

Brown University study used to downplay spread of coronavirus in US schools

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A new database announced by Brown University and software company Qualtrics is being used to claim that the danger from the coronavirus pandemic in reopened schools is minimal, and that in-person learning should be resumed more fully across the United States.

One of the first articles commenting on the database, known as the National COVID-19 School Response Dashboard, was in the *Washington Post*. In an article titled “Scant evidence that the pathogen is spreading inside buildings,” it uses the data presented to claim that there are “low levels of infection among students and teachers.”

The article continues, asserting that “health experts” suggest that “opening the schools may not have been as risky as many have feared.” Drawing from the database, it notes that “0.23 percent of students” and “0.49 percent” of teachers nationwide had a confirmed or suspected coronavirus case.

Similar arguments were made by the *Hill*, as well as the authors of the Brown study themselves. Emily Oster, an economics professor who helped create the database, noted, “These numbers will be, for some people, reassuring and suggest that school reopenings may be less risky than they expected.”

Translated into actual numbers and extrapolated to the teacher and student population across the country, the infection rate reported by the database corresponds to about 18,620 teachers and an estimated 115,000 students infected with the coronavirus. These cases and any subsequent deaths are the direct result of the reopening of schools amidst a raging pandemic, which has resulted in more than 7.1 million cases in the United States and killed more than 207,000 people.

It is worth pointing out that the total case numbers suggested by the Brown study are four to five times higher than other estimates of COVID-19 in schools. A

different database, the COVID Monitor, counts as of this writing only 24,358 cases of the coronavirus among both staff and students. If anything, the data presented in the Brown study is an alarming indication that the data collected so far on school reopenings is inadequate for accurately tracking the virus and keeping it from infecting and killing more teachers and students.

It should not be forgotten that the number of students and teachers infected should ultimately be zero. The fact that a pandemic has so far killed at least 30 educators and is poised to kill many more should not be taken as an unavoidable loss of life. Yet both the *Post* and *Hill* articles, as well as the Brown study itself, treat the spread of the pandemic as a fact of life, and not a deadly threat that must be fought against at every turn.

Both data sets are based only on the current reopenings, which are centered in smaller communities. School reopenings in more populated areas such as New York City began this week and will continue through the first full week of October. Larger reopenings, combined with the advent of fall and flu season, are expected to result in even more infections.

The data are also based on only partially available national statistics. A recent article in the *New York Times* notes that only 14 states report coronavirus cases at the school-by-school or district-by-district level. Fourteen others present only the number of cases in schools at the county or state level, while 22 others do not report coronavirus cases in schools at all. They are lumped together with all cases in the state.

Of those 22 states, eight are run by Democrats, including California and Illinois and much of the US Northeast. In not reporting cases in schools, they are directly contributing to the continued spread of deadly conditions for both teachers and students. The logic of

such actions is that virtually every teacher and student will get the disease at some point, with ultimately deadly consequences.

Such dangers are also present on college campuses. A preprint of the study “College Openings, Mobility, and the Incidence of COVID-19,” posted on medRxiv.com, notes that “Most US colleges have reopened campuses for in-person teaching this Fall,” and as a result, the “COVID-19 incidence in the county increased on average by a statistically significant 0.024 per thousand residents.” The study finds no increase of cases on campuses or in their respective counties where classes resumed online.

Overall, this increase translates into 3,219 additional cases of COVID-19 per day across the United States, about 7.5 percent of the current daily total. The authors of the study also note that they did not account for spillover into the larger community, meaning that the broader impact has not truly been captured.

There are many indications, however, that such a broader impact is being felt, or will be felt in the near future, by the cities and towns surrounding campuses. An article published last week in *National Geographic* noted that young people have become the primary spreader of the pandemic “not because of parties and bars,” but because they more often than not have jobs that can’t be done remotely, such as those who work in the service industry.

This is compounded by the ongoing economic crisis. Tens of millions lost their jobs during the pandemic, and at least half have not been able to get them back. For young people, as the article notes, this places them “in a lose-lose situation: If they can find employment, many feel compelled to take it even if it means putting themselves at risk.”

This is especially true now that the Democrats and Republicans have allowed the extra federal coronavirus aid to expire, on which many young people relied as a lifeline for months.

Many of these are college students, who must work in order to pay for tuition, room, board and school supplies. They thus encounter large numbers of people both on and off campus. As the *National Geographic* article noted: “So while younger generations are being blamed, in some quarters, for the pandemic’s spread, they are bearing the greatest burden of poverty and the brunt of the transmission risk that comes with keeping

the economy going, all with little help in sight.”



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