

NYC Forum: Reproductive Health Strategies in Young Men of Color

Sponsored by The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies' Health Policy Institute, in cooperation with the Academy for Educational Development, and The Young Men's Clinic
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Notes: NYC Forum

Welcome and Introduction by Raul Ratcliffe

Introduction of the panelists by Jessica Gonzales

Opening Remarks and Brief Overview of the Joint Center/Task Force by Michael Wenger:

- The Joint Center was started in 1970 out of the civil rights movement, in partnership with Howard University.
- In 1970 there were 1,400 black public officials.
- The Joint Center project is part of a larger initiative. The current project is focused on reproductive health and behavior for young men of color.
- Today's forum is the first in a series of three forums that will address the issue of reproductive health strategies in young men of color.
- The Youth Task Force today's recommendations and will make them a reality.

Brief Overview of the Young Men's Clinic by Dr. Bruce Armstrong

- The Young Men's Clinic (YMC) is one part of many services provided by Columbia University.
- The YMC focuses on community the community, and provide a lot of education in a many different areas.
- The YMC provides a host of different services/areas such as work, school, and health services (i.e. physicals, STD/STI testing).

Young Men's Clinic Video Presentation

Panelist/Audience Discussion

Dr. David Bell (Panelist)

- The YMC sees about 3,500 men each year
- The YMC sees nearly 25,000 women each year
- In many ways things are getting better for young men, for instance we have seen a marked rise in the use of condoms, and lower pregnancy rates.
- However, we have also seen a rise in the rates/instances of HIV/AIDS and Chlamydia in 20-25 year old men.
- African American Males 20-25 years old have the highest rates of STDs in the country, even though they use more condoms than any other group.

Dr. Santelli (Panelist)

- Adolescents are the next generation of leaders in this country; therefore need to be taken care of.

- Young people account for over half the new cases of AIDS/HIV and STDs in the country
- In young men ages 20-24, the problem is that we do not have a system of care for young men as we do for young women
- We have seen no national recommendations for young men, even though it is obvious that young women are being addressed from some source.
- Another issue is that gonorrhea rates are a hundred times higher for young men of color than other groups, as is evident in Baltimore. This raises questions, such as are the downtown kids having more sex than suburban kids? The answer is yes; however, we also see that condom use is higher in cities, so why are the disease rates even higher? The answer is that in the urban/downtown areas, the kids are getting the diseases, which are treatable, but don't have access, knowledge to treatment options. This is especially true for African-American men.

Christopher St. Vil (task force member)

- Given all the statistics provided by the panelists, now the question is really “why is it all happening?”
- There are three main interrelated issues that need to be addressed:
 1. Beliefs surrounding masculinity and manhood
 2. Media's role as an influence on young men
 3. Lack of positive role models that show happy/healthy relationships
- Beliefs surrounding masculinity and manhood- There is the idea that you “have to be with a woman,” and if you're not that makes you less of a man. There are many societal pressures. And the truth is that often times these young men aren't even interested in having sex yet. Sometimes the message gets distorted, and the young men end up treating women without respect. They equate “stacking” women with success.
- Media's role as an influence on young men. Media in terms of Quantity and Quality is lacking. Young people have unsupervised exposure to these media outlets, and as these kids get older the messages they are receiving get internalized.
- Lack of positive role models that show happy/healthy relationships -Many of these men come from single parent households, where they don't get to see their mothers in positive relationships. There is not a lot of stability in these situations, and the young men experience much turnover with these “father figures.” Often times these male role models encourage/egg-on behaviors that eventually lead to unhealthy relationships and mindsets.

Dr. David Bell (Panelist)

- How does the YMC deal with the challenges? What are they?
- Issues surrounding masculinity pose a huge challenge.
- There is a fear of vulnerability, of finding out that something may be wrong with their body, a fear of not being insured, of homosexuality, and having their masculinity challenged.
- Fear is a threshold that must be crossed in this country. The doctors and social workers at the YMC attempt to reach out to the young men by initiating and encouraging the young men to speak freely. We try to let them know that issues surrounding sex, home life, relationships, and friendships can and should be discussed. The most honest discussions must keep occurring.

- Unfortunately, open communication from young men isn't the norm in the United States.

George Gonzales (Panelist)

- We provide a questionnaire at the YMC. This allows the young men to express their concerns.
- Once inside the YMC the young men have additional access to information. The doctors and social workers then have a greater chance to prepare the kids for all the challenges they will have to face.
- The YMC also works to dispel myths concerning social work/workers. They aren't just there to take the kids away, as is the usually misconception the young people have when they encounter social workers. At the clinic the young people can see that social workers can help work out feelings about relationships, sex, and protection. They can also feel free to open up about their feelings and thoughts.

Dr. David Bell (Panelist)

- Media can also play a positive role in portraying the merits and worth of the YMC.
- The Kaiser Foundation in conjunction with MTV have visited the YMC clinic three times to see the work that is being done.

Dr. Santelli (Panelist)

- We, as the educators, must also acknowledge the successes, and strive to see more.
- We have seen high rates of condom use at all ages.
- One strategy that needs to be employed is that state by state we need to get more men insured. In order to do this we need to get them out to vote.
- In schools, earlier and more comprehensive approaches to reproductive health must be taken. We need more teachable moments. (ex. condom use demonstrations)

George Gonzales (Panelist)

- The importance of dialogue can not be stressed enough.
- Identifying areas that hurt such as the feeling the need to belong to something (often a reason for gang involvement)
- As providers we need to stress how you can get that same sense of belonging from healthy organizations.

Floor Discussion

- Not a lot of people are given access to good primary school sex/health educations. States need to address this problem.
- Testing: Men are not aware that you only get tested for what you ask to be tested for. They need to learn to ask for STD tests.
- We need more cultural competency in society, greater understanding of the issues effecting young men of color, both from the professionals, and the men themselves.

- We need more activities in the communities. If more local organizations paired up with CBOs then we could help give the kids a new focus. It would no longer be on sex, but on their futures.
- Another problem these young men face is that once they get out of their parents houses, they are left to their own devices. They need the information before they get to this point, or else they won't know how to deal with sex, relationship, and money issues.
- There is also the notion that having multiple partners has been prevalent throughout time, when in reality the majority of young men are monogamous.
- Work needs to be done to dispel the "superman syndrome," where young people act invincible, thinking "it" will never happen to me. The fact is that one in four kids will get some type of STD.
- One idea presented was making clinics mobile, similar to the dentist vans that currently circulate. This would help with community outreach.
- There needs to be measures in place that ensure once these young people are getting access to information, or in many cases treatment, that they are following up and staying engaged in their own well being.
- Male participation in needs to be increased in organizations all around. This is another way in which the masculinity issue creates a roadblock to making positive change.
- The best thing that can be done is to scare the guys. Show them in a tangible way that they will die, and that the actions they are taking can threaten their lives.
- Young people need to learn to be goal oriented. They need to know that they can be anything they want to be if they set their minds to it.
- The issue of "sex being success" needs to be dispelled. Youth need to see other examples of success.