

The impact of “herd immunity” on youth and students in the US

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Universities, colleges and grade schools in the US have made international headlines in recent weeks as campus reopenings continue to lead to massive outbreaks of COVID-19 in the surrounding regions.

Within one month of reopening, almost three dozen universities in the US have reported over one thousand cases from their own campuses. Some universities have fared even worse. For example, Ohio State University reported more than 2,600 positive cases in the first month, and the University of Georgia has reported nearly 4,000 positive cases during that same period.

School administrations and media outlets have repeatedly blamed students’ “partying” and the supposed irresponsibility of young people for spreading the virus.

Despite the irresponsibility of some youth and the role risky social gatherings may have played in spreading the virus, such criticisms are founded on a lie. The unbridled spread of COVID-19 is not the fault of a relatively small number of students, but is a direct consequence of the criminal policies of the American ruling class.

Young workers and students are being put on the frontlines of the pandemic, acting as involuntary test subjects for the bipartisan policy of “herd immunity”—allowing the virus to spread rapidly and broadly among young people, their family and coworkers, and the whole population.

This policy has had a devastating impact on youth physically, emotionally, and economically.

Health impact: the myth of “immunity” among youth

The return to school has resulted, predictably, in the tragic and untimely deaths of both students and educators. While the disease is more lethal for older individuals or those with certain health conditions, young people contract the virus, many become hospitalized and some die—even among the healthy.

As reported, the hundreds of WSWS has education several college students have passed away due to COVID-19. These educators and students were forced to endure unsafe conditions in the return to face-to-face learning despite all credible scientific evidence indicating that reopening the schools would prove deadly.

It is a tragic and unforgivable consequence of this broken, decayed, inhumane system under which we survive that healthy and bright students like 19-year-old Chad Dorrill from North Carolina, or 20-year-old Jamain Stevens Jr. of Pennsylvania, or Jezreel Lowie B. Juan of Hawaii—to name only a few young people lost to this pandemic—are not alive today.

The policy of “herd immunity” means young people have been forced to play Russian roulette with their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Some have suffered immense consequences from the illness, and others have been put into early graves.

With so much yet unknown about the COVID-19 virus and its effects, it is impossible to say that any single person could be considered safe from the disease, even if they only suffer mild symptoms initially. COVID-19 has been linked to a wide array of long-term effects, ranging from difficulty breathing and chronic fatigue to neurological issues. The emotional strain among those recovering and those still healthy is also immeasurable.

Young workers and students report feeling constant dread. They fear for their own safety and livelihoods, but also that they could be unknowingly spreading the virus to their loved ones. These young people have no way to easily calm their fear; many cannot regularly afford a rapid test to confirm or deny their suspicions.

Most significantly, millions cannot afford to stop working. According to new studies released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in August of this year, mental health disorders among youth, such as anxiety, depression and suicide ideation, have all seen a sharp rise since the onset of the pandemic.

The economic consequences for young people

Students, teachers, and young workers are being put on the frontlines of the pandemic with minimal protection and few benefits through their precarious, low-paid jobs.

While the media talking heads, school administrations, and Democratic and Republican politicians continuously blame student partying for the rise in cases among youth, the reality is that those under 30 are the most likely to be low-paid “essential” workers—including health care workers, those in retail and food service, agriculture workers and baristas.

These essential workers are almost guaranteed to be exposed to the virus, either from the public or their coworkers, when an outbreak occurs in their area.

Many young workers have become the sole source of income in their homes. A PEW research survey on unemployment released September 24th reveals that adults younger than 30 are more likely than those who are older to say they or someone else in their household has been laid off or taken a pay cut because of the outbreak: 54 percent of adults ages 18 to 29 reported that their household has had one or both of these experiences.

In particular, working-class millennials, those aged 24 to about 40 years old, have been hard hit. Many of this generation entered into the COVID-19 era having not fully recovered from the 2008 financial crisis. The youngest workers in Generation Z, those under 24, had yet to build any safety net.

Millions of working-class youth were already living paycheck to paycheck. The majority of people under 30 years old had less than \$1000 in savings, and one out of five young workers was living in poverty.

Fourteen percent of Americans, some 46 million people, say that since the virus was declared a pandemic, their emergency savings have been wiped out, according to a new CNBC + Acorns Invest in You survey. Another 11 percent of adults have had to borrow money to cover everyday expenses.

Over half of people under the age of 45 say that the one-time \$1,200 payment from the government under the CARES Act covered less than two weeks of expenses. Roughly a quarter, or 26 percent, of those ages 25 to 34 say they had completely depleted their emergency funds.

Many cannot afford health insurance or pay for routine medical treatments even if they were partially covered by insurance. The cost of exposure for a young worker would mean weeks without a full paycheck, at minimum, even if they tested negative. A positive test, at best, could mean a month without a full paycheck, along with the severe emotional and physical toll of the virus. Due to their

precarious financial position, young workers are being forced to work during the pandemic by economic blackmail.

The political impact on youth

Amid these dire conditions, one does not have to convince the younger generation of workers and youth that the world is in crisis. Young people are standing face to face with the defining social problems of this epoch: staggering inequality, record joblessness, lack of healthcare, climate change and the crisis of democracy, among others. The significant financial and emotional distress from the pandemic has led many young people to draw broader conclusions about the responsibility of capitalist system.

The events surrounding the pandemic are accelerating a process of radicalization that has been developing among workers and youth over decades.

Throughout the present crisis, the political establishment, Democrats and Republicans alike, have treated young people, workers and the elderly with inhumane contempt, sacrificing the working class for the financial interests of the ruling class.

On the other hand, youth and workers have watched healthcare workers, service workers and education workers come forward to work on the front lines of the pandemic to save lives. This generation of youth has witnessed, and many have participated in, immensely powerful protests and demonstrations against the criminal policies of the Trump administration, in defense of the rights of immigrants and against police brutality, in recent months and years. These experiences have and will continue to define the political outlook of a whole generation of youth.

Students, youth, and workers are looking for a way to fight. They are increasingly identifying themselves as socialists and coming to understand that the problems they face are rooted in the capitalist system, which subordinates all aspects of life to private profit.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth and student movement of the Socialist Equality Party, urges youth and students to join our movement, and by doing so, the fight for socialism.



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