

# The New York Times

## Room for Debate: A Running Commentary on the News

How to Close the Race Gap in H.I.V.?

How can public health officials fight the spread of H.I.V. among young gay black men?

### Navigating Without a Map

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In our response to the AIDS epidemic, we've often been confounded when it comes to effective prevention techniques and activities, especially as the disease found its way into populations outside the mainstream.

This has been particularly true when it comes to the homeless, IV drug users, prostitutes and poor single, black women, among others.

The newer problem is with younger men who have sex with men. While they have always been at the core of the epidemic, the caseworkers at VillageCare have been saying for well more than a year that we're facing an explosion of H.I.V. among younger gay males.

Young gay men lack role models. At worst, they can be promiscuous, even careless; at best, they have trouble negotiating safer sex.

These very young gay men are told by their families, friends, religious leaders and others that their sexuality is a mistake or an abomination. They feel isolated and rejected, and are often depressed. Men of color are doubly traumatized as sexual and ethnic minorities and live in a culture where homosexuality is universally condemned.

Howard Haughton, a VillageCare case management supervisor involved in reaching out to men who have sex with men— and 80 percent of those we serve are under 30 — describes them this way: “Many of our guys get the message that they are not worth saving. In that context, how can we expect that they would wear a condom?”

Many of these young men were shaped by negative experiences as they grew up. Among VillageCare's caseload, 30 percent report childhood sexual trauma, and 50 percent report a history of sexual and/or physical abuse.

All of this results in a marginalized community of young men who have sex with men, operating on the fringes, invisible to the rest of society — particularly the mass media.

These are young men searching for love in the dark without a map. They lack role models and are unable to discern appropriate sexual boundaries. At worst, they can be promiscuous, even careless; at best, they have trouble negotiating safer sex.

Reaching out to them effectively is difficult, because secrecy and silence abound.

It means meeting them on their own turf — “where they're at,” Haughton says, getting out on the street, finding them and connecting without scaring them off.

“When these men are engaged with caring people, their ability to change their circumstances and behavior is extraordinary,” he says.

Read more: <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/08/10/fighting-hiv-among-young-black-gay-men/young-gay-men-lack-role-models?scp=2&sq=devito&st=cse>