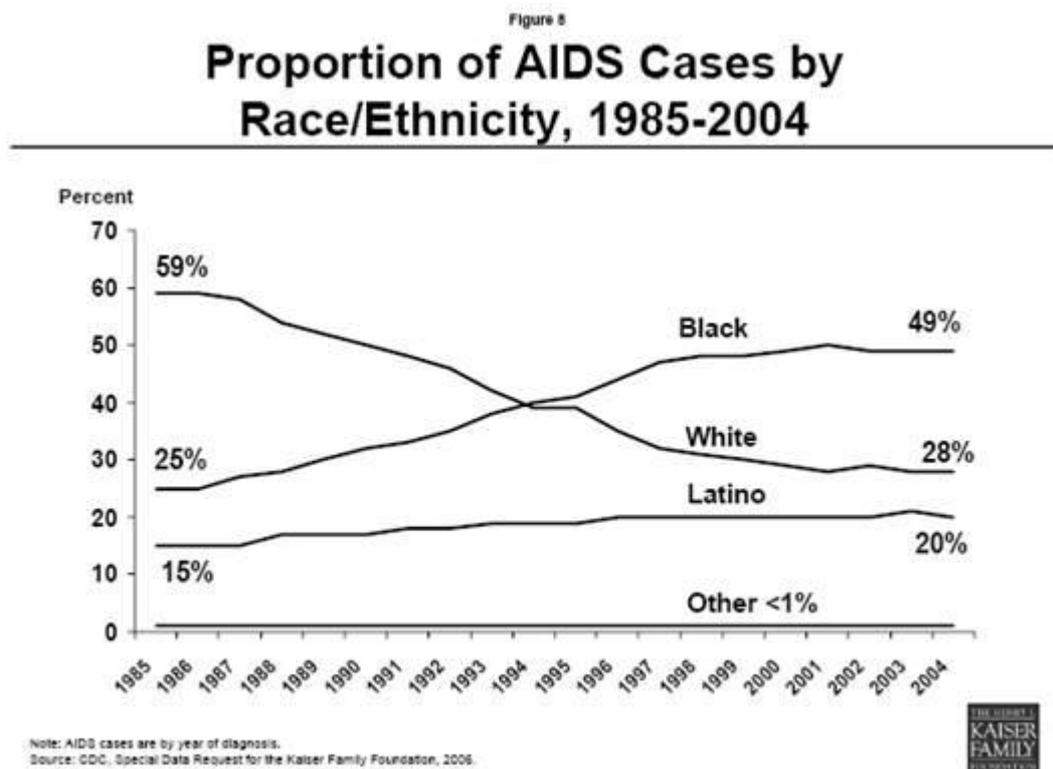


HIV/AIDS and Minority Communities

Several correspondents sent critiques of last week's [GoozNews article](#) on HIV/AIDS spending. Dr. Joseph Sonnabend of London had this to say:

It's true that the 1.1 million people infected with HIV in the U.S. has remained constant over the past decade. However what this figure does not reveal is that the demographic distribution of this disease has changed radically. And rather than represent the success of the government's massive investment, this demographic change actually represents a miserable failure.

This is best illustrated by the following figure, that in an absolutely unequivocal fashion illustrates the preventable disaster that has been happening in plain view over the past twenty years.



Just look at the changes in the proportion of cases in African American and white communities. The lines crossed around 1994, but the trends were evident long before this. What proportion of federal funds were directed at prevention efforts in African American communities? And whatever funds might have trickled into this community, the utility of this expenditure can hardly be called a success.

Although the above figure ends in 2004, the lessons to be drawn from it remain absolutely clear. We have seen a tragedy developing under our noses and have just stood by and let it happen, while applauding the success of the expenditures committed to this disease.

All too often we measure our responses to public health emergencies in terms of the number of dollars committed to deal with them. We do not seem to require some measure of accountability by asking how, and to what effect the money was spent.

For African American communities the government response has been an utter failure, particularly in that we had clear signs of a developing disaster. As far as white Americans are concerned, many, I should say most, affected have been gay men. It is arguable whether any government expenditures on prevention contributed in any significant way to the decline in prevalence of HIV infection in this group.

Since the beginning of the epidemic, this community has itself mounted prevention campaigns and should be credited with having achieved the success shown in the above illustration. Safe sex, as we know it today, was created in this community without a penny of government assistance.

It would be wrong not to recognize that in some areas the massive investment to which you refer has been spectacularly successful. AIDS research has advanced the fields of molecular virology and cell biology, particularly our understanding of the control of gene expression immeasurably, a success that has implications and benefits far beyond AIDS.

However expenditures on prevention may have largely been a waste of public money. How much was spent on "America responds to AIDS"? This was a typically untargeted prevention education campaign. What has always been needed is a recognition that this disease is not uniformly distributed; it disproportionately affects certain groups, who would benefit from appropriately targeted prevention education programs.

In this regard the massive investment you spoke of has been a tragic failure. AIDS is a preventable disease.

Posted by gooznews at December 8, 2008 10:31 PM