Chicago Reports Big Drop in New HIV Rates, but Are the Data Skewed?

Chicago's Black, Latino and white populations saw declines in new cases of HIV and AIDS in 2020. However, STIs are on the rise.

October 19, 2022 By Trent Straube

The number of new HIV and AIDS diagnoses reported in Chicago in 2020 have sunk to the lowest levels since the 1980s, according to the latest data from the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH). And the decline in new cases was seen among the city's African-American, Latino and white populations as well as in all genders and age groups.

What's more, the data show that more Chicagoans living with HIV are virally suppressed, meaning that they are taking meds regularly and their virus is undetectable. As such, they not only live longer and healthier lives but also don't transmit HIV sexually, a fact referred to as Undetectable Equals Untransmittable, or U=U.

This is clearly good news, but the health department notes: "Caution should be taken however, when comparing 2020 data to previous years. The COVID-19 pandemic may have affected trends in HIV reporting during 2020—potentially resulting in underreporting of new HIV diagnoses."

Indeed, these numbers may be "skewed," according to a press statement by John Peller, president of AIDS Foundation of Chicago. "I think there is some very good news in this report overall, and certainly, we're seeing a continuation of the trends we've seen for the past few years with HIV cases declining," Peller said. "But like so many other things in the year 2020, I think there really needs to be a big asterisk next to these numbers."

In 2020, the city reported 627 new HIV diagnoses, a 35% drop from 2015. In total, about 19,340 Chicagoans have been diagnosed with HIV and were living in the city in 2020.

The drop in trends bodes well for the state's Getting to Zero Illinois (GTZ-IL) initiative, which sets the goal of ending the HIV epidemic by 2030. You can learn more about the campaign at GTZIllinois.hiv, where you'll also find a link to a dashboard of updated metrics ranging from linkage to HIV care to use of p-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), the pills and long-acting injectable that prevent a person from contracting HIV.

“I’m…proud of the excellent progress that Chicago continues to make in the fight against HIV/AIDS,” said the city’s health commissioner Allison Arwady, MD, in a CDPH statement on the new data. “It’s not just that HIV diagnoses are down, it’s that they are down for Black Chicagoans, White Chicagoans, and Latinx Chicagoans of all ages. But we must remain focused on addressing disparities, knowing that more than half of new HIV diagnoses still occur in Black Chicagoans and that other STIs [sexually transmitted infections] are on the rise, especially among younger people.”

Notably, non-Hispanic Black Chicagoans accounted for 50.6% of all reported chlamydia cases, 60.7% of gonorrhea cases and 50% of syphilis cases, according to the CDPH press release.

Also in 2020, Chicago women saw a 56% increase in the number of primary and secondary cases of syphilis (from 88 cases to 137). A pregnant person with syphilis can pass the virus on to the fetus, which can lead to stillbirth or death of the baby. In fact, 19 newborns were diagnosed with congenital syphilis in 2020, an increase from previous years.

Below is a selection of bullet points on HIV, AIDS an STIs included in the CDPH press release:

HIV TRENDS in 2020, CHICAGO

New Diagnoses

- 627 new HIV diagnoses in 2020 in Chicago, a decrease of 5% from 2019 and a decrease of 32% from 2015

- By age group, largest number of new HIV diagnoses in 20- to 29-year-old Chicagoans (44% of new diagnoses)

- By race/ethnicity, largest number of new HIV diagnoses in Non-Hispanic (NH) Black Chicagoans (55% of new diagnoses)
    - NH Blacks also represented 57% of AIDS diagnoses and 48% of late HIV diagnoses

- By geography of community area, largest number of new HIV infection diagnoses in Uptown residents. Corrected for population size, highest rate of new HIV infection diagnoses in Pullman

residents (102.7 per 100,000)

People Living With HIV and Viral Suppression

- 19,340 individuals who had been diagnosed with HIV through 2019 were living with HIV in 2020 in Chicago, corresponding to a rate of 717.9 per 100,000 population.
  - People 40 years and older accounted for 67% of Chicagoans living with HIV in 2020.

- Among all people in Chicago living with HIV in 2020, 71% had accessed care and 61% had achieved viral suppression
  - Among the 14,611 people living with HIV serviced by the 12 CDPH-funded agencies that implement Population-Centered Health Homes, 90.1% were virally suppressed.

STI TRENDS in 2020, CHICAGO

- Gay and bisexual men continue to account for the majority (59.2%) of primary and secondary syphilis cases.

- Since 2016, the highest proportion of reported STIs has been among non-Hispanic Blacks, with:
  - 50.6% of reported chlamydia cases,
  - 60.7% of reported gonorrhea cases and
  - 49.9% of reported P&S syphilis cases in 2020.

- Between 2016 and 2020, reported syphilis cases increased among non-Hispanic Blacks by 56%, decreased among non-Hispanic Whites by 22% and decreased among Hispanics by 2%.

- Chicagoans ages 20 to 29 years were the most frequently diagnosed age group for chlamydia

(54.2%), gonorrhea (50.5%) and primary and secondary syphilis (35.8%).

- 19 reported cases of congenital syphilis in Chicago in 2020—a 138% increase from the previous year.

In related news, last month, San Francisco released its HIV data for 2021. For details, read "SF HIV Cases Creep Up, Maybe Due to Changes in Testing." Similarly, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has released national HIV statistics. See "HIV Testing Fell Steeply During the Early Pandemic" and "Steep but Deceptive Drop in HIV Diagnoses in 2020."

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