

## AIDS & FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES



### *Here Are the Facts!*

The HIV/AIDS pandemic continues to grow and threaten Aboriginal Peoples throughout the world. The last decade has seen a steady rise in Aboriginal AIDS cases in Canada. Some studies have shown that as many as twenty percent of 16,000 AIDS cases in this country may be Aboriginal.

Infection rates in First Nations women and 2-spirited (gay) people are rising rapidly. Injection drug users, inmates, and street involved persons are increasingly at risk.

First Nations AIDS cases are younger than non-Aboriginal AIDS cases. 30% of all newly documented cases among First Nations Peoples are under 30 years old, with almost one in four cases being female (compared to one in thirteen among non-Aboriginal persons). In some cases, people are being infected at ages 19 and 20.

### *Why are First Nations People Susceptible to HIV/AIDS?*

No one is immune from AIDS. The economic and social power imbalance between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people in this country plagues our communities with a host of social problems. HIV is rapidly becoming one of them. Studies in mainstream society also show that instances of

HIV infection occur more frequently where poverty, violence, drug abuse and alcoholism are present.

The high degree of movement of First Nations people between inner cities and rural on-reserve areas may bring the risk of HIV infection to even the most remote First Nations reserves. Some reserves may be governed by leadership that are unsympathetic to AIDS and HIV. Cases where HIV infected 2-spirited men have been unable to return to their reserve for holistic treatment have been reported.

Disproportionate inmate populations with higher at-risk factors can unwittingly contribute to new infections both during incarceration and after release.

### *What Can Be Done to Help?*

More education and better information among First Nations people in Canada is needed to guide prevention and control strategies.

More on reserve programming and treatment must occur. The barriers between reserve and off-reserve leadership must be broken down, and issues of homophobia must be addressed in reserve communities.

More First Nations programming and education

in prisons and institutions must be provided.

Communities must take an active role in the education of their children and members about the dangers of unprotected sex and other risk associated behaviours.

Governments and other agencies must respond to HIV/AIDS in First Nations communities by ensuring that resources and services are culturally appropriate with access to counselling and HIV testing.

This fact sheet was prepared by The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network located in Ottawa, Canada. CAAN is a National Coalition of Aboriginal people and organizations that provide leadership, support, and advocacy for Aboriginal people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS regardless of where they reside. For more info call CAAN at 1-888-285-2226. Statistics taken from LCDC Epi-Updates.

# Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network