

POLITICIZING A TRAGEDY: THE AIDS EPIDEMIC

Religious and political groups used the AIDS crisis to demonize LGBTQ+ people, but the queer community mobilized to fight these initiatives.

In 1981, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a story about five young gay men with a rare lung infection. A year later, the CDC had a name for it: Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). **The AIDS epidemic shattered LGBTQ+ communities. Over 90% of people died within a year of their diagnosis.** Tens of thousands of families learned their sons were gay only after they became sick.

LGBTQ+ people, and in particular lesbian women, mobilized to support AIDS patients and educate others. They gave presentations to nurses, distributed condoms at bars, and shared prevention practices.



An AIDS vigil in front of San Jose City Hall, 1987. Photograph by Ted Sahl, San José State University Special Collections & Archives.

New organizations offered counseling and emergency services, while queer groups and businesses, including Imperial Courts and gay bars, raised money.

The queer community also fought misinformation, fear, and hatred. Many Americans feared that AIDS was airborne like the flu or carried by mosquitoes. A 1986 *Los Angeles Times* poll found that 50% of the public favored quarantining patients, while 25% believed that “AIDS is a punishment God has given homosexuals.”

Lyndon LaRouche took advantage of this moment. LaRouche had already accused Queen Elizabeth II of conspiring to get Americans hooked on drugs. Now, his followers exploited fears about AIDS to get Proposition 64 on the November 1986 ballot.


Prop 64 had two key aspects: 1) mandatory HIV testing and 2) public disclosure of anyone who tested positive. It would also have prohibited anyone with HIV from attending or teaching school and restricted their travel. LGBTQ+ people and their allies leapt into action, registering and educating voters and writing checks.

Although the Catholic Church and President Reagan eventually opposed Prop 64, many polls still indicated it would pass. **Ultimately, Prop 64 was defeated: 71% to 29%.**

“WE ABSOLUTELY FEARED WE WOULD ALL END UP TATTOOED, BRANDED, AND HERDED INTO CONCENTRATION CAMPS. WE WERE SCARED FOR OUR LIVES, LITERALLY.” – Paul Wysocki, BAYMEC Finance Director for the “No on Prop 64” Campaign


Off the Cuff

Would the fact that a child with AIDS is attending the same class as your child worry you? What would be your reaction and why?




It would concern me. They don't know everything about how you can contract it. Kids can get it without knowing it.
Peter McLaughlin
Junior
Art

Yes. It would definitely worry me. I don't think enough facts are known about the influence of AIDS. It would be a definite danger.



Wendy Couch
Graduate student
Music



No. Studies have shown that kids aren't affected just because another child is in the same classroom with them. AIDS can only be transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids.

David Alexander
Graduate student
Health service

Misinformation and stigma were widespread, as seen in this excerpted 1985 *Spartan Daily* survey. San José State University Special Collections & Archives.

HIV/AIDS Today. A medical breakthrough came in 1995 when the Food and Drug Administration approved the protease inhibitor Saquinavir, and medical “cocktails” – a combination of multiple medicines – began showing positive outcomes. By 1997, AIDS-related deaths had dropped by 50%. Today, more than one million Americans live with HIV, a manageable and treatable health condition. While treatable, it is still a health crisis affecting both those who identify as LGBTQ+ and those who do not. Black and Hispanic people are disproportionately impacted, with the infection rate among African Americans being over four times higher than among non-Hispanic whites.