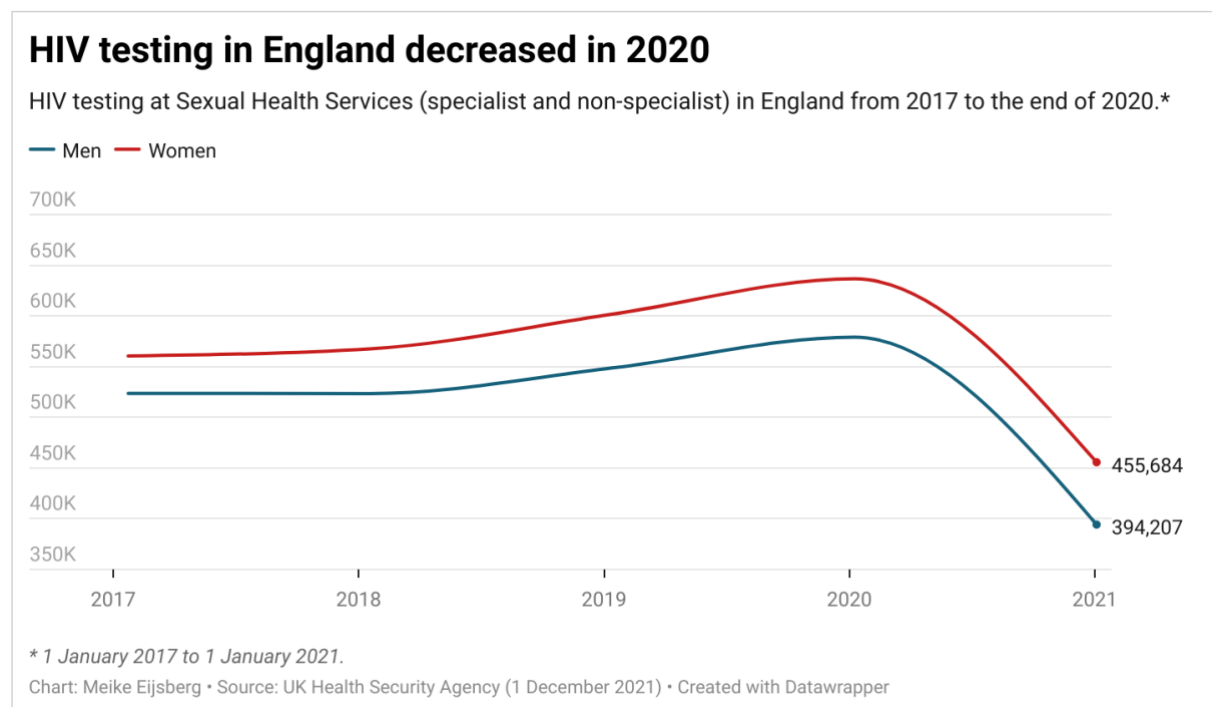


Significant disparities exist in England's HIV testing scheme

Last year, there was a big decrease in HIV testing in England, according to new data published by the UK Health Security Agency on World AIDS Day 2021. The number of people testing at sexual health services decreased by 30%. This is in stark contrast to the increase recorded in 2019.

The decline is a cause for concern because, similar to COVID-19, regular testing is a crucial tool for ending the HIV epidemic. "Loads of progress has been made in HIV in the last 40 years," said Laura Scott, Policy and Research Officer at the Terrence Higgins Trust, the UK's leading HIV and sexual health charity. "It's amazing, but we're not there yet."



Due to low numbers of testing, there are, seemingly, few new HIV diagnoses. There were 35% less diagnoses amongst men and 28% less diagnoses amongst women. "But this is not a true drop," Scott explained. It's largely a result of the pandemic when "there were a lot of behavioural changes due to the lockdown and people didn't have access to testing."

In 2020, there was a 7% decline in testing for gay and bisexual men, but a 41% fall in testing for heterosexual men. Heterosexual or bisexual women tested 29% less whereas Lesbian or WOSW (Women Only having Sex with Women) women tested 14% more.

Big differences in HIV testing in England in 2020

The change in HIV testing at Sexual Health Services (specialist and non-specialist) in England in 2020 compared to 2019.

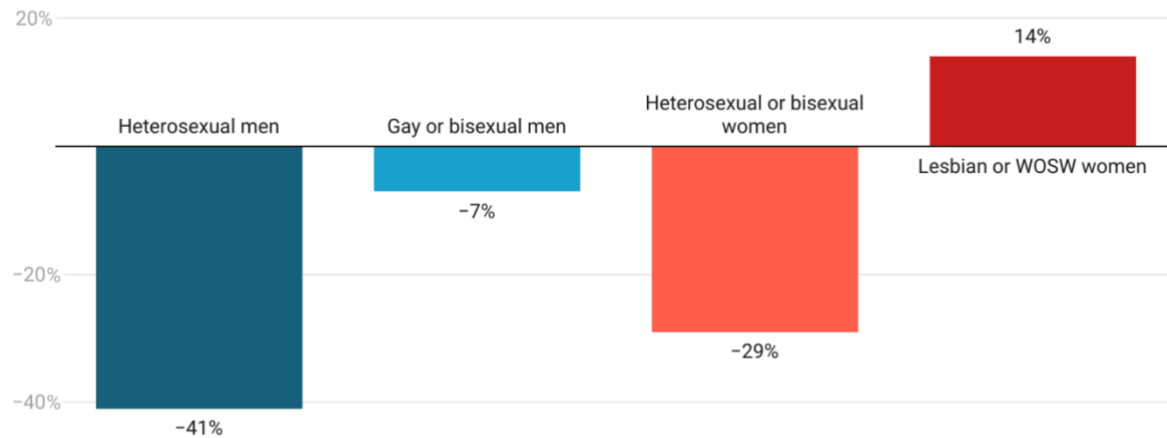


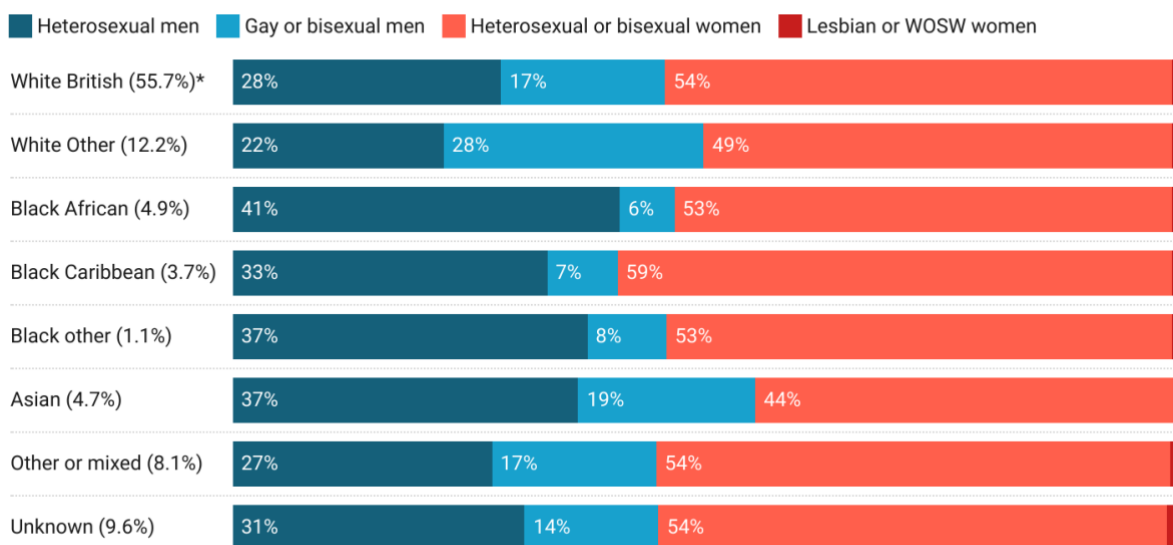
Chart: Meike Eijsberg • Source: UK Health Security Agency (1 December 2021) • Created with Datawrapper

Despite the increase in testing for lesbian women this year, they remain a minority. This is worrying, because “it’s not about getting people through the door, it’s about getting healthcare staff to think to offer the test to *all* people,” Scott explained.

Women *are* testing more than men, but within this group there are huge disparities. For instance, White British heterosexual women are testing the most (54% of all tests in the ‘White British’ category and 30% of all tests conducted in 2020). Lesbian women falling in the ‘Black Other’ category, however, are testing the least (0.7% of all tests in the ‘Black Other’ category and less than 0.01% of all tests conducted in 2020).

Great inequalities in HIV testing in England in 2020

HIV testing at Sexual Health Services (specialist and non-specialist) in England in 2020, broken down by ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.



* Percentage relative to HIV testing total in 2020.

Chart: Meike Eijsberg • Source: UK Health and Security Agency (1 December 2021) • Created with Datawrapper

Overall, those categorized as 'White British' and 'White Other' make up more than 65% of all HIV tests conducted in 2020. These numbers are an indication of a skewed testing availability that disadvantages those who are of non-white ethnicities.

To assist the disproportionately affected groups, "we need to stop labelling it as a condition which is so concentrated in one population [i.e. gay and bisexual men]," Scott explained. But she also added that: "Even when we get to zero HIV diagnoses, there's still going to be an awful lot of people living with HIV who are going to need support and services."