Sisters in Need

In the South, AIDS hits African-American women hard.

October 1, 2008 By Laura Whitehorn

We've known for years that the AIDS epidemic has been creeping south of the Mason-Dixon Line. The latest numbers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) confirm it. In 2006, the total number of AIDS cases among women and adolescent girls for the rest of the United States (Northeast, West and Midwest) was 4,876. In the South (including 16 states and Washington, DC), it was 5,323, and 75 percent were among African-American women and adolescent girls.

The high percentage isn't because black women have more sex partners than other groups. At a June 2008 conference sponsored by New York City's Iris House, Victoria Cargill, MD, of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), said that black and white people have similar rates of risk behaviors but that black people end up with higher rates of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, and studies back this up. (See "Amazing Race" for possible reasons behind the elevated numbers.)

None of this surprises Lisa Diane White, director of programs at SisterLove, a Georgia-based organization that has been battling HIV among women—especially African-American women—for 19 years. Lack of funding for prevention programs poses a big obstacle, White says.

Another challenge is convincing women to protect themselves or to treat their HIV. "For women," she says, "HIV is often secondary to housing, child care and day-to-day survival." And it doesn't help that women still consider HIV a gay epidemic. White says, "We tell women, 'Who do you think we're talking about? Look in the mirror.'"

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