rates nevertheless painted an alarming picture of the spread of a poten-

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tially lethal disease.

At a news conference, Dr. Helene D. Gayle, who directs the H.I.V. program at the Centers for Disease Control, and Dr. Linda Valleroy, who led the study, described the situation using similar terms, saying the "explosive H.I.V. incidence rates" were "alarming" and "of critical public health importance."

The findings were reported in the agency's weekly report. They add to a number of reports of increasing rates of sexually transmitted diseases, which increase the risk of becoming H.I.V.-infected, among gay men.

The new findings do not necessarily suggest that the proportion of men infected will continue to rise by almost 15 percentage points year after year. Many of the uninfected are using prevention measures. But the results do suggest, the researchers said, that without vigorous public health efforts, the prevalence of infection is likely to rise.

For a decade, the estimated number of people newly infected with H.I.V. in this country each year has been a stable 40,000. Gay men account for about 42 percent of new infections, Dr. Gayle said.

is stable, rising or falling."

The Centers for Disease Control released the findings on the 20th anniversary of the federal agency's first report on a mysterious ailment that would eventually become known as AIDS. Since then, more than one million Americans have been infected, of whom 450,000 have died. In Africa and elsewhere, H.I.V. has caused about 20 million deaths and has infected an additional 36 million people.

"We tend to think about our rates in the United States as being so much less than what we are seeing in other countries, and that is true if we look at it overall," Dr. Gayle said. She added that the findings "show that there may be populations in this country that have rates and potential for explosion analogous to what we have seen in other parts of the world."

The gay men in the study were small children in the 1980's when health officials issued the early information that helped reduce infection rates among gay men. Now, health officials say they must renew and sustain such messages, in part because young gay men have not seen many friends die of AIDS and may not take prevention as seriously as older gays.

"A new generation of young men is

The preliminary information on the incidence, or number of new infections each year, comes from a different analysis of the results of the study reported in February, which also involved men in San Francisco.

To measure incidence, epidemiologists tested 2,942 volunteers, chosen at random in 194 urban neighborhoods, at dance clubs, bars and other public venues frequented by young gay men. (Prisoners were not included in the study.) The participants answered questions related to their sexual history and drug use and were counseled about H.I.V.

Because the sample was small, it is possible that actual rates of new infection among young gay men in the study might be lower or higher than the 14.7 percent figure for young, gay black men. The researchers said the range of possible rates of new infection was from 7.9 percent to 27.1 percent for the black group.

Also, the study involved men who went to gay bars and similar venues, whose sexual practices and drug use may not mirror those of other gay men. On the other hand, the reluctance of many gay black men to acknowledge their homosexuality means their rate of H.I.V. infection would not have been detected.

Dr. Gayle said that programs for black men "must address the stigma of homosexuality which prevents many of these men from identifying themselves as gay and bisexual and may keep them from accessing needed prevention and treatment services."

In any event, the health officials said, even the lowest incidence figure — 7.9 percent — suggested a resurgence of H.I.V. among young gay men.

"The important thing about this is there is a significant and continuing H.I.V. epidemic among men having sex with men in these cities right now," Dr. Valleroy said.

Phill Wilson, executive director of the African American AIDS Policy and Training Institute in Los Angeles, said: "As a black gay man who has been living with H.I.V. for 20 years now, a prevalence in this population of 30 percent and an annual incidence of 14 percent is reason to be alarmed no matter if the number

For black gays, stigma may mean greater AIDS risk.

at great risk of H.I.V. and in need of the education and support of community leaders at all levels," said Dr. Mark Loveless, chairman of the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors in Washington, D.C., and AIDS director in Oregon.

In part because about 300,000 Americans do not know they are infected and not all states report new H.I.V. infections, health officials do not have "a good sense of the populations newly affected by the epidemic," Dr. Gayle said.

In January, the Centers for Disease Control announced a new strategy that aims in part to encourage people at high risk to get an H.I.V. test and form a profile of those who are newly infected. The agency intends to use the information to tailor prevention and treatment efforts to the needs of infected gay men as part of the \$400 million this year that the agency provides to state and local prevention programs. One aim will be to determine how such men can best be referred to health care and prevention services to reduce the risk of transmission. Because about half of those in the study said they engaged in unprotected anal sex, another goal will be to develop new and more effective prevention messages.

A chief goal of the strategy is to reduce by half the number of newly infected people in five years. Even then, 20,000 new infections will occur each year.

The new blood test will be used to get a better handle on areas of high incidence so health officials can garner the resources needed for testing and prevention efforts in communities across the country.

Dr. Gayle said, "We are not going to be able to do door-to-door surveys looking at who are the most recently infected people."