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LESS THAN A YEAR AFTER CDC ANNOUNCED THE U.S. HIV EPIDEMIC IS MUCH LARGER THAN PREVIOUSLY THOUGHT, PUBLIC'S SENSE OF URGENCY IS DOWN, EVEN AMONG SOME HIGHER RISK GROUPS

Sense of Personal Risk Falls for Young Adults, Testing Rates are Stagnant

Amidst Call for Stepped Up Focus on Domestic HIV/AIDS, There is Public Support for More Spending and the Public Believes Greater Efforts on Prevention Will Make a Difference

Washington, DC – Less than a year after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recalculated the size of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and announced that there were 40 percent more new HIV infections each year than previously believed, a new survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation finds that Americans' sense of urgency about HIV/AIDS as a national health problem has fallen dramatically and their concern about HIV as a personal risk has also declined, even among some groups at higher risk.

Key findings of the survey include:

- The share of Americans naming HIV/AIDS as the most urgent health problem facing the nation dropped precipitously from 44 percent in 1995 to 17 percent in 2006 and to six percent now.
- CDC estimates that HIV rates are seven times higher among African Americans and three times higher among Latinos compared to whites. While these groups are more likely than whites to see HIV/AIDS as an urgent problem, fewer say it is a "more urgent" problem for their community now than in 2006 (declining from 23% to 17% of all adults, 49% to 40% of African Americans, and 46% to 35% of Latinos).
- The share of those ages 18-29 who say they are personally very concerned about becoming infected with HIV declined from 30 percent in 1997 to 17 percent today; personal concern among young African Americans declined from 54 percent to 40 percent over the same time period.
- More than half (53%) of non-elderly adults say they have been tested for HIV, including 19 percent who say they were tested in the past year. Testing is most common among adults under the age of 30, with three in ten young adults and nearly half (47%) of young African Americans reporting having been tested in the past year. However, reported testing rates for all these groups have not changed much in the past decade.

"Many indicators of urgency and concern are moving in the wrong direction, including for higher risk groups," said Kaiser President and CEO Drew Altman. "The survey underscores the need for a new focus on domestic HIV," he added.

At a time when there have been calls for increased attention to the domestic HIV/AIDS crisis including the recent Obama administration announcement of the five year public awareness campaign, Act Against AIDS, the survey also finds public support for more spending.

Half of the public thinks that the federal government is spending too little on domestic HIV/AIDS, while just

five percent say it spends too much. More than a third (36%) of Americans say they have personally donated money to an HIV/AIDS-related charity, including nearly half (45%) of African Americans, and there is confidence that new efforts in prevention will make a difference.

While down somewhat from 2006, public support for continued or increased government spending on HIV/AIDS is notable considering the current economic recession and a decline in reported visibility of the domestic epidemic. The share saying they have heard, seen, or read “a lot” or “some” about the problem of HIV/AIDS in the U.S. in the past year declined from 70 percent in 2004 to 45 percent in 2009, and the share that saw “a lot” was cut in half for not only the general public, but also among African Americans and Latinos.

Despite a polarizing debate in recent years about such issues as abstinence and condoms, six in ten Americans believe that spending more money on HIV prevention in the U.S. will lead to meaningful progress, and about half believe the same about spending on treatment.

Some Signs of Progress, But Misconceptions And Stigma Remain

The survey indicates some signs that HIV/AIDS in the U.S. may carry less stigma than in the past. For instance, there has been a slow and steady increase since the late 1990s in the share of people who say they would be very comfortable with a coworker who has HIV/AIDS (44% now, up from 32% in 1997). However, stigmatizing attitudes towards people with HIV have not gone away; fully half (51%) of the public says they would be uncomfortable having their food prepared by someone who is HIV positive.

Misconceptions may be a factor in stigma, and several remain when it comes to correct information about HIV transmission. One-third (34%) of Americans incorrectly believe or are unsure whether HIV can be transmitted by one of the following actions: sharing a drinking glass (27%), touching a toilet seat (17%), or swimming in a pool with an HIV positive person (14%).

Confusion about HIV transmission may contribute to discomfort around those who are HIV positive. People who harbor misconceptions about transmission are more likely to say they would be uncomfortable working with someone with HIV (43% versus 13% who correctly answered questions about transmission) and more likely to be uncomfortable having their food prepared by an HIV positive person (71% compared to 40%).

A significant share of the public also harbors misconceptions about prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS. Nearly one in five (18%) do not know there is no cure for AIDS and about one-quarter (27%) believe or are unsure whether former professional basketball player Magic Johnson has been cured of AIDS. Additionally, a quarter (24%) believe or are unsure whether there is a vaccine available to prevent HIV infection. Many of these misconceptions are more common in the African American community, including that Magic Johnson has been cured (37% of African Americans think he has been cured or are unsure), that there is a vaccine available to prevent infection (36%), and that there are drugs available that can cure HIV and AIDS (30%).

Methodology

The survey was designed and analyzed by public opinion researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation and was conducted January 26 through March 8, 2009, among a nationally representative random sample of 2,554 adults ages 18 and older. Telephone interviews conducted by landline (N=1,951) and cell phone (N=603, including 214 who had no landline telephone) were carried out in English and Spanish. The survey includes oversamples of African American and Latino respondents as well as respondents ages 18-29. Results for all groups have been weighted to reflect their actual distribution in the nation. The margin of sampling error for the overall survey is plus or minus 3 percentage points, for whites it is plus or minus 4 percentage points, for African Americans it is plus or minus 5 percentage points, and for Latinos it is plus or minus 6 percentage points. For results based on other subgroups, the margin of sampling error may be higher.

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