# National emergency over HIV

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With a 500-percent surge in new human immunodeficiency virus or HIV cases per day, the Philippines now has the fastest-growing number of people living with HIV (PLHIV) in the Western Pacific region. This development is alarming enough to prompt the Department of Health (DOH) to urge President Marcos to declare a national public health emergency.

“With a national public health emergency for HIV, every sector in the society will help to address this. The whole of society, the whole of government can help us in this campaign to reduce the number of new HIV cases,” Health Secretary Teodoro Herbosa said.

The HIV surge, Herbosa said, is a “bigger” problem than mpox (previously known as monkeypox). All of the mpox fatalities in the country died not from mpox itself, but due to complications caused by advanced HIV, he added.The DOH has recorded 57 cases per day from January to March this year, or 5,101 newly diagnosed PLHIV over that period, including a 12-year-old from Palawan province, who was found to have engaged in unprotected sex since an early age.

HIV and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) surveillance has shown that Filipinos who are newly diagnosed with HIV are getting younger. The DOH noted that the predominant age group has shifted from 35-49 years old in 2002-2005, to 25-34 years old starting in 2006. The below-15 age group has also seen a 133-percent increase, the highest, followed by 15-24, whose numbers increased by 106 percent.

## Mode of transmission

DOH data showed a total of 148,831 reported HIV cases from January 1984 to March 2025. Sexual contact remained the predominant mode of transmission, but has shifted to men who have sex with men (MSM) since 2007. Herbosa warned that the number of PLHIVs could breach 400,000 cases by the end of 2030 should there be no improvement in the services for HIV/AIDS prevention and PLHIV support.

But while a national emergency can help raise awareness, the government must immediately implement concrete solutions to stem the rise in HIV cases especially among the young. Former health secretary Janette Garin, for one, said the government should increase efforts in making medicines available and accessible to prevent widespread infection. She added that the rise in cases was expected because the availability of tests and public awareness have driven the numbers up.

The study, “Exploring the HIV Epidemic in the Philippines: Initiatives and Challenges,” published in January this year, offers additional insights. It said that initiatives like Republic Act No. 11166, or the Philippine HIV and AIDS Policy Act of 2018, strengthen the comprehensive policy on HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment, care, and support.

## Catholic Church’s conservatism

It, however, noted that despite these measures, including the increase in primary HIV care facilities and treatment centers, there still was “not much improvement [in controlling] the rising HIV cases.”

The researchers attributed this to several factors, such as the low use of artificial contraceptives, like condoms, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), or the use of antiretroviral drugs, to prevent contracting HIV, especially among MSM. The researchers noted that PrEP was available mainly in urban areas but not in the provinces and recommended that health care providers include this service, with the help of private companies and the government.

They also cited the Catholic Church’s conservatism, which “greatly influences [and] prevents the full implementation of sexual education in all schools in the country.” The Church has opposed the use of artificial contraceptives and sex education in schools, arguing that parents should be the primary educators in this area.

## First AIDS case

However, as the study pointed out, many parents are not knowledgeable enough to assume this responsibility, especially when conversations on sex remain a taboo in many families.

The government can look to Thailand, which has successfully controlled its HIV epidemic through several programs focusing on prevention and care that have evolved since 1984, when their first AIDS case was reported. Among Thailand’s notable HIV prevention policies were the 100% Condom Program, Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission, and expansion of antiretroviral therapy coverage, which were all done in partnership with civil society and PLHIV.

In the 1990s, Thailand, under the leadership of then-Cabinet member Mechai Viravaidya, launched an intensive public information campaign on HIV/AIDS prevention. This included mandatory one-minute AIDS education spots every hour on television and radio, as well as education programs in schools that raised students’ level of awareness.

The world today has a better understanding of HIV and AIDS, and together with it, many ways to protect oneself from contracting HIV, or treating it early it so that PLHIVs can live a long and healthy life. This is where the government should focus its efforts instead of hyping up numbers that only trigger panic or fear among the public.