

[Back](#)

AIDS spreading in Harlem neighborhoods at a fast rate

By David Shimkin and A. Cassidy Sehgal
Spectator Staff Writer and Spectator News Editor

HIV and AIDS are spreading at a higher rate in Harlem than in other areas of New York because the city government is not doing enough to halt the decline of living conditions in the area, according to several local health experts.

“The deterioration of the Harlem community is the problem which has lead to the tremendous spread of the disease there,” said

Robert Fullilove, principal investigator of the Community Education and AIDS Prevention Core of the HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies Outreach Community Center at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital.

AIDS is the number one cause of death of men between the ages 16 and 24 in the Harlem community, according to Fullilove.

The mortality rate in Harlem is the highest in the country for black males without even taking into account HIV and AIDS deaths, he said.

“More people die from premature deaths

from homicide, smoking related diseases, liver disease, cancer and drug abuse [in Harlem]. That is a function of the lifestyle in the Harlem," Fullilove said.

Until something is done to curb unemployment, homelessness and drug abuse in Harlem, AIDS will continue to spread rapidly in the area, he said.

Fullilove said more funding for AIDS treatment facilities and education cannot stop the spread of the disease. First the government must address the decay of the community and its complete financial decline, he said.

"More treatment facilities is not the answer, because you can't just treat one aspect of the problem. You can't apply a band-aid to a wound that requires major surgery," Fullilove said.

"Education is simply not enough to solving the AIDS problem. We won't be able to solve the AIDS problem unless we're able to stabilize health care, stabilize sanitation and stabilize services available to the community," he added.

Minority Task Force on AIDS Coordinator Dwayne McKinley said, "The whole community is devastated. It's a very difficult epidemic for us all to deal with."

The task force, located at 115th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue, is a city-funded organization charged with educating and counseling the central Harlem community about the AIDS epidemic.

McKinley cited some grave statistics about

McKinley cited some grave statistics about the spread of AIDS in Harlem.

“Women between the ages of 15 and 44 in

central Harlem have the highest AIDS death rate [among women in the city],” McKinley said. “Overall, if you look at the statistics concerning AIDS in New York, 61 percent are of people of color.”

In the first three months of 1990, of the 31,804 babies tested for HIV antibodies in New York City, 408 were found to have the antibodies in their blood stream, according to a study done by the New York State Department of Health in their HIV Sero-Prevalence quarterly report. Thirty to 35 percent of the babies who have the antibodies develop the disease, according to a New York State health official who did not wish to be identified.

Many babies in Harlem are born to HIV-infected mothers, McKinley said.

“They are either born HIV-positive, or they will later become infected,” McKinley said. “They can become exposed to the virus in the womb, from the birth canal, or through breast feeding. We have so many children born in this community who are infected that it’s overwhelming.”

McKinley said the spread of AIDS throughout Harlem is due in large part to pre-existing problems.

“The big problem is a lack of social services,” McKinley said. “The problems are just not drug-related, they’re economic, social, and they’re race-related.”

“There is chronic unemployment in the area, you have an undereducated populace, and 50 percent of all households are headed by single females,” McKinley said. “Of that 50 percent, a majority of them are on welfare.”

Additionally, the disease spreads rapidly in Harlem because people who are infected are constantly moving throughout the community, Fullilove said.

“When buildings burn down that breaks up social networks. When a building burns down people are dispersed to other corners of the community and as they form new social or living groups they spread disease,” Fullilove said.

McKinley said health care facilities are inadequate in Harlem.

“There is less than one doctor per 1,000 residents in central Harlem,” McKinley said.

Fullilove also said more community based organizations are needed to combat the spread of AIDS since people that have a higher risk of being infected with HIV do not always turn to doctors when they need care.

Funding for city-funded community based organizations is extremely poor, McKinley said.

“The government should be doing a lot more but because of funding constraints, the government appears to be at its end,” McKinley said. “They don’t have the funding to do it.”

Another major obstacle toward stopping the spread of AIDS in central Harlem is the

the spread of AIDS in central Harlem is the lack of drug treatment center slots for addicts, McKinley said.

“There are thousands of intravenous drug users in Harlem alone,” McKinley said. “The proportion of treatment slots to addicts is something like 10 to one.”

Fullilove agreed that the number of drug treatment programs for addicts is far too low and said the waiting lists for heroin addicts is incredibly long. Additionally, he criticized the government for not handing out clean intravenous needles to addicts.

“The government is afraid to hand out clean needles to addicts because they’re afraid that it will lead to an increase in IV drug use, I don’t see that as the case,” he said.

Stopping the spread of the disease is far more important than the case for not legalizing IV needles, he said.

Andrew Breslaw, a spokesman for Ruth Messinger, the Manhattan Borough President said drug enforcement officials are not concerned enough with drug treatment.

“If you continue just to [fight] the narcotics epidemic in terms of law enforcement, you’ll just be catching-up. You’ll never get on top of it [the drug problem].

Breslaw also said federal government is apparently unwilling to commit large enough portions of its resources towards fighting the epidemic in such hard-hit locales like New York City.

“The city can improve what it’s doing with

better targeted funds, but if we're ever going to turn the corner we're going to need federal assistance," Breslaw said.

"I think the federal government is going through a period of retrenchment, it takes itself out of the problems of urban America."

"And it certainly hasn't helped being a liberal Democratic city," Breslaw said.

In addition, drug-related crime in the area is extremely high because it seems like one of the only alternatives for residents of the financially depressed Harlem community. If the government wants to crack down on drug sales and use they should help provide economic opportunity, Fullilove said.

"The criminal underworld must be given alternatives," Fullilove said.

McKinley also cited the lack of general health care as a major crisis.

Cultural attitudes

Attitudes towards AIDS in the black community are changing slowly, because of cultural attitudes, McKinley said.

"Quite often, people don't want to be associated with this disease because it's known as a 'white gay man's disease'," McKinley said. "Many people have suffered and died going through denial."

Fullilove said most members of the community are aware about the disease but are less concerned about it because they are more concerned with day to day survival.

"Members of the community who are in a

higher risk category of catching the disease have a different sense of risk. People addicted to crack who prostitute themselves are more concerned with day to day things such as 'am I going to make enough money, am I going to get beat up,' " he said.

"They are not necessarily as worried about the disease since it may manifest itself 11 years in the future," he said.

Prostitutes in Harlem are not changing their sexual practices because of AIDS, according to Ivelisse Capellan, director of the **See**

AIDS program at Alianza Dominicana, which is funded by the New York City Department of Health.

Alianza Dominicana, a community-based organization on 176th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, is across the street from drug-infested Highbridge Park.

Prostitutes in the area continue to trade sex for crack, she said.

"There's a lady infected there who still has sex with healthy people," Capellan said.

The distinct cultural differences of recent immigrants such as those from the Dominican Republic have not made the fight against AIDS any easier, Capellan said.

"There's a lot of people in this community that are HIV-positive and they're afraid to get help and ask questions," Capellan said. "People talk a lot. If someone sees you walking in [to Alianza Dominicana] they'll think you're infected."

A major problem, says Capellan, are the attitudes about sex in the Latino community.

“You have a lot of women who find it hard to discuss their sexual habits in an open manner with their partners,” Capellan said. “There’s never been a structured social way in which Latinos could do that.”

“There are some people who still feel that only certain people get AIDS,” Capellan said, “people who are bad, unfaithful, who are drug addicts. It has a lot to do with religion.”

An added problem is the attitudes of men specifically, according to Capellan.

“It’s difficult to give information to the males because they think that they’re macho and that they’ll never get the disease,” Capellan said. “And there’s a lot of discrimination--once you’re infected, they think you’re homosexual and they don’t want to be near you.”

Other people in the community disagree about the deleterious effects of dealing with a different culture and assert cultural differences should be seen as such and not as impenetrable hurdles when it comes to AIDS education and prevention.

AIDS education for Latinos is difficult to facilitate not because of cultural differences but because not enough attention has been paid to the spread of the disease in heterosexual communities, said Miguelina Maldonado, coordinator of the Hispanic AIDS Forum, which is a private and city funded organization involved in educating the Latino community

about AIDS.

“It’s not that cut and dry and simple. It’s not hard to educate because of machismo per se...the messages have been directed toward a white gay population or a general population without an understanding of how [Latino] people perceive sexuality and how they would react to a life-threatening disease.”

“The educational messages have not traditionally worked because of cultural and socio-economical differences,” Maldonado said.

According to Maldonado, traditional AIDS education up to now has been too limited in its scope.

“Most preventive education was basically designed to impart education that in and of itself does not change behavior,” Maldonado said. “People do not change their behavior because someone tells them to use a condom.”

“Education is simply not enough to solving the AIDS problem. We won’t be able to solve the AIDS problem unless we’re able to stabilize health care, stabilize sanitation and stabilize services available to the community.”

Twenty percent of all reported cases of AIDS have occurred in New York City; 1 in 23 babies born in New York City municipal hospitals are HIV-infected; studies by the Army show that among new recruits from New York City, 1 in 100 are HIV-infected, 1 in 50 recruits from Manhattan are infected. (Source: Columbia Gay Health Advo-

“It’s difficult to give information to the males because they think that they’re macho and that they’ll never get the disease. And there’s a lot of discrimination--once you’re infected, they think you’re homosexual and they don’t want to be near you.”

AIDS cases by sex and race/ethnicity, reported through 1990 in the United States

	White, not Hispanic	Black, not Hispanic	Hispanic	Asian/Pacific Islander	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Total
Male	77,215	33,309	19,918	823	178	131,777
Female	3,905	7,857	3,065	75	32	14,969
Total	81,120	41,166	22,983	898	210	146,746

Total reported AIDS cases in United States, through August 1990: 146,746

Total reported AIDS cases in New York City, through August 1990: 27,965

Total fatalities as of August 1990: adults/adolescents--88,433; children under 13 years old: 1,328

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control

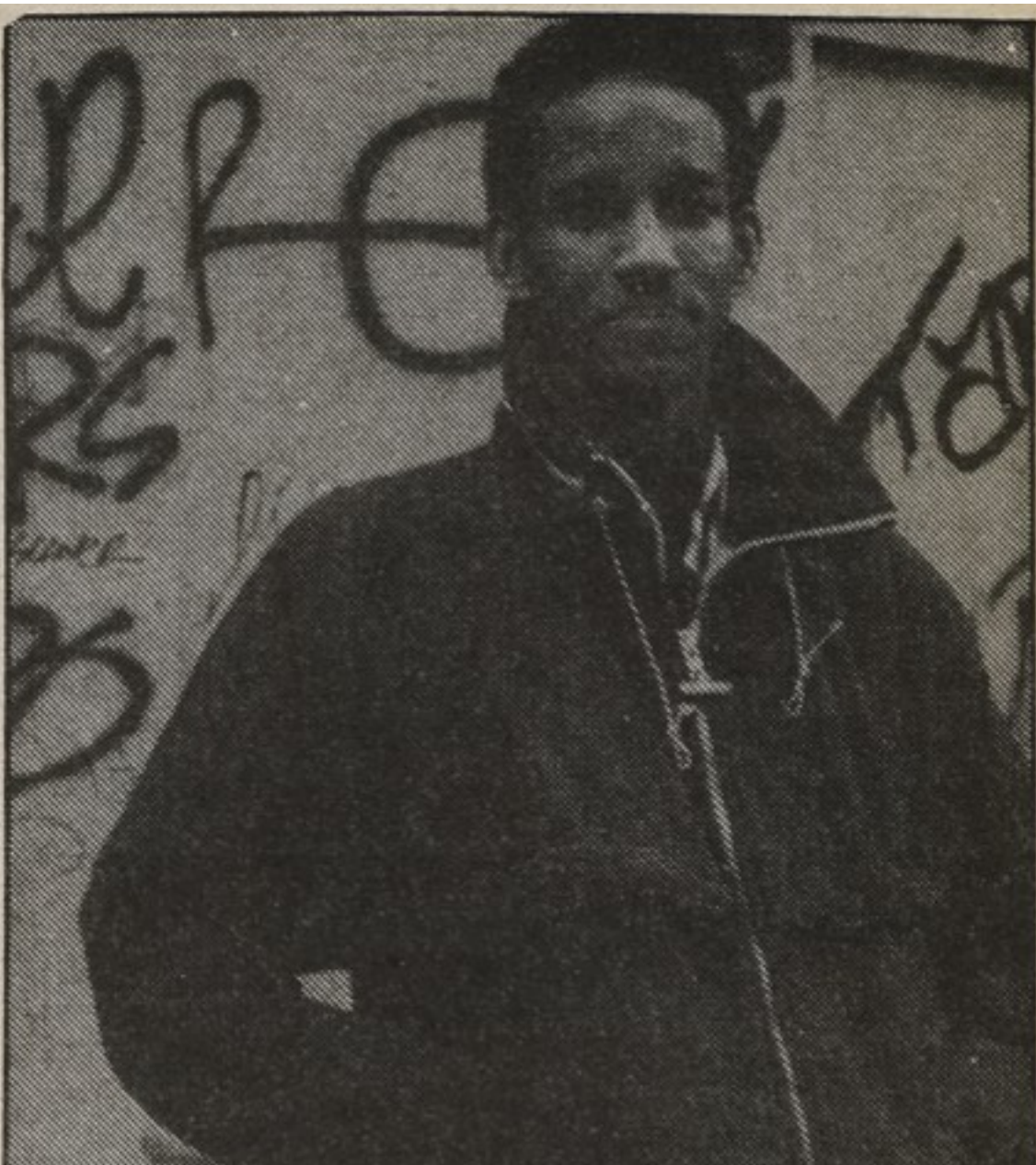
Alianza Dominicana, CENTRO DE RECURSOS COMUNALES





SPECTATOR/ROMSAI BOONYASAI
SPECTATOR/ROMSAI BOONYASAI

Members of the Alianza Dominicana, a community based organization on 176th Street that provides AIDS counseling.





SPECTATOR/ROMSAI BOONYASAI

Dwayne McKinley, Coordinator of the Minority Task Force on AIDS, outside his office on 115th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue.



SPECTATOR/ROMSAI BOONYASAI

Highbridge Park in Washington Heights is the home of many prostitutes and IV drug users.

This article has been automatically clipped from the Columbia Daily Spectator 29 October 1990, organised into a single column, then optimised for display on your computer screen. As a result, it may not look exactly as it did on the original page. The article can be seen in its original form in

the page view.