Thousands of US college students return home for Thanksgiving amid surging pandemic

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Hundreds of thousands of college students have returned home for Thanksgiving this week as new cases of COVID-19 continue to surge in nearly every state. Only three states—Vermont, Maine and Hawaii—remain below 20 new cases per 100,000 daily and several states are pushing the limits of their hospital capacities.

After the disastrous decision by administrators at more than 1,900 colleges to reopen their campuses to in-person learning this fall led to hundreds of thousands of confirmed cases, countless students are bringing the coronavirus back home with them. Health officials are warning that even with a negative test, travelers may still transmit the virus.

As the US set a record for hospitalizations for the 16th day in a row, Dr. Jonathan Reiner, a former White House medical advisor, has warned that Thanksgiving could be the "mother of all super spread events." More than 2,200 COVID-19 deaths were reported in the US on Wednesday—making it the highest one-day coronavirus death toll the country has reported since early May.

The rampant spread of the virus in all parts of the country poses a serious threat to the health and safety of students and their families. While many schools have planned to switch to remote learning after the Thanksgiving holiday, even this minor provision will be inadequate.

Contrary to the myth that schools are safe environments for students of all ages, colleges and universities across the country have been breeding grounds for the virus.

A survey by the *New York Times* has found that there have been 321,000 cases at 1,900 colleges and universities and at least 80 deaths since the beginning of March. Even this considerable number of infections is likely an understatement considering the propensity for young people to be asymptomatic and the chronic lack of testing at many schools.

Schools across the country brought hundreds of thousands of students together in densely populated campuses this fall, hundreds of which have recorded cases numbering over 100. Now students are rushing to make it back home for the holiday as their campuses close amidst major outbreaks.

Thousands of University of Wisconsin students rushed to get tested before flying home to be with their families for the next several weeks. Many have no choice but to go home. At Ohio State University, where more than 4,700 students have tested positive this fall, thousands more will return home for Thanksgiving before returning for in-person classes on January 18.

Leading public health officials have warned against traditional Thanksgiving celebrations in the US, instead urging people to stay home and celebrate only with members of the same household. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also recommended last week that people should not travel for Thanksgiving.

In this context, colleges which are sending students home for the holiday will be going against every guidance from health officials.

Even the State University of New York system, which at least had the sense to require students from all 64 schools to test negative before leaving campus, is still acting against the recommendations of health officials who have warned that a negative test is not a license to travel and that those who do test negative may still transmit the virus.

The CDC is warning that if college students go home for Thanksgiving, they should be considered guests and families should wear masks, stay six feet apart and open windows to mitigate the infection risk.

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Having families treat their children in this manner, in their home, after being away at school for months, will be an incredibly difficult feat. Through no fault of their own, there will surely be those that are unable to follow these guidelines, or who simply let their guard down after months of stress and uncertainty in their lives.

For millions of families the holidays will be an extraordinarily difficult time. Hundreds of thousands will be grieving the loss of a loved one to COVID-19, millions more will be struggling to put food on the table. On top of this already difficult situation, many families now must weigh the risks of allowing their children to return home for the holidays.

There is no doubt that many will decide, or be forced due to difficult circumstances, to take the risk, resulting in an increase in cases throughout the country.

The responsibility for this disaster lies with the Republican and Democratic politicians of every state, and the university bureaucrats with which they have strong political ties. No state has been spared the onslaught of cases that have torn through campuses this fall due to the drive to reopen schools, waged by capitalist politicians of all stripes.

The reopening of campuses and K-12 schools has been a cornerstone of the bipartisan "herd immunity" policy which has allowed the virus to spread unchecked in order to keep workplaces open and profits flowing.

In New York, Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo—who has been hailed by the media and political establishment for his response to the pandemic in the spring despite overseeing the highest number of deaths from COVID-19 in any state to date—referred to college students as the "canary in the coal mine" and remarked that the outbreaks that were occurring just days into the semester were to be expected in K-12 schools as well.

The effect of this policy has been devastating. On August 26, the *New York Times* was reporting 26,000 cases in colleges and universities. A month later the number had more than tripled to 88,000 and after two months the number had risen past 178,000.

The *Times* has also reported 5,000 infections related to university athletics. Despite this, college football will continue through Thanksgiving. Florida State University has requested that students who return home for the holiday remain there but will allow its football team to continue practicing this week and play Virginia on Saturday.

The University of Virginia itself has told players that if they travel to have Thanksgiving with family and do not employ social distancing and mask wearing, they will have to quarantine. However, they are allowed to visit family if the gatherings are small or just for one day and social distancing and mask wearing are followed.

Meanwhile, at Ohio State, no players are allowed to travel home and they will have Thanksgiving dinner with each other.

That every university has its own guidelines has been par for the course for universities in handling the pandemic. State and colleges have developed their own internal guidelines and policies, some more effective than others but most far too inadequate to effectively prevent outbreaks.

As has been one of the defining characteristics of the policy of herd immunity, it does not matter how many people get sick as long as the rate of infection does not surpass whichever governing body's arbitrary threshold is in place.

The latest surge in cases across the country, producing the worst daily case numbers for the entire pandemic, presents a serious threat to the health and lives of tens of millions of workers and students in the United States and worldwide.

With schools planning on returning for the spring, despite warnings from the CDC that deaths could pass 400,000 by the start of the next semester, a clear and present danger threatens students, staff, faculty and community members in all parts of the country.

The only solution to the pandemic is the independent political mobilization of students and workers to keep schools and non-essential workplaces closed until it is safe to return. All students and workers who wish to fight the capitalist policy of herd immunity in schools should sign up here to join the National Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.

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