Multimedia Primary Source Discussion Set
The AIDS Crisis, 1981-1993

URL: https://americanarchive.org/primary_source_sets/aids-epidemic

Teaching Tips
These sources – drawn from documentaries, panel shows, and The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour reports that aired between 1983-1993 – illuminate numerous themes that can be productively explored in the classroom. First, they illustrate the struggles endured by people with AIDS: the physical toll of the disease, also the pain of losing loved ones, the devastating cost of medical treatments, the harms of discrimination, and the indignity of public shaming. Second, the collection traces the contours of the controversies that roiled American society as a result of the AIDS epidemic and the questions that it prompted: Was the government spending enough on research? Were drug companies being exploitative? Should medical trials give placebos to participants? Should schools teach about condoms? Should drug addicts be given clean needles? Were confrontational AIDS activists justified in causing disruption to call public attention to the disease? The sources in this discussion set allow students to explore these issues and relate them to broader ideological debates in American society.

Background Information
Before engaging with this resource set, students should be familiar with the following:

• Some general historical background about the AIDS crisis, including a broad understanding of how the disease spread and the communities it disproportionately affected
• Some familiarity with the rise of conservatism and the political success of Republican Ronald Reagan
• Some general understanding of the social and political concerns of evangelical conservatives (i.e. the “Religious Right”) regarding sex and sexuality
• Some historical background on the sexual revolution of the 1960s, the Gay Liberation Movement, and growing visibility of LGBTQ+ people
Essential Question
What social and political challenges and debates emerged as Americans grappled with the AIDS crisis?

General Discussion Questions
• What were some of the challenges faced by people with AIDS?
• One might think that victims of a novel, deadly disease would receive widespread public sympathy. While many Americans did express compassion for people with AIDS, a large number of Americans treated AIDS patients with fear, prejudice, and even condemnation. Why did people with AIDS sometimes receive this less sympathetic treatment?
• What political fights and controversies emerged regarding how to properly respond to the AIDS crisis? How can we relate these political debates to broader political conflicts of the era?
• What were the goals and tactics of activists who fought for a more robust, effective, and humane response to the AIDS epidemic? What were some controversies associated with this activism?

Classroom Activities
1) You might only have time for a brief treatment of the AIDS crisis in a survey course. If so, you could identify one or two clips from this set to show your class and follow with some discussion questions. For example:

Show “Screaming, Yelling, Making a Fuss”: ACT UP Grabs America’s Attention (1990) and ask students to identify the organization’s goals and strategies. Students could also discuss whether they think the confrontational tactics would have been effective in achieving the group’s goals.

Show The AIDS Crisis and the Gay Rights Backlash in Houston (1991) and use it as an opportunity to discuss the impact of the AIDS crisis on the Gay Rights Movement. In what ways did the crisis mark a setback for the Gay Rights Movement? But at the same time, how might the AIDS crisis have had a galvanizing effect on gay political mobilization?

For many other clips in this collection, students could analyze the different “sides” of an AIDS-related disagreement and try to relate these conflicts to broader political themes and trends from the period as well as from more recent history.

2) After watching some of the clips, you could ask students: What makes the AIDS epidemic similar to the COVID epidemic? What makes the two epidemics different? If students need assistance, you can follow up with questions asking students to compare: the government response; the groups that were most at risk; the nature of
fears over the spread of the disease; behaviors that led to risk of infection; political divides over proper response; and the relative deadliness of each disease.

3) If time constraints limit how many clips each student can watch, you can administer a “jigsaw” activity in which students are assigned to different groups that each watch a different subset of clips. Students from different groups can then teach each other about what they watched. For example:

Split students into five groups and assign specific clips to each group.

**Group A**
Two clips about the human impact of the AIDS epidemic:
- *Bobby Reynolds Describes Living With AIDS* (1986)

**Group B**
Two clips about conservative backlash in response to the AIDS epidemic:

**Group C**
A clip about the activist group, ACT UP:
- *“Screaming, Yelling, Making a Fuss”: ACT UP Grabs America’s Attention* (1990)

**Group D**
Two clips about debates over experimental treatments:
- *Balancing Scientific Rigor and Humanitarian Concerns in Medical Trials* (1989)

**Group E**
Two clips focusing on the impact of AIDS in lower-income Black communities:
- *There Are No “High Risk Groups...Only High Risk Activities”* (1988)
- *Black Community Organizations Tackle the AIDS Crisis* (1989)

Each of these “expert groups” watches their assigned clips (in class or for pre-work) and discusses teacher-assigned questions about the clips.

Next, reshuffle the groups such that each new “jigsaw” group has at least one member from each expert group. Students then teach each other about key ideas from their clips.

You could then provide “synthesis questions” for the jigsaw groups to discuss at the end of the activity (e.g. “Do you think the response to the AIDS crisis would have
been different if its primary victims were not stigmatized groups like gay men?”). Or students could discuss the COVID comparison questions in the previous activity.

This activity is imagined as part of a single lesson on the AIDS crisis. However, if you are able to devote more time to this topic in your curriculum, these clips could provide a springboard to various extension activities. A few examples:

- Each expert group could combine AAPB clips with supplemental research to create a “museum exhibit” that the rest of the class could view.
- You could organize a mock hearing or press conference in which members of each expert group could field questions from other students (playing the role of journalists or congresspeople) about their topic.