

Deaths and illness among youth raise concerns as schools plan to reopen

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While schools and universities discuss plans to reopen, new warnings have emerged concerning the effects of the COVID-19 virus on youth. Several recent deaths of young students demonstrate the basic fact that, despite efforts by the media and politicians to downplay the dangers, the virus can pose a deadly threat to young people.

On April 25, in Lancaster, Texas, 17-year-old Lancaster High School student Jameela Dirrean-Emoni Barber died from liver and blood clots after she tested positive for coronavirus. Barber, who would have been a senior this fall, suffered a sudden and tragic death. Reports indicate that she had no underlying health conditions.

Similar cases are emerging throughout the country. Another tragic example can be found at Wheeling High School in a northwestern suburb of Chicago. Sophomore Zach Leviton, who was just 16 years old, died after falling severely ill. After being put on a ventilator, Leviton died on April 13 at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, Illinois. State health officials are investigating Leviton's death, which is believed to be linked to COVID-19. Leviton initially tested negative for the virus; however, doctors found his symptoms to be characteristic of an early-stage coronavirus infection.

COVID-19-related deaths have also been traced to college campuses and stem from university administrators' lack of preparation for and communication regarding the virus, as well as the general state of severe underfunding for both public education and health care.

Located in the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States, the City University of New York (CUNY) has identified four faculty, 10 staff, and three students who have died from the virus. Furthermore,

students, faculty, and staff have complained that university officials have not been forthcoming with information on CUNY's coronavirus cases. Students have also raised criticism over the delay in CUNY's response to the pandemic as well as its lack of financial support for students who have lost campus jobs.

In the state of Michigan, one of the virus epicenters in the US, students and youth also face dire conditions.

A student at Western Michigan University (WMU), 25-year-old Bassey Offiong, tried multiple times to get tested for the virus after showing COVID-19 symptoms. He was denied at every attempt. This was at a time when test kits were largely unavailable in the country, meaning that many with the virus were not able to receive a diagnosis and corresponding treatment. When Offiong's conditions worsened, he traveled to Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak, which has been ranked among the best hospitals in the state. He died on March 29, spending the last week of his life on a ventilator. Offiong would have graduated from WMU and received his degree in chemical engineering just a month from the time of his passing. He appeared to not have any underlying health conditions.

Another youth from Kalamazoo, Cornelius Frederick, contracted the virus and died at just 16 years old while staying at the foster care group home Lakeside Academy. Lakeside Academy is a facility that treats youth in need of intensive behavioral and mental therapy. Frederick, who was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, had lost his mother when he was 10, and, after his stepfather was incarcerated, spent four years in the foster care system.

On April 30, Frederick was physically restrained by Lakeside Academy staff after he had thrown a sandwich. Frederick reportedly told staff, "I can't breathe!" before passing out. He was transported to

Bronson Methodist Hospital where he tested positive for COVID-19.

Since May 4, nine staff members and 39 students also tested positive for the virus at Lakeside Academy.

Foster care systems have seen a surge of outbreaks in states across the country. These systems are notorious for being understaffed and under-resourced. Facilities are often crowded, making social distancing next to impossible.

Children and youth within these systems are often moved from one foster home to another. Such conditions often leave the mental and physical well-being of foster children and youth in neglect, making them particularly vulnerable during the pandemic.

Moreover, very few states have issued a moratorium on “aging out,” when a youth is no longer provided services, usually between the ages 18 and 21. More than 20 percent of youth who age out of the system will struggle with homelessness, meaning they will likely be forced to stay in crowded and unsanitary shelters, being placed at a much higher risk for COVID-19 infection.

While it is true that the virus is significantly more lethal to older people, the rate of infection among youth is significantly higher than what was originally anticipated. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 40 percent of American COVID-19 patients who were hospitalized were under 55—and 20 percent were between ages 20 and 44. And in rare cases, even children have died after falling ill with COVID-19.

In addition, recent reports have also revealed a dangerous condition, which doctors are calling multisystem inflammatory syndrome, that is thought to be related to COVID-19. The condition has shown up in children across the US—and internationally.

Reopening schools and universities in the summer and fall months without proper preparations will force students to decide between continuing their education and their own health and the health of their loved ones, both young and old.

For older students, the threat is increased. Two fatal cases at Wayne State University in Detroit have underscored the deadly conditions created on crowded campuses.

On April 3, Darrin Adams, a 51-year-old Wayne State student studying sociology, died. Adams was also a custodian at the university. Antoinette Bell was 50

years old when she passed on May 7. She was studying social work.

The drive to reopen schools is unfolding under conditions in which the virus has yet to be controlled. The United States, with barely 4 percent of the world’s population, has 32 percent of the world’s cases and 29 percent of the world’s deaths. Furthermore, the full effects of the virus are still largely unknown. Despite the almost daily claims by the Trump administration and the media that this or that vaccine or treatment has been discovered, no viable vaccine has been developed. There is no known cure.

Schools and universities are in the midst of unveiling plans and procedures for “safely reopening” in the fall. However, none of the plans include any serious measures to protect students and their loved ones from the virus. The coronavirus is extremely infectious, spread through aerosolization or on surfaces. There is no doubt that crowded schools, hosting people from all over the country and the world, have the potential to turn into COVID-19 hotspots very quickly, and with deadly consequences.



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