

Resurgence of the HIV Epidemic Among Men who Have Sex with Men?" *American Journal of Public Health* 91(6, June): 883–888.

Wright, Kai. 2001. "The Great Down Low Debate: A New Black Sexual Identity May Be an Incubator for AIDS." *Village Voice*, June 12.

10 Things You Should Know about the DL

Keith Boykin

It's coming again. Get ready for a new round of news stories about the down low. It started [in 2004] with a wave of media hype and sensationalism designed to scare black women about men on the DL. But now . . . it's important to separate fact from fiction in this delicate conversation.

Almost everything we've been told about the down low in recent years is wrong. That's why I've put together a quick list of ten things everyone should know about the down low.

1. The down low is just a black version of "the closet."

The down low is popularly used to refer to men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay or homosexual. Maybe you've heard that concept before. Long ago, we called it "the closet." The term "down low" is just a new way of describing a very old thing, but it's the hot new buzz word of the moment.

2. The down low is not new.

The phrase itself may be new, but the practice is as old as history. Men have been secretly sleeping with men since the beginning of time. And married men have been doing the same thing. The only thing new is what we call it.

3. The down low is not just a black thing.

When Jim McGreevey, the governor of New Jersey, announced [in 2004] that he had cheated on his wife with another man, no one bothered to make the obvious point—Governor McGreevey had been on the down low. When white men do it, we call it what it is and move on. When black men do the same thing, we want to pathologize it. Therein lies a double standard.

4. The down low is not simply a gay thing.

The term "down low" entered the mainstream of black popular culture in the early 1990s. In 1993, Salt-n-Pepa recorded a song called "Whatta Man" that mentioned the down low. In 1994, TLC recorded a song called "Creep"

about a woman on the down low. In 1995, Brian McKnight recorded his song, "On the Down Low," about a woman named Maxine on the DL. Then in 1996 and 1998, R. Kelly recorded not one, but two songs about the down low.

We laughed about it when it was a heterosexual thing, but suddenly we became alarmed when we "discovered" that gay and bisexual men were on the down low too. There's another double standard. In reality, the down low is simply about cheating, whether heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual.

5. The down low is not the cause of the black AIDS epidemic.

In 2003 (the last year in which we have full CDC data available) there were more than 7,000 black female AIDS cases reported in the United States. Out of that number, only 118 reported "sex with a bisexual male" as the method of exposure. That's just 1.6 percent of all black female AIDS cases. Believe it or not, there are other ways to get infected besides having sex with a man on the down low. Many women are also becoming infected through injection drug use, sex with an injection drug user, and sex with a heterosexual (not down low) man.

Focusing on the down low misleads women to think that the down low is a health threat instead of HIV. That's a serious mistake. A man on the down low who is HIV negative cannot pass the virus to you, but a straight man who is not on the down low could easily give you HIV if he is infected with the virus. The down low does not cause AIDS. HIV causes AIDS.

6. The down low discussion is a distraction from the real issues.

All the time we've spent sensationalizing the down low in the past few years is time we could have spent talking about solutions to the AIDS epidemic in our communities.

On an individual level, we need to encourage men and women to exercise personal responsibility. On an institutional level, we need to mobilize our churches, fraternities, sororities and civic organizations so they can

provide reliable safe sex information, HIV testing, and nonjudgmental counseling. And on a public policy level, we need to talk about free testing facilities, needle exchange programs, condoms in prison, targeted AIDS prevention funding, resources for low-income people living with AIDS, and safe sex education in public schools. That's the dialogue we should be having.

7. There are no "signs" to tell if a man is on the down low.

There are going to be a lot of people out there trying to tell you how to find out if your man is on the DL. Don't waste your time. The whole point of the down low is that these are people who do not want to be detected. The moment you come up with a "guidebook" to give you some warning signs is the moment when men on the down low will devise new strategies to elude you.

8. Becoming a "down low detective" is not the answer.

Log onto various Internet web sites about the down low, and you'll find lots of information about how to spy on your partner. Sure, you could hire a private investigator to follow him around when he goes to work, but what does that say about your relationship? If you do suspect something is fishy, you may be in for a shocking surprise. Your man may be cheating on you—with another woman!

A better solution is to confront the homophobia in our community that contributes to the down low. If we want to stop the down low, then we need to create a climate where men (and women) don't feel the need to be on the down low in the first place. Then we won't have as many

men who feel forced into fake relationships to keep the parents, friends and nosy neighbors out of their lives.

9. Demonizing men on the down low will not make them straight.

One popular response to the down low is to demonize all down low men as villains. That may make us feel a little better for a moment, but it won't change the reality of who they are. In fact, demonizing men on the down low is more likely to push these men further into denial about their sexuality. People often ask, "Why don't these men simply come out and say they're gay?" That's a good question, but as long as we keep demonizing homosexuality, don't expect any mass confessions to happen anytime soon.

10. Stereotyping women as victims will not keep them safe.

Much of the discussion about the down low recently has portrayed women as "victims" of black men. Framing the issue this way disempowers women from the ability to protect themselves, reinforces negative stereotypes about black men and encourages an unhealthy battle of the sexes in the black community.

The media machine behind the down low business (and it is a business) has tried to exploit women's fears about the DL in order to make a quick buck. But fear is not the answer. Education is. Knowledge is power, and all women and men need to know the truth.

Source: Boykin, Keith. 2005. "10 Things You Should Know About the DL." www.keithboykin.com. Reprinted by permission.