

China has been in the spotlight over its HIV/AIDS epidemic largely because of its huge population of 1.3 billion. Although national prevalence remains low, clusters of high prevalence exist, both geographically and among sub-groups. By the end of 2005, the cumulative number of HIV cases was estimated at 650,000, and full blown AIDS cases were estimated at 75,000, corresponding to a prevalence rate of 0.05%, according to a joint report by the China Ministry of Health, the World Health Organization, and the United Nations AIDS Program, UNAIDS. The report, released in January 2006, also said that about 25,000 people died of AIDS in China in 2005 alone, and another 70,000 contracted HIV, most of them injecting drug users and sex workers.

HIV prevalence is particularly high among sub-groups in some regions, some of which have high concentration of industry and manufacturing. The disease is especially prevalent in the southern border provinces — also centers of regional and international trade — of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan.

There is an indication that the epidemic is spreading to the general population through evidence that the proportion of sexually transmitted HIV infections is increasing and the proportion of female HIV cases has increased considerably over the recent years.

The evolution of the epidemic in China depends to a large extent on the coverage and effectiveness of prevention programs throughout the country. The participation of the private sector is seen by public health authorities in Beijing as an essential element of this coverage. Until recently, HIV/AIDS was not a topic that companies were willing to discuss openly, fearing negative reactions from government, employees and consumers. Over the course of 2003 though, the atmosphere surrounding HIV/AIDS in China has changed dramatically. The government's new attitude to HIV/AIDS means that potential political repercussions for business action are being replaced with the potential for political recognition.