

New data shows that nearly 1400 kids in Michigan's Upper Peninsula have caught COVID-19

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New demographic data obtained by Columbia University's Brown Institute for Media Innovation's "Documenting COVID-19" project, in collaboration with the *Detroit Free Press*, has revealed a dire situation in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (U.P.).

The data shows that the number of cases among children in Michigan's U.P. exploded from a total of 149 cases in the first seven months of the pandemic, to nearly 1,400 children in K-12 over a six week period in the early months of the fall school term.

Furthermore, since mid-October more than 13,500 people in the U.P. contracted the virus, *a three-fold increase since the pandemic began in March*. The death toll during the second wave has also skyrocketed: 337 dead in 10 weeks, compared to 46 deaths in the previous seven months.

Many U.P. counties remain today in the "Level B" category, according to the system the state uses to assess coronavirus risk. This means that the positivity rate is between 7-10 percent. These infection rates are similar to southeast Michigan's Oakland and Wayne counties.

The U.P. is home to a population of about 313,000, according to the 2010 census, a number that is a little under half the current size of the city of Detroit.

Early in the pandemic, many thought that rural areas were safer from the pandemic due to lower population density. On this basis, schools were allowed to open.

However, throughout the fall, hospitalizations and deaths rose dramatically in less populated regions of the country. In fact, a Pew Research Study released in December shows that the geography of new deaths has shifted over the course of the pandemic, now deeply affecting rural areas. Much of this data has been

obscured or underreported in the mainstream media.

The recently reported data on the major outbreak among children in the U.P. was not provided as a regular part of the state government's reporting. It was uncovered by *Documenting COVID-19*, a repository of searchable documents related to the COVID-19 pandemic obtained through the state's open-records laws and the Freedom of Information Act by Columbia University's Brown Institute for Media Innovation's *Documenting COVID-19* project.

The revelation of the massive outbreak of the virus among children in Michigan's U.P., a largely rural part of the country, is only further evidence that many of the peninsula's 15 counties will very likely see a rapid rise in cases if schools continue with reopening plans this spring.

Furthermore, the spread of the virus among students will undoubtedly lead to an increase in community spread. Over those same two-and-a-half months of increasing cases among children in the fall, more than 13,500 people in the U.P. contracted the virus, three times the total number infected since the pandemic began in March.

Michigan's seven-day average of new cases is now 3,136, an 11 percent increase from 2,837 a week ago today. Forty-three counties now have a positivity rate of 10 percent or higher. That compares to 32 counties on December 21, the start of Christmas week.

The impact of the decision to reopen schools in Michigan, including the U.P., has been devastating. Several educators have died in Michigan school districts since the hybrid and full openings began.

The latest reported death was that of 69-year-old Cheboygan school bus driver Dale Wiersum, who died

from COVID-19 in December as the second wave took hold before the Christmas holidays. Wiersum had been a driver for 7 years in the district before his tragic death.

The problem facing working families in rural communities is not fundamentally different from working families in urban communities who are forced to make the tough decision to return to work in order to survive. As a consequence of parents having to return to work, they are forced to send their children into school.

No county in the U.P. has an overall poverty rate under thirteen percent, with an income and poverty profile not different from counties in the lower peninsula. Houghton County in the western part of the U.P. bordering Lake Superior, had a poverty rate of 21.4 percent in 2017. Schoolcraft County, further east and at the top of Lake Michigan, also had an overall poverty rate of 21.4 percent in 2017. This figure is close to the high levels found in urbanized Wayne County, where Detroit is located, with a poverty rate of about 24 percent.

Like the sprawling auto plants in other parts of the state, there is no doubt that manufacturing in the U.P. contributed to the increase in cases.

Among those forced to go to work to keep the stream of profit intact for US corporations were nearly 900 workers at the Escanaba Mill, a large paper mill employer in the eastern part of the U.P. One paper mill worker told a reporter from the *Detroit Free Press* that “many people have worked while infected and many others come to work sick but refuse to get tested.”

Another infected mill worker reported that when he found out he was exposed in early October, he let his employer know, but had to continue working until he tested positive — which he eventually did on October 15.

The mill was cited in contact tracing notes for allegedly not taking testing seriously. Records indicate that six cases were reported over September and October at the mill.

On the western side of the U.P., workers from Delta and Menominee counties work in nearby Wisconsin, at Fincantieri Marinette Marine, which builds ships for the Navy. Four cases were reported in April, and a dozen employees were quarantined. By November, there were more than 150 cases.

The experience in rural America, including in the U.P. of Michigan, also shows that coronavirus cases cannot be defined as a racial issue. In recent months, the loss of life to COVID-19 has been roughly the same in less racially and ethnically diverse districts as it has in ones more diverse.

The working class in both rural and urban areas must put a halt to our children getting sick by the horrible policies of the ruling elite.



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