

*"AIDS the epidemic is out there, but nobody really talks about it."*

(Female, 18-29)

*"I was just about to say that's probably our biggest disease, lack of knowledge."*

(Male, 30-49)

*"And ultimately, the responsibility falls not with that individual, but with the male or female... whomever who contracted it from, it's your responsibility to protect yourself."*

(MSM, 30-49)

*"I wouldn't say I don't want to know, but I think if you don't have money, if you find out that you have it, I don't think you're really going to have the resources to make yourself better. You know what I mean? That's why a lot of people don't want to know. They know that they can't fix it... I understand why they say it even though I don't agree with it."*

(Male, 18-29)

*"...when I think of greater than, I think of Martin Luther King. He was greater than, you know, so I mean, it empowers you to say, "Well, you know what? Well, maybe I am greater than and I will be greater than if I make the choice to get tested."*

(Female, 30-49)

To inform the *Greater Than AIDS* campaign, the Kaiser Family Foundation and Black AIDS Institute organized five focus groups in Atlanta, GA on January 19 and 20, 2010, and March 10, 2010. These were the third set in a series held around the country. The previous focus groups were held in Chicago, IL in August 2009 and in Oakland, CA in December 2009.

Michaels Opinion Research recruited and moderated the focus groups held in January, which consisted of a total of 32 Black adults segmented into four groups by gender and age, 18-29 and 30-49. Researchers David Malebranche and Jeffery Roman recruited and moderated an additional focus group held in March with a group of Black males who identified as men who have sex with other men (MSM). Participants in the January focus groups were not screened for sexual orientation. None of the participants were screened for any specific association with HIV/AIDS and participants were not informed in advance about the focus of the research, other than that it would address health issues facing Black Americans.

The objective of the focus groups was to provide insight into how HIV/AIDS is viewed in the Black community. Additionally, public service ads and other outreach elements developed for the *Greater Than AIDS* campaign were shared to help inform future campaign messaging and development. (*Greater Than AIDS* public service ads began appearing in Atlanta and elsewhere around the country in fall 2009. With the exception of the men in the older group, some participants in each of the groups had seen the campaign.)

Given the disproportionate burden of the disease in the MSM population as well as the stigma that might inhibit a fuller discussion of sexual orientation in the general population groups, the additional focus group provided an opportunity for the participants to openly explain their views about HIV/AIDS in the Black community and among MSM specifically. For the most part, responses in the Black MSM focus group were similar to the other four focus groups, although as anticipated there was more discussion about the role of sexual orientation in the spread of HIV/AIDS. The following report summarizes results from all five of the Atlanta focus groups.

While the participants represented a random selection from the Atlanta area, the views of these individuals are not intended to represent the opinions of all Black Americans. Rather, the focus groups are seen as providing a useful means of hearing first-hand, in their own words, how some in the target population perceive the impact of HIV/AIDS in their lives and community, as well as response to the *Greater Than AIDS* campaign.

*"[AIDS] is still a silent killer."  
(Male, 30-49)*

*"Because of the things that I've heard, like the higher concentration that they were seeing in the new infections and were black females. Not white. Not even Mexicans. Black females were the highest among the new infections."  
(Female, 18-29)*

*"I say everybody. At first they said, okay, it was the gays, you know, those are the only people getting AIDS. And then people say, okay, kids, because they are risky and having unprotected sex and people on drugs, but now it's coming all into families because you can be married or in a, a relationship long-term and that person like, they are talking about down and low, or people just sleeping around, you know, not being trustworthy, and it's coming into married families, long-term relationships, you know."  
(Female, 30-49)*

### HIV/AIDS AS AN ISSUE FACING BLACK AMERICANS

Without prior knowledge of the focus of the research, all groups mentioned HIV or AIDS among the first few top-of-mind health issues facing Black Americans, along with diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancer. Notably, when asked if any health issues are getting more serious, all groups immediately named HIV or AIDS. While the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS was frequently mentioned, given the opportunity within the focus groups to talk about the issue, most participants were very open and even eager to discuss HIV/AIDS.

In all groups, there was consensus that HIV/AIDS was a significant problem facing Black Americans with most perceiving that rates are increasing. Participants commented that "Atlanta has really big numbers" and that in general, the AIDS epidemic is "out of control." One participant said that AIDS is "an epidemic with the Black race." Among the reasons cited for higher rates among Black Americans were people not getting tested, not using protection, and some that know to protect themselves but "just don't care." Participants also commented on "lack of awareness" and lack of education about HIV/AIDS. There was significant discussion in the MSM focus group about "complacency" around HIV, with many saying people now view HIV as a "treatable," "chronic" disease.

When asked if anyone was at higher risk for getting HIV/AIDS, participants mentioned Black women, MSM, and youth. The older groups (aged 30 and older) were mostly likely to view HIV/AIDS as a problem for youth, perceiving that HIV education has been "put to the back burner," although one woman in the 30-49 age group recognized that "older people get AIDS too." The MSM group also named "elderly people" as being at risk for HIV, but acknowledged that "anybody that's having sex" is at risk. All groups were aware that Black women were at increasing risk for HIV. Both of the general population male groups attributed increasing rates to Black women having become more "promiscuous," saying that "women are more susceptible to get [HIV]" and that there has been "a massive increase of women that have started sleeping around a lot more than they would normally do."

Among the three cities where we held focus groups with the general population, there was more discussion about sexual orientation in Atlanta, although it was still limited. Several of the men in the 30-49 general population group attributed higher rates of HIV in the area to MSM, saying that the nickname for Atlanta has changed from "A-Town" to "Gay Town" and that the city is now referred to as "San Francisco East" due to its large gay population. Still, in all groups it was understood that anyone could get HIV.

*"I have seen people completely humiliated by HIV. I've seen people come out to their family and their friends and be shunned. I've seen people say, "You can't come over here. Don't hold my baby. Don't eat off my dishes." That hurts! No matter how strong you are, it hurts."*  
(MSM, 30-49)

*"Anybody can have AIDS. You never know."*  
(Male, 18-29)

*"I've seen like Caucasian and Asian men, they cry or show emotion. People say, "Oh, he's emotional." A Black man cries and shows emotions, "He's gay." So I think that the stigma and the weight that our culture puts on a Black man is so heavy."*  
(MSM, 30-49)

Not surprisingly, the men in the MSM group were more forthcoming about how sexual orientation relates to HIV. When asked why Black Americans may be reluctant to talk about HIV/AIDS, one man in the MSM group commented "because people think if you talk about AIDS that means you're gay" and "then people don't want to be know as being gay." A discussion ensued around the expectation of all Black males to be "alpha males" – very strong, emotionless and "hyper-masculine." One man commented that he had seen Black men ostracized for coming out with their sexuality, saying that "we shun our people just for being gay. So imagine, stack HIV on top of it." The men in the MSM group talked a lot about social issues surrounding being Black and having sex with men, with one man saying that "being Black, you're already second. Then you go from there to being gay and Black... you're just horrible."

Notably, in every group, a number of participants brought up a personal connection to HIV/AIDS. For several it was an immediate family member or a close friend living with HIV or AIDS. One of the older men in the general population group identified himself as living with HIV and felt the need to expressly state that he was not gay. Even though participants were aware about how HIV is transmitted, many alluded that they were not entirely comfortable around people living with HIV. A few participants talked about not sharing drinks with their friends and family members living with HIV/AIDS and one younger woman commented that "I still kind of watch my daughter and myself around her because you're never too sure."

Many worried about access to care and affordability of treatment. The groups perceived life with HIV as depressing, and that those who are living with the disease are probably "feeling isolated, feeling alone, not knowing what to do." Despite the awareness of medications, some still saw the disease as a "death sentence" and "automatic termination." Others discussed how family members were too embarrassed to talk about living with the disease and they would not explicitly state that they were living with HIV or AIDS. Even though many in the focus groups easily shared personal experiences with HIV/AIDS, participants commented that they do not like to talk about the subject. One younger man said that the issue is "really acceptance" and that if you are living with the disease, "nobody is going to want to socialize with you."

Similarly, when asked what life is like for people living with HIV/AIDS, one man in the MSM group said that it is "dismal" and "a death sentence," but then continued on to describe one of his friends living with disease as "robust" and "energetic." Notably, there appeared to be a disconnect between what people have personally seen of friends living with the disease and what they fear may happen to

*"A lot of people may feel that way. They just don't want to – if they say if I don't talk about it, it doesn't exist."*

(Female, 18-29)

*"If they got it, they don't want to know because if they find out, they say they'll get sick, and they'll start dying."*

(Male, 18-29)

*"Yeah, and a lot of people just don't want to go and get tested, don't want to know."*

(Male, 18-29)

*"I think that's why it's kind of secretive, because you don't know who got it nowadays, because people are ashamed to tell."*

(Female, 30-49)

*"The subject is so final. It's like talking about death. You don't talk about when your funeral is coming up. To me, it's like the same idea like all these – it just seems like it leads to one thing."*

(Female, 18-29)

themselves, saying that "there is still a stigma attached, even in the gay community."

In the MSM group, three of the 11 men disclosed as HIV positive by the end of the focus group session. In contrast, one man in the MSM group said that he never knew anyone who was HIV positive or who had died from AIDS. The group focused a significant amount of discussion around communication and honesty about one's HIV status to potential sexual partners.

### RESPONSE TO HIV/AIDS IN BLACK AMERICA

While there was a high level of awareness and concern about the impact of AIDS in the Black community, participants were almost unanimous in saying that the issue has moved off the public agenda, citing lack of attention in the media, less visible community outreach efforts as compared to past years, and no apparent spokesperson.

Some participants noted that people do not talk about HIV/AIDS unless they are directly affected by the disease, with one individual saying that "it never hits that close to home for me." Others alluded that the subject was taboo, with one man in the older group saying that "it's that thousand pound gorilla sitting in the corner; nobody wants to look at it or talk about." Fear, especially fear of the unknown and embarrassment were among reasons given for not talking about HIV/AIDS. Many said that bringing up the topic of HIV/AIDS would raise questions about one's own status. Some felt that if they did not get tested, then they do not have to worry about being subject to stigma or discrimination or that "if I don't talk about it, it doesn't exist." However several participants, especially among the two older groups, mentioned that they do talk to their children about HIV/AIDS and other sexual health issues.

Participants commented on seeing less public service messages about HIV/AIDS than in the past. One participant commented that "it's not being promoted now like it was." One notable exception was the *Rap It Up* campaign (undertaken by BET and the Kaiser Family Foundation) which was mentioned in every group. Many commented on an association between less media attention to HIV/AIDS and decreased public concern or urgency.

Participants mentioned churches, doctors' offices, and the CDC as sources of trusted information for HIV/AIDS issues, although it should be noted that the CDC is based in Atlanta. A few named specific college campuses in Atlanta or professors at nearby universities. Participants in every group mentioned that people only talk about

*"We only hear about it when there's a story about it or there's like AIDS awareness or if one person decided to talk about it, but it's not all our black leaders pushing that into our ears, getting it into our heads."*

(Female, 18-29)

*"I think that the Black community as a whole has a long way to go because I believe that as a community, we still brush a lot of stuff under the rug."*

(MSM, 30-49)

*"When I think – I think of the silence. We talk about everything else, but about AIDS it's silent, no one talks about it."*

(Female, 30-49)

*"It's very sad. I could see how a lot of people don't talk about it because it's sad, but it's a reality."*

(Female, 18-29)

*"I kind of feel like that's not a fair question because I feel like I'm pretty sure that there's black leaders that whom might like to make it a higher priority but don't know what to say, so..."*

(Male, 18-29)

the issue on World AIDS Day, with some noting that no one talks to the community on a daily or weekly basis because "it's not a priority." Overall participants struggled to think of individuals or organizations visible on HIV/AIDS.

## LEADERSHIP ON HIV/AIDS IN BLACK AMERICA

With the exception of an occasional name, participants generally were not able to identify a strong voice fighting against HIV/AIDS in the Black community. A few celebrities were mentioned in each of the groups. Magic Johnson remained "the biggest name" and the only constant that surfaced in every group as a visible face on the issue. Some named Al Sharpton and President Obama as Black leaders on the issue.

Several participants commented that it seemed like Black leaders were "preoccupied with other issues" and HIV gets lost in the shuffle and "it kind of just faded away." Another noted that HIV/AIDS is not a popular political issue to talk about, so leaders would not know what to say or "they don't think people want to hear about it." Some felt that leaders do not talk about HIV as much "because it's affecting the minority," as opposed to cancer, a disease which many leaders tackle because it affects "the majority."

Some cited funding as a reason for the lack of attention to HIV/AIDS, while others said that money is not the only issue and "it's our habits and if we curb our habits, then we'll have a solution." One man commented that "the United States is desensitized" to the issue. Some just felt that "it's kind of an awkward discussion" and that prevented further discussion about HIV/AIDS and that people aren't sympathetic towards AIDS like they are towards other diseases.

Yet, all groups were in agreement that HIV/AIDS should be a priority. One woman in the older group commented that even if there are leaders on the issue, "they don't put it out there" and that "they need to put it in the 'hood where if people in the 'hood actually see it, they'll join." Some participants said if there were organized activities around HIV/AIDS, they would get involved, but "nothing's going on." One younger male thought that "there should be less talking and more action" among Black leaders. Although many participants came back to the belief that HIV/AIDS is not a popular issue to discuss and that "black leaders don't talk about it" because they "feel like the whole AIDS thing is hopeless."

*"It's a symbol of hope that we can actually conquer instead of it conquering us."*  
(Female, 18-29)

*"I think it really provokes a conversation. I guess if you and your partner are sitting down and just that you happen to sit besides this, I mean you guys look across, and you see talks, silence, you can – she possibly will be the one who wants to bring it up saying, "You think we should get tested or...?" I think these series kind of make a connection, yeah."*  
(Male, 18-29)

*"We are greater than ignorance. We are greater than being silent about it. We are greater than, you know, not knowing about it. We are greater than that."*  
(Female, 30-49)

*"It feels like AIDS is closer to home than what I thought before. That was really something, a taboo for me. I wouldn't be discussing AIDS with anybody and I guess because of familiar faces, people like me I'm seeing, I can more relate to it and stop shoving it off like it's somebody else's problem. It's our problem."*  
(Male, 18-29)

*"In spite of all the bull crap that goes on in this city whether, you know, like we all talked about tonight – this city is greater than this disease."*  
(Male, 30-49)

### REACTION TO THE GREATER THAN AIDS CAMPAIGN

While different elements resonated with different individuals, overall, participants responded well to overarching unity and empowerment messages of the *Greater Than AIDS* campaign. Some were initially unclear about the greater than sign (>) or hand sign, though upon reflection and in combination with the [www.greaterthan.org](http://www.greaterthan.org) URL it became clear.

Although not specifically identified as such, many participants saw the campaign as focusing on Black Americans. Most viewed this positively, with one younger woman explaining that the visuals said, "Hey, Black people, let's be more focused about it. Let's be more educated on AIDS." All groups commented that the diversity of individuals represented across the campaign was a good thing with one participant acknowledging "that they are trying to, I guess, touch every aspect of AIDS, couples, single man, family, you know, teenage girls, and young boys." Another participant echoed the sentiment that everyone can relate to at least one of the images saying that "and you've got a little something for everybody." The men in the MSM group also liked the diversity of ages represented, saying that "it's talking to different types" and that there was at least one image with someone that "looks like me." While some were concerned that the posters did not include people of any other races, one participant commented that because it is targeting Black Americans it "gets my attention."

The video elicited the strongest positive responses across the groups, especially among the younger women. Towards the end of the video when the actors were saying that they want to be counted in for the effort to curb HIV, one young woman wanted to be counted in as well and shouted out "and me!" Another young woman said that the video was so empowering it "gave me goosebumps." A woman in the older group said "I hope to see [the video] during the Superbowl." The younger men also felt moved by the video, saying that "it was a spot that inspires hope." After seeing the video, one man said that he viewed HIV/AIDS differently and he now sees it as "a problem with solutions... we can solve it one step at a time." The radio ads were generally well received in the older groups, including the MSM group, because they had a diversity of voices and they inspired the audience to start "talking to the next generation, talking to our kids and grandkids."

Participants commented that the campaign personalized the issue of HIV/AIDS. Upon closing reflection after having reviewed all campaign elements, participants said that they felt more aware and inspired to do something. One woman remarked that the campaign

*"It makes me feel good and I say that because it makes me feel good to know that... somebody is finally taking a step to say, "Hey, this needs to be back out there," and it does because it's been, you know, just like they said, it's not – it hasn't been, you know what I'm saying?"*  
(Male, 30-49)

*"I think it's empowering because it's reminding us as a people who we are and who we were and that you know there's nothing that we can't overcome."*  
(MSM, 30-49)

brings HIV/AIDS to "the forefront of your mind," making you want to "go do something about it," like "get tested" and "talk to people about it." Others heard a call to action as saying "do your part to educate your community" and "band together to spread awareness" about HIV/AIDS. The campaign was seen as "empowering" and helped make the disease less taboo, with one participant saying that the *Greater Than AIDS* campaign "brings AIDS back up, so I thank you because we can talk about it now."

The man in the older group who identified himself mid-way through as living with HIV especially appreciated the intent of the campaign saying that "we could have talked about anything, but I'm just glad that something, it might be something small, but something is being done..." Participants across the groups felt that the campaign was unique in that it was a community movement, and not necessarily based upon one affected person or individual actions. One younger man commented that "When I see this whole thing together, the ads, the radio, what we listened to earlier, and the pictures, it kind of changed my thought pattern." Another felt that the campaign "makes you feel like there is a solution to the problem, so it's kind of hopeful."

## About the *Greater Than AIDS* Campaign

The ***Greater Than AIDS*** movement responds to the AIDS crisis in the United States, in particular to the severe and disproportionate epidemic among Black Americans. Major media companies are working together to distribute *Greater Than AIDS* public service ads and related content across the country. The **Kaiser Family Foundation** – a leader in health policy and communications – is providing strategic direction and day-to-day management for *Greater Than AIDS*, as well as overseeing campaign production and helping to support member company commitments. The **Black AIDS Institute** is also providing strategic leadership, guidance, and technical assistance to *Greater Than AIDS*. Other AIDS service organizations as well as the CDC's Act Against AIDS Leadership Initiative, a collaborative of fourteen highly respected and influential organizations serving African American communities, are providing additional counsel and support for community mobilization efforts. Additional funding and technical support is provided by the Ford Foundation, the Elton John AIDS Foundation, and the MAC AIDS Fund. [www.greaterthan.org](http://www.greaterthan.org)