

**Having A Damn To Give: 46% and Counting**  
**Reflections on the HIV Rates reported by the CDC**  
by Craig Washington

It has been 2 months since the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported the alarming findings of a study in which 46% of Black homosexually active men surveyed in 5 major cities tested HIV positive. Phill Wilson, founding executive director of the Black AIDS Institute, expressed outrage at the lack of outrage about this astounding statistic in his editorial, "Nearly 50% of Black Gay Men May Already Be Infected with HIV. Who Gives A Damn?" While he cites the lack of any front page coverage and calls to action from Black and gay media or civil rights organizations, Wilson is most troubled by hearing no response from Black gay men. As a fellow poz Black man, I share Wilson's anxiety which springs from a ferocious love for our brothers in the life. It is this love that drives my continued search for answers that have eluded us for years.

I do not know if this sample is highly accurate, but I do know that the infection rates of Black gay men are not going down. This is just the latest of a litany of CDC reports indicating that our prevention efforts are failing. I doubt that this study will move us to take to the streets but maybe the buzz will move us to pause and reflect before we act, to back up before we try it again? Sexual behavior is as complex as it is primal and cannot be policed by billboard messages or sex-negative directives. Black gay men need the support of viable and affirming communities to maintain their well being, so HIV prevention must be incorporated into a larger context of Black gay community development and multi-issue activism.

Two crucial realities are articulated by this national silence. One is that Black men are not valued enough by our society to merit any public alert regarding their condition. The other is the dearth of infrastructure and capacity among Black and gay or same gender loving men. Too few of those who are not Black and gay give enough of a damn about those who are to consider this as a crisis. And too few of us who are, are both willing and able to mount the kind of response this crisis demands. These two realities commingle and suffuse our political climate and social terrain as seamlessly as the ocean feeds and is fed by the rain.

The majority of Black heterosexuals have made it resoundingly clear that their HIV related concerns are reserved for women and children. Many Black gay men feel isolated and disconnected, having no evidence of a legitimate Black gay or same gender loving community among them. In light of the forces that thwart us, we cannot dismiss the achievements of our public leaders and organizations as well as the unheralded triumphs of everyday people. Nor can we deny that they are still not enough and that we have to find the means and motivation to do more. We have not yet amassed the resources required to grow strong communities and mobilize a viable movement which would take on a myriad of issues including but certainly not limited to HIV.

Consider for example Atlanta, the so-called Black gay mecca, which has no media or bookstores owned and operated for and by openly gay Black people. There is no history center to which I can refer a young man to see an exhibit on Black lgbt history and learn about Essex Hemphill or Pat Hussein, and thereby learn about himself, his purpose. With the exception of the new Urban Tea Party, we have no place outside of the clubs, none of which are Black owned, none where we may commune in the daylight. I am by no means a club hater, but clubs are designed to meet specific popular demands. They are not equipped to serve as sites for our cultural enrichment and political autonomy. We have very few places in chocolate cities across the country where on any given day we can enter and expect to see others like us and thus find refuge and sustenance. Such public facilities would enable us to expand our interconnection and reciprocal support far beyond our immediate sexual and social circles.

We have no national and few local multi-issue organizations whose work would buttress our AIDS activism by challenging white supremacist classist patriarchal norms and policies. We also need more intellectually rigorous Black gay media that would feature stories like the CDC study and examine other matters of sociopolitical relevance. In short, we need a diversified host of Black queer cultural, political and media institutions in order to create a self-loving extended community that is as Hemphill might say “capable of whatever, whenever” the call to action is sounded. If the Black church is able to cultivate Black donors of all income levels, many of whom are same gender loving, then surely we can secure enough Black gay capital to fund our organizations and own the buildings they occupy. Those of us who possess the vision have to convince those who possess the means that the vision is well worth their investment.

This level of development will take years, perhaps decades. We must determine what can be done right now and in the ensuing days, weeks and months to come. I believe as always, it all comes down to the individual. I must take stock of my own commitments to my brothers in the life. When I am about to do the do, will my desire for raw pleasure obliterate my resolve to not infect my partner? When I encounter someone whom I do not find attractive on the street and we clock each other how do I interact? Does he have to be cute in order for me to speak? How do I talk to brothers at the workshop who live for Men4now and are hooking up 24/7? Do I lecture or do I listen? It is the personal norms and values we choose to honor as well as the revolution we build that will make the difference if one can be made.