

## **TRENDS IN PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT AIDS, 1983 to 1990**

**By Eleanor Singer and Theresa F. Rogers**

Since 1987, when our first summary of public opinion polls about AIDS appeared in *Public Opinion Quarterly*<sup>1</sup>, more than 450 questions about AIDS, in over 50 surveys, have been archived at the Roper Center.<sup>2</sup> We briefly summarize the major trends since the beginning of questioning on this topic in 1983.

### **Knowledge and Concern about AIDS**

One of the clearest trends has been the steady gain in the public's information about how AIDS is transmitted. Close to 100% now know that the virus can be transmitted by an exchange of blood or semen, as in homosexual or heterosexual intercourse, oral sex, or the sharing of needles when injecting drugs. At the same time, misinformation has steadily declined: the proportion who think AIDS can be transmitted by working next to someone, shaking hands, sharing a drinking glass, or from a toilet seat has decreased from a high of between 50 and 60% in the mid-eighties to between 10 and 20% in 1988 and 1989.<sup>3</sup> In one important area, misinformation may have increased: the percentage believing AIDS can be caught by donating blood jumped from 29% in 1988 to 44% in 1989.

But when people are asked, not whether AIDS can be caught by working next to someone who has the disease, but whether they would be willing to work next to someone who has AIDS, the figures change dramatically. For example, in a 1987 Gallup poll, 84% said that AIDS could not be caught by working near an AIDS victim. In that same poll, though, only 65% disagreed with the statement, "I would refuse to work alongside someone who has AIDS." And in a July 1987 Roper poll, only 38% said they would work with someone with AIDS.

Despite the steady increase in the number of AIDS cases (to more than 115,000 in 1990)<sup>4</sup>, and in the percentage of people reporting personal acquaintance with an AIDS victim (from around 6% in 1985 to more than 10% in 1989), concern about AIDS as a personal health threat has not increased since the mid-eighties. About one fifth of the population reports they are "very concerned," and another fifth, "fairly concerned." Still, the perception that the disease is likely to spread to the population at large has remained high, at around 70%.

### **Changes in Behavior**

Depending on the wording of the question, about 10-20% of the public said they had changed aspects of their

sexual behavior in response to the AIDS epidemic in 1985 and 1986; by the end of the decade, the percentage had increased to between 20 and 30%. The percentage reporting increased condom use showed a small but statistically significant increase, from 8 to 12%, between 1987 and 1988, the last year in which the question was asked; condom sales in fact increased between 1986 and 1988.<sup>5</sup> But, altogether, very few questions have been asked about changes in behavior in response to the threat of AIDS on any of the surveys we have examined.

### **Attitudes toward Testing**

In January 1988, 6% of the population reported having been tested for AIDS, and another 7% said they were considering such a test. There have been great differences in responses to questions about willingness to be tested, depending on how the question is put. For example, although 90% said (ABC News survey, June 1987) that they would be willing to take a blood test for AIDS, only 43% said they would be willing to give a blood sample for this purpose in a national survey (Gordon Black survey, December 1987). Opinions on who should be tested range from 80-90% for immigrants, prisoners, and people applying for a marriage license; to 65-75% for those in high risk groups, patients in hospitals, and foodhandlers; to 50-60% for tourists; and 35% for children entering school.

Few questions have been asked about the consequences of testing. Most people would have doctors notify the local health department, spouses, and sex partners, but less than half would have them notify the federal government, insurance companies, or employers.

### **Restricting the Rights of Others**

From the beginning, the public has tended to see AIDS as a community health rather than a civil liberties issue. But the percentage prepared to curb the rights of others has varied over time and from one topic to another. For example, between 40 and 50% say it would be appropriate to test employees for the AIDS virus, but 75% believed in 1988 that people with AIDS should be allowed to continue to work. The latter figure was an increase from about 67% in 1985. About two thirds have consistently favored allowing children with AIDS to attend public schools, but some polls find that only about half as many are willing to send their own child to a school where another child has AIDS. The data show a slight decline—from about 30% to about 20%—in the proportion favoring more stringent measures, such as quarantining AIDS patients. Here, however, different question wordings produce different, in some cases much more restrictive, responses.

### Sympathy for People with AIDS

Almost half of those questioned agree that AIDS may be a punishment for the decline in moral standards; this number does not appear to have changed over time. And while almost half express "a lot" of sympathy for people with AIDS, the proportion drops drastically when the disease is said to have been acquired from sharing needles while using illegal drugs, or from homosexual activity.

There has been speculation that the AIDS epidemic would end the sexual revolution, as well as trigger a backlash of negative attitudes toward homosexuals. A recent comprehensive review by Tom W. Smith indicates that while "revolution" may have been an overstatement, some leveling off of approval for premarital sex does seem to have occurred since the early 1980s, along with a slight increase in disapproval of premarital sex and of homosexual behavior.<sup>6</sup> Tolerance for gay civil rights has not decreased, however.

### Concluding Observations

The latter half of the eighties saw a dramatic increase in public information about AIDS. The Surgeon General's Report on the disease was released in 1986, and figures compiled by the Centers for Disease Control indicate that media coverage peaked in 1987, with a total of 11,852 news stories, up sharply from some 5,000 stories each in 1985 and 1986. Early in 1988, the federal government mounted a nationwide information campaign. One of the consequences of this information explosion seems to have been a large increase in the number of people who feel they know a lot about AIDS.

Since 1988, however, both media coverage and government attention have declined. It's too early to determine the consequences of this decline for public information, attitudes, and behavior—especially because polling on the subject also seems to be on the decline. Furthermore, there are indications that AIDS is coming to be seen as largely confined to specific subgroups within the population, a redefinition that may have important consequences for public policy.

In our 1987, POQ article, we made a plea for standardization of at least some AIDS questions. Our plea has not been heeded. As a result, few trends can be traced precisely from the beginning of the epidemic to the present. It's hard to separate true change from fluctuations attributable to variations in question wording (as well as to sample definition, or other survey procedures). The opportunity to identify trends is also curtailed because questioning tends to be topical rather than cumulative. Although this is inevitable when many of the polls are sponsored by media organizations, some standardized

questions ought to be repeated at regular intervals. The Centers for Disease Control surveys do just that for some AIDS-related topics; many others, though, including preventive behavior, are not covered at all.

The social issues surrounding AIDS engage strong emotions—of fear and disapproval, as well as compassion and tolerance. Polls have helped chart the course of these reactions, and have documented changes in information and misinformation about the disease. We urge that polling on these matters be continued by the private sector.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Eleanor Singer, Theresa F. Rogers, and Mary Corcoran, "Polls Report: AIDS." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51:580-95, 1987.

<sup>2</sup>These figures exclude the monthly surveys carried out by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) since 1987, which would have more than tripled the number of questions archived between 1987 and 1990. Because summaries of trends in responses to these questions are published at regular intervals by NCHS (see "Advance Data" from Vital and Health Statistics of NCHS, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), we have instead focused this article on nongovernmental surveys about AIDS. None of our conclusions from the private sector polls are contradicted by the NCHS data.

<sup>3</sup>The figures cited in the text include those who responded DK. There is no evidence that the observed changes are attributable to the government information campaign of 1988. See Eleanor Singer, Theresa F. Rogers, and Marc B. Glassman, "Public Opinion about AIDS Before and After the U.S. Government Information Campaign of 1988." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, forthcoming (1991).

<sup>4</sup>Heather G. Miller, Charles F. Turner, and Lincoln E. Moses, eds. *AIDS: The Second Decade*. Washington, D. C., National Academy Press, 1990.

<sup>5</sup>Singer, Rogers, and Glassman, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup>Tom W. Smith, "Polls Report: The Sexual Revolution?" *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 54:415-35, 1990.

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