

Newark LGBTQ+ Responses to HIV/AIDS

Overview

In this lesson, students will learn about the emergence and crisis years of HIV/AIDS in the 1990s and discover how the LGBTQ+ community in Newark, New Jersey responded by exploring primary sources.

Grade Level

9-12

Time

Total: 65 minutes (5 minutes warm-up activity, 10 minutes historical background, 15 minutes timeline activity, 15 minutes primary source exploration, 20 minutes assessment; assessment can also be assigned as homework)

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Describe the importance of balls to the Black LGBTQ+ community .
- Assess the importance and success of community engagement in public health efforts.
- Distinguish between the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and describe the impact of each.
- Explain the origin and evolution of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.
- Identify important cultural, political, social, and scientific developments related to HIV/AIDS in the early 1990s.
- Analyze the roles of the Newark LGBTQ+ community and the federal government in responding to HIV/AIDS using oral history testimony.
- Locate historical sources and evaluate their credibility and usefulness.
- Craft a historical argument using primary and secondary historical sources.

New Jersey Social Studies Content Standards

6.1.12.CivicsPI.14.d: Use primary sources representing multiple perspectives and data to determine the effectiveness of the federal government in addressing health care.

6.1.12.HistoryCA.14.c: Determine the influence of multicultural beliefs, products (i.e., art, food, music, and literature), and practices in shaping contemporary American culture.

6.1.12.HistorySE.14.a: Explore the various ways women, racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ community, and individuals with disabilities have contributed to the American economy, politics and society.

6.1.12.HistorySE.14.b: Use a variety of sources from diverse perspectives to analyze the social, economic and political contributions of marginalized and underrepresented groups and/or individuals.

6.1.12.EconNE.16.b: Evaluate the economic, political, and social impact of new and emerging technologies on individuals and nations.

Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.7: Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7: Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as in words) in order to address a question or solve a problem.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9: Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

Resources Needed

- Computer with internet access
- Projector linked to computer
- Student devices
- Printed copies of James Credle oral history excerpt

Warm-Up Activity

Using the projector, share photos from FireBall 2014 and 2015 with the class (see Appendix 1). Ask students if they can identify what the photos are showing. If students do identify the scene as a drag ball, ask them to share as much information about these events as they can. If they don't identify it, ask guiding questions such as:

- What do you think the purpose of this event is?
- What does the mood of the people in the video seem to be?
- Does this video remind you of anything you've seen in real life, or in a movie/TV show?

Historical Background

Depending on the content of the discussion during the warm-up activity, adapt the content below to provide a brief history of ballroom. Then describe the connection between ballroom and the HIV/AIDS crisis.

From [“A Brief History of Voguing”](#) by Tsione Wolde-Michael, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a distinctly black LGBTQ culture took shape in Harlem. The Harlem Renaissance (1920-1935) was particularly influential to this process. The intellectual, cultural and artistic movement took the neighborhood by storm, bringing with it a flurry of literature, art, and music that centered black life. Many of the movement's leaders were openly gay or identified as having nuanced sexualities including Angelina Weld Grimké, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Alain Locke, and Richard

Bruce Nugent among others. The movement offered a new language that challenged social structures and demonstrated the ways that race, gender, sex and sexuality distinctions were actually intersecting, fluid and constantly evolving.

Over the years, Harlem continued to be a vibrant site of LGBTQ art, activism and culture. So it should come as no surprise that Harlem was the birthplace of “vogue”, a highly stylized form of dance created by black and Latino LGBTQ communities. Between the 1960’s and 80’s New York drag competitions known as “balls” transformed from elaborate pageantry to “vogue” battles. As part of this ballroom culture, black and Latino voguers would compete for trophies and the reputation of their “Houses” – groups that were part competitive affiliation, part surrogate family. Named after the famous fashion magazine, vogue took from the poses in high fashion and ancient Egyptian art, adding exaggerated hand gestures to tell a story and imitate various gender performances in categorized drag genres.

Through dance, drag queens showed how gender is a performance – they pretended to put on makeup or “beat face”, style their hair, and put on extravagant clothes. This creative performance through voguing was even used to peacefully settle disputes among rivals in an environment that assumed a degree of mutual respect and compassion. Using dance and pantomime, the voguers would “read” each other. Ultimately, the winner would be the person who “threw the best shade.”

With time, vogue changed from the “Old Way” (which emphasized hard angles and straight lines) to the “New Way” in the late 1980’s (which added elements like the catwalk, the duckwalk, spinning, bussey and enhanced hand performance). Today, New Way is characterized by more rigid movements and “clicks” or joint contortions. Vogue Fem uses similar “New Way” elements but focuses on speed, flow and stunts. Regardless of the style, voguing shows the courage of black and Latino LGBTQ communities to make an art form that goes beyond creative expression. Vogue offers a sense of identity, belonging and dignity in a world that does not fully value their lives.

The documentary Paris is Burning captures a snapshot of the history of vogue in the mid-late 1980’s. This iconic film by Jennie Livingston was a portrait of some of the most prominent voguers in New York’s ballroom scene and the challenges they faced along the lines of race, gender, class and sexuality. Although it is widely celebrated as an invaluable piece of documentary history on LGBTQ communities of color, the film remains controversial. The voguers in the film were working-class, poor and/or sex working. Some were even battling homelessness and HIV/AIDS. Yet they had to sue to be paid next to nothing for their participation in the film.

Feminists like bell hooks believe that Livingston was not critical of her position as a white filmmaker. hooks goes on to argue that without references to any subversive process that might be taking place, voguers seem to imitate the very structures that marginalize them. Other scholars maintain that the imitation used in vogue creates a black imaginative space where aesthetics and LGBTQ life can be explored in all its complexity.

These complicated issues of race, representation and appropriation in relation to vogue continue today. They are important to address in order to keep traditions that are at once black, brown and LGBTQ and debunk the myth that LGBTQ lives of color were never publicly lived.

From “[The Early Days of America’s AIDS Crisis](#)” by Tim Fitzsimons, NBC News

A LURKING VIRUS

When the AIDS plague finally took hold in the U.S., it surged through communities that the straight world preferred not to see.

It took a few tries. The virus lurked in tropical regions of central Africa, and made several incursions into the American continent before becoming a global pandemic. HIV likely killed a young man in St. Louis in 1969, just one month before the Stonewall riots. A Norwegian sailor died from AIDS in 1976 after he likely contracted the virus while traveling in Africa.

It was not until the late 1970s when the HIV strain that started the North American pandemic had made its way to the United States, via Zaire and Haiti. By then, the sexual revolution was in full swing and HIV was spreading silently among gay male populations in large American cities. Men who have sex with men were, and still are, disproportionately impacted by HIV because it transmits much more easily through anal sex than through vaginal sex.

*The first official government report on AIDS came on June 5, 1981, in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, a government bulletin on perplexing disease cases: “In the period October 1980-May 1981, 5 young men, all active homosexuals, were treated for biopsy-confirmed *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia at 3 different hospitals in Los Angeles, California. Two of the patients died.”*

In NBC Nightly News’ first report on AIDS in June 1982, Robert Bazell reported that “the best guess is some infectious agent is causing it.”

In a 1983 appearance on NBC’s “Today” show, activist and Gay Mens Health Crisis co-founder Larry Kramer asked host Jane Pauley, “Jane, can you imagine what it must be like if you had lost 20 of your friends in the last 18 months?”

“No,” Pauley replied.

“It’s a very angry community,” Kramer said.

Even as the nation’s attention was directed toward gay AIDS victims, the virus was replicating in the bloodstreams of hemophiliacs and injection drug users. A government report from August 2016 found that between the start of the AIDS epidemic and today, nearly 700,000 people have died of AIDS in the U.S.

THE ‘GAY PLAGUE’

After the Stonewall Riots in 1969, LGBTQ activists across the country made significant civil rights advances and secured some municipal and state-level protections against discrimination

in public employment. Roughly two dozen states had decriminalized sodomy by 1980, and some activists were already talking about the next frontier: legal recognition for marriage.

Almost at the exact time that HIV cases first began to pop up in Los Angeles and New York, the LGBTQ civil rights struggle faced a reactionary backlash led by figures like Anita Bryant and Rev. Jerry Falwell, whose “Moral Majority” inveighed against giving rights to gay people.

On March 22, 1980, a year before that first MMWR report, evangelical Christian leaders delivered a petition to President Jimmy Carter demanding a halt to the advance of gay rights. “God’s judgment is going to fall on America as on other societies that allowed homosexuality to become a protected way of life,” Bob Jones III predicted, according to UPI.

As the anti-gay reaction gained steam across America with the election of Moral Majority ally Ronald Reagan, activists found their demands for attention for a growing medical crisis were ignored. The march for LGBTQ civil rights ground to a halt — after more than a dozen states repealed sodomy bans in the 1970s, just two jurisdictions, Wisconsin and the Virgin Islands, decriminalized sodomy in the 1980s.

In 1982, Larry Speakes, press secretary for Reagan, laughed when asked about whether the president was tracking the spread of AIDS.

“It’s known as gay plague,” the journalist asked. Some people in the room chuckled.

“I don’t have it, do you?” Speakes snapped back, as the room erupted in laughter. “Do you? You didn’t answer my question. How do you know?”

In 1984, Health and Human Services Secretary Margaret Heckler announced the discovery of the virus that caused AIDS, the development of an AIDS test, and forecast that a vaccine would be available by 1986. But no vaccine ever came.

'SEIZE THE FDA'

After Heckler’s announcement, it took a year before Reagan publicly uttered the word “AIDS” until 1985, when over 12,000 Americans had died and the virus had begun to spread swiftly through hemophiliac populations and injection drug users.

In 1987, zidovudine, or AZT, became the first drug approved to treat AIDS. But the drug only seemed to slow the progression of the disease, and did not cure it or even prevent death. Patients were prescribed to take an AZT pill every four hours, night and day, forever. Today, we know that this amount of AZT is a toxic overdose.

In the face of government silence, and in the absence of a promised vaccine, AIDS activists began to organize to provide care for the patients who were falling ill.

Adapted from “Project VOGUE: A Partnership for Increasing HIV Knowledge and HIV Vaccine Trial Awareness Among House Ball Leaders in Western New York” by Amina P. Alio et al., Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services

The ballroom community was significantly impacted by the HIV/AIDS crisis. The same groups that were part of the ball scene—trans people, gay men, and people of color—were the groups with the highest risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Ball communities became support systems for queer people during times of illness and mourning, as well as conduits for sharing information about the disease, prevention, and care. This was vital, especially in the face of ignorance about the epidemic from the medical establishment and preexisting issues of racism, homophobia, and transphobia in medicine. Some of the most prominent and effective activists and projects to fight against HIV/AIDS and the political and medical climate of discrimination came from the ballroom community.

Timeline Activity

Split students into six groups or pairs, and assign each one of the following categories:

- Activism
- Culture and Society
- Policy and Programming
- Science
- Treatment
- Data

Provide them with the [Avert HIV/AIDS Timeline](#) and ask the first five groups to decide amongst themselves what the most important event in their category was between 1990 and 1992, and why they consider it important. Ask the sixth group (Data) to find the total number of HIV/Aids infections and deaths between 1990 and 1992. Once complete, ask a member of each group to share their decisions and reasoning with the whole class.

Primary Source Exploration

Now that students have a broad understanding of the epidemic, transition into discussing how it impacted Newark. Let students know that they will be reading an excerpt from an oral history interview conducted with James Credle by the Queer Newark Oral History Project and provide the following background information on his life.

From “James Credle,” Queer Newark Oral History Project

James Credle (1945-2023) was a retired American academic administrator, counselor, and Veterans and LGBT rights activist. Born in Mesic, North Carolina, he was one of 14 children born during the time of Jim Crow. His mother was a dayworker and his father worked part-time as a carpenter. Credle and his siblings worked through high school to supplement the family income. He worked in fields picking cotton, potatoes, corn, and cabbage. He later worked in a crab factory. His family were members of Mount Olive Baptist Church where he sang in the choir. James graduated from the all-black Pamlico County Training School in 1962. He moved to Newark, New Jersey to work at the Veteran's Administration Hospital in Lyons, New Jersey with his aunt and uncle.

James worked for three years at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Lyons, New Jersey. In 1965, he was drafted into the army and served two years in the military at Fort Devens training to be a medic. He served in Vietnam from 1966 to 1967 as a Spec 4 medic for the 196th Light Infantry Brigade where he was wounded yet continued to help other soldiers evacuate while under enemy fire.

He returned to Newark shortly after the 1967 Newark riots and returned to work at the Lyons, VA Hospital. He attended Rutgers University–Newark from 1968 to 1972 under the G.I. Bill where he received his B.A. in Sociology graduating third in his class. He started all four years on the Rutgers–Newark Scarlet Raiders basketball team serving as captain twice. James was a member of the Black Organization of Students (BOS) and Tau Kappa Epsilon. Along with other BOS members, Credle participated in a 72-hour occupation at Rutgers Conklin Hall protesting for increased opportunities and access for minority students, staff, and faculty at Rutgers–Newark.

He spent one semester at Rutgers Law School before obtaining the position of director of the office of Veterans affairs at Rutgers–Newark. In 1976, he became assistant dean of student affairs at Rutgers. His responsibilities included acting as the director of the office of Veterans affairs. James worked at Rutgers for 37 years. James was also a founding member and chairperson for the New Jersey Association of Veterans Program Administrators and the minority affairs director for the National Association of Concerned Veterans. He was a founding member of the National Association for Black Veterans, vice chair of the New Jersey Agent Orange Commission, and the Executive Director of the National Council of Churches' Veterans in Prisons program. James was a founding member and previous Co-Chair of the National Association of Black and White Men Together and the New York Men of All Colors Together.

James was happily married to his husband of 10 years, Pierre Dufresne. On the morning of October 21, 2013, the first day New Jersey allowed same-sex marriage, the wedding was officiated by Cory Booker at Newark City Hall. James was an original co-founder and current President of Newark Pride Alliance /Circle of Friends Scholarship Awards and Progenitor of the Iconic Newark Fire & Ice Ball.

Share copies of the excerpt from Credle's interview (Appendix 2), which the class can read independently or out loud, popcorn style. Ask the students to respond to the interview excerpt. Suggested guiding questions:

- What does the interview reveal about the response of the Newark LGBTQ+ community to HIV/AIDS?
- Why did the government stop supporting the Newark activists' work?
- Why do you think the Trenton Times wrote about the balls in the way that they did? How might this press coverage have impacted the balls?
- How does this source connect to the information from earlier in the lesson about ballroom and the epidemic as a whole?
- What conclusions can you draw about ballroom, HIV/AIDS, and related activism from the fact that FireBall still existed in 2015?

Assessment

Ask students to imagine that they are asking a government official or donor for funds to continue holding FireBalls, either in the 1990s or in the present. (The class can also be split, with half writing as though it is the 1990s and half writing about the present.) Have them write a short letter about the importance of the events, using primary and secondary sources to support their arguments. Students can use the sources shared in class and incorporate new sources that they find independently.

Briefly discuss with students how to decide if a source is credible enough to use in their work. Share why the sources used in class were credible (publisher, author, audience, etc.) and how students can find similar sources—for example, exploring the archives of newspapers, searching scholarly databases, looking at government websites, and reading other oral histories from the Queer Newark Oral History Project. Also share [Purdue OWL's source guidelines for evaluating sources](#).

This assessment can be completed in class or as homework. Students can also be asked to share their work in groups or with the class to evaluate their arguments and source choices.

Appendix 1: FireBall Photos





Appendix 2: James Credle Oral History Excerpt

I decided I needed to move back to Newark, that I didn't need to be going over on that subway, that there were too many people in Newark getting sick and dying. So I worked with Barbara Ford to write a grant to the state that was monies coming from Washington, the CDC, where we did what we called home health parties with people teaching them about how to be safe and doing safe sex practices. And that project was called Project Fire and it started around 1992 and it went for ten years until the federal bureaucracy told us that our way of doing the work in terms of our home health parties was not getting enough feedback that we actually couldn't show that we were having people change their behavior. So they were doing more quantitatively looking at how people were changing their behavior. So the funding ceased to be available to us for our work. But we were written up in the Trenton Times because they claimed that we were buying wigs and stiletto heels for our group and actually what we were doing we had started balls. We used to have a thousand people who came to our balls. At our balls we would ask people, the houses, do you know houses? Do you know the house community? Well, the houses would be in competition around a safer sex message and we would provide money for them in terms of who did the best safer sex message in terms of a presentation by a house at a ball. But the point was the money came from ticket sales and came from money that we had raised and we never used a dime of any monies that we got from the federal bureaucracy to do that work. But, of course, it gets all, the health department and the state didn't want to have anything to do with us after that in terms of HIV.