

Latinos in Georgia See Rising HIV Rates While Other Groups See Declines

[VIDEO]

Latinos made up 56% of cases in newly detected HIV clusters in Atlanta. What drove the disparity, and how can it be addressed?

April 28, 2023 By [Trent Straube](#)

Looking at molecular HIV data in [Georgia](#), researchers identified five clusters in which [HIV](#) was spreading rapidly in metro Atlanta. What's more, 56% of people in these HIV networks identified as Latino, a finding that underscores the health disparities and barriers to care [Latinos](#) face.

"A lot of HIV is driven by stigma, discrimination as well as inadequate access to care," David Philpott, MD, MPH, an epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), [told 11 Alive news](#), an NBC affiliate in Atlanta. He presented his findings Tuesday to fellow health officials during the 2023 Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) Conference in Atlanta.

Philpott's studies showed that while HIV rates among Latinos in Georgia increased, they declined among the state's African-American and white populations, reports 11 Alive.

After examining state HIV surveillance data, Philpott; Carlos Saldana, MD, an HIV medical adviser at Emory University; and other researchers with the CDC and the Georgia Department of Public Health (GDPH) [published their findings March 10 in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report](#). The clusters included 75 people by June 2022. In addition to most being Latino, 81% were men who have sex with men, the average age was 29 and 84% resided in the four metropolitan Atlanta counties.

Researchers also noted the speed at which that HIV was spreading. "We detected the networks in which HIV was spreading rapidly," [Saldana](#) told 11 Alive. "In these networks, HIV spreads at least six times faster than previously estimated national averages."

The 11 Alive segment is posted at the top of this article. It's also in this Facebook post:

By analyzing the routinely collected blood samples from new HIV cases—referred to as [molecular surveillance](#)—researchers and officials can identify new clusters of transmission, with the goal of

targeting resources to combat the spread and link people to care. Molecular surveillance is a pillar of the national [Ending the HIV Epidemic](#) initiative. But the method is not without its detractors. Advocates raise alarms about the lack of consent (people getting tested for HIV don't usually know how their genetic information will be used). They're also concerned about the possible criminalization of people with HIV if they're linked to new cases. To learn more about the topic, see ["Critics Worry Government Surveillance of HIV May Hurt More Than It Helps"](#) and ["Questioning the Benefits of Molecular Surveillance."](#)

In reporting on the Georgia HIV data, researchers also detail possible reasons for the greater number of cases among Latinos, along with potential solutions. The authors wrote:

"Qualitative interviews identified barriers to accessing HIV prevention and care services, including language barriers, immigration- and deportation-related concerns, and cultural norms regarding sexuality-related stigma. [The Georgia Department of Public Health] and the health districts expanded coordination, initiated culturally concordant HIV prevention marketing and educational activities, developed partnerships with organizations serving Hispanic communities to enhance outreach and services, and obtained funding for a bilingual patient navigation program with academic partners to provide staff members to help persons overcome barriers and understand the health care system."

"A growing number of services are now available to Hispanic and Latino gay and bisexual men in Atlanta," [wrote Philpott in an EIS abstract](#), "including health education, testing and assistance in navigating the health care system."

Community groups also play a role in reaching Latinos and linking them to health care resources. Two such HIV groups are Latino Linq and the Latino Community Fund of Georgia. Eric Rangel is president of both. "We provide these services, and folks feel comfortable with it because they see someone who looks like them and speaks their language," Rangel told 11 Alive. "We instill trust in the community to let them know we understand there's an issue."

In its 2021 HIV surveillance data summary, the Georgia Department of Public Health presented a big-picture snapshot and offered national context. In the report's introduction, the authors wrote:

"HIV infection remains an important public health problem in the state of Georgia. As of the end of 2021, there were 61,518 persons with HIV in Georgia, and 2,412 persons were diagnosed in 2021. The number of persons with HIV continues to increase because of effective therapies now available. Based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2020 HIV Surveillance Report, Georgia was ranked the 4th highest in the nation for the total number of new diagnoses of HIV infection among adults and adolescents after Florida, California, and Texas, and ranked the 5th highest for the number of persons with HIV infection, after Florida, California, Texas, and New York. Georgia ranked 2nd in the rate of HIV diagnosis among adults and adolescents after the District of Columbia, and 4th in the rate of persons with HIV after the District of Columbia, Maryland, and New York."

