



Act Up Dublin activists via Instagram (@ActUpDublin)

Amid a HIV crisis, Ireland needs better sex education and government action

POLITICS - OPINION

There's a diagnosis every 18 hours, but there's little political urgency in tackling the biggest epidemic since the AIDs crisis

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New statistics have emerged that show the highest numbers

of HIV diagnoses on record in Ireland from last year. At 531 new cases, that's nearly double the European average.

Every 17 hours, another person in Ireland is told they have the disease – it's a very real crisis, but little urgency has been shown by the government to address it. The numbers reflect that of the AIDs epidemic that swept the 80s and 90s, where generations of people were lost to the disease.

Grassroots activists, like Act Up Dublin, are making noise about it though – the group has expressed concern for the lack of action surrounding the current crisis, reflecting on the inaccessibility of HIV prevention drug PrEP, as well as stigma around the disease, and “outdated or non-existent” sex education programmes across the country.

Other stats show that 50 per cent of new chlamydia cases and 39 per cent of cases of gonorrhoea are young people in Ireland.

Ireland's sex education programme hasn't been changed or updated in two decades. It's no coincidence that numbers of sexually transmitted diseases or health issues are soaring. The Oireachtas Education Committee (which shadows the Department of Education and Skills) called for reform on Irish school teachings last month, but any move to actively do so has yet to happen. In two decades, Ireland has experienced monumental social change: laws prohibiting divorce were lifted in the 90s, equal marriage was voted in with huge numbers back in 2015, and the draconian abortion laws were repealed after a landslide vote just last year. Ireland's people are liberal and pushing for a more diverse, inclusive future, but its government has yet to act to nurture a well-informed youth, or attempt to guarantee their safety and health. Sex ed shouldn't be a box-ticking exercise, subjective, or unequipped with peripheral vision to the changing world and values around.

As it stands, sex education in many parts of the country is abstinence-based, focused on pregnancy, and lacking in full

LGBTQ+ information. The previous committee report found significant changes were needed most for LGBTQ+ students, as well as those with learning difficulties.

“When we don’t equip young people with the information or vocabulary to articulate their issues or protect themselves, people suffer”

Relationships and Sex Education is required by law to be taught in schools, but the law does not impact the ideals or values schools are allowed to teach. This is reflected in the huge number of schools run by the Catholic Church – many bring in bishops, other church figures, and anti-choice groups to teach. *The Times* found that a Catholic agency that doesn’t teach about contraception or LGBTQ+ relationships conducted classes in 400 Dublin schools. Accord, a Catholic marriage prep and counseling service, and anti-abortion group Youth Defence regularly visit schools to teach and distribute materials. No pro-choice groups campaign in Irish schools. Ultimately, large numbers of Irish teenagers are receiving biased, misinformed sexual education from outsourced, unregulated services, according to the ethos of the oppressive institutions they have to navigate.

A young gay teen in Galway could be agonising over anal sex, while a girl in Monaghan might be hearing misinformation about abortion and cancer in an anti-choice

workshop. Young people who have been diagnosed with HIV claim they never even knew of its existence before diagnosis. When we don't equip young people with the information or vocabulary to articulate their issues or protect themselves, people suffer. Remember, this is a country with a past and ongoing issue with oppressing the body autonomy of its people – the Mother and Baby homes, the Magdalene Laundries, issues of forced adoption, Direct Provision, and child abuse covered up by the Catholic Church. Things are dire in Northern Ireland too, where equal marriage and abortion still aren't part of liberalised laws, and the Ulster Rugby rape trial shone a light on serious issues about consent and rape culture that pervade society.

People in Ireland are having to take the helm on managing their own sexual health. A new report found that 3,000 Irish people downloaded the app Burnd (a third of the app's downloads worldwide), which offers help to access HIV and STI treatment, as well as information on sexual violence, sexual, gender, and contraceptive services. The grassroots activists continue to do the legwork, as always – the Rape Crisis Centre, Act Up, disability organisation Inclusion Ireland, and LGBTQ group ShoutOut have advocated for changes to the law surrounding education in schools. ShoutOut has completed around 350 workshops in schools to tackle LGBTQ bullying, but maintains Irish schools are still hostile towards its queer pupils.



Robbie Lawlor
@Robbie_Lawlor



When I was diagnosed with HIV at the age of 21, I didn't even know HIV existed in Ireland. Went to a Catholic school.

Ellen Coyne  @ellenmcoyne

Got a *horrible* letter from a woman calling me everything from a liar to an attention seeker for explaining how I got no sex ed. Good morning Maire, please let me familiarise you with the existing Irish sex education system
[thetimes.co.uk/article/cathol...](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/cathol...)
[thetimes.co.uk/article/cathol...](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/cathol...)

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Currently, the case is being made for the introduction of the Objective Sex Education Bill, which would allow for more objective, secular, factual, and inclusive education. It would include teaching on contraception, non-heteronormative sex, abortion, gender, and consent among other issues, with state-regulated teaching that would mean consistency across the country. The changes to the law continue to be put on the back burner, but hopefully, with the jarring new stats, it can be brought to the forefront.

Irish youth organisation Youth Work Ireland's poll from April 2018 found more than 90 per cent of young people surveyed believed the internet more useful as a source of information on sexual subjects than parents or teachers. 20 per cent of participants thought that pornography was a more useful source of sexual education.

Myths, misinformation, and shame unfortunately plague Ireland's social system, spurred on by decades of state-sanctioned, Church-led abuse and ignorance of the most marginalized. Though Ireland prides itself on bringing marriage equality and abortion reform into life-changing laws, more needs to be done to make it a place that's safe and inclusive for everyone. Whether that's making HIV prevention drug PrEP more accessible, protecting abortion clinics, abolishing Direct Provision, tackling the raging housing crisis, or equipping its youth with consistent, expansive, empowering sex education.

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