

Professional football testing and tracing regimens reveal further dangers for in-person teaching

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A set of coronavirus testing and contact tracing measures implemented last year to cover 11,400 people was recently published in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report posted by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). These include testing “conducted 6 days per week” and “trained staff members” carrying out interviews “to identify contacts.”

The report noted how “extensive mitigation and surveillance measures in facilities,” including wearing masks and minimizing in-person interaction, along with employees who “were regularly educated about risks from household and community exposure,” combined to keep the spread of COVID-19 among those followed in the CDC study relatively low.

In a rational world, one might expect that these would be the absolute minimum guidelines for essential workers in a pandemic: for doctors, nurses, grocery workers, agricultural workers, emergency service workers, to name a few. However, in 21st century America, during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, such measures are not for such a critical section of society, but rather for professional athletes, specifically for players in the National Football League.

The protocols were laid out in a joint CDC/NFL paper that cataloged the spread of the coronavirus among players and staff from August 9 to November 21. The report also served as a review and assessment of the testing and contact tracing conducted for football players during the 2020 season.

First, it must be noted that whatever the successes of the program the league implemented, holding games at all was extremely irresponsible. As the study itself notes, 329 cases of the coronavirus were identified among the employees of the league, along with 20 confirmed cases among those who had contact with infected players or

staff. Among these, dozens were offensive linemen, who are more at risk than their colleagues because of the weight they put on to play their position. It is sheer luck that no deaths have so far been reported.

Second, the study makes clear that for those workers who absolutely must work during the pandemic, there are methods to contain the extent of the virus as much as possible, if the resources are made available. According to ESPN, more than \$100 million was made available to the NFL and the NFL Players Association, which built a robust infection control system.

From a purely scientific standpoint, the data is among the most detailed account yet produced of how the coronavirus spreads. During the season, every player in the league and most staff were tested six days a week, with the turnaround time on their laboratory PCR tests always less than 24 hours. They also were required to wear proximity devices, which allowed for real time contact tracing and recorded all interactions that occurred within six feet of other players and staff. The NFL also hired a support group of contact tracers to conduct interviews when the disease spread to family members, roommates or others not wearing the proximity devices.

The NFL then used the data collected to carefully watch the speed at which transmission of the virus occurs. It found, “Among the 21 persons with suspected within-club transmission, 12 had no device-recorded interactions of ≥ 15 consecutive minutes with a person with confirmed COVID-19, including eight who had no interactions > 5 consecutive minutes and seven who had no interactions > 15 cumulative minutes per day (with no other known exposures to a person with COVID-19).”

Of course, the fact that even with all the policies and restrictions put in place, infections in numerous different places and in multiple different ways still occurred is a

warning to the working class. If transmission of the coronavirus can penetrate the NFL's extraordinarily well-funded testing and contact tracing regimen, the vast majority of workers, who do not have access to such resources, stand no chance.

These results are further evidence that the virus is both airborne and can be present in the air long after the infected person leaves the room. This means that an infected person freely exhaling (not wearing a mask) in a poorly ventilated area can infect many people, even if no one is present in the room when he or she is.

Such dangers immediately call into question workplace and school reopenings in the United States and internationally. These dangers are multiplied when one considers that at the time the NFL games were being played, the new more infectious and deadly variants of the coronavirus had yet to emerge.

Compared to the players and staff of the NFL, teachers doing in-person learning are threatened a great deal more by the coronavirus. They are in enclosed rooms for hours on end, especially during the winter months, with ventilation systems that are more often than not either inadequate or nonexistent. They intermingle with their colleagues and their students, all of whom can transmit the disease, and, as documented by the NFL, all it takes are a few moments of an infected person eating lunch to potentially infect several others.

Yet those who work and learn in schools are tested even less than those in sports, generally at most once a week. Contact tracing across the country has essentially collapsed. And vaccines, which have been presented by the Biden administration and the media as the panacea that will allow schools to reopen, are being distributed and administered not to protect health care and other frontline workers, but to boost corporate profits by getting certain sections of workers, above all teachers, back to work.

Moreover, the CDC is encouraging schools to reopen at "any level of community transmission," claiming that "strict adherence to mitigation strategies" will keep teachers, staff and students safe. This is the language of the Trump administration, which has now been appropriated by Biden. The entire ruling elite seeks to resume fully in-person learning in all school districts that currently provide remote instruction so as to pressure parents to return to their own equally dangerous workplaces.

This is a recipe for disaster. One of the more interesting results of the NFL study was that the spread of the virus

among the players and staff of the NFL broadly mirrored that of the spread of the disease nationally. While some spikes in the data were caused by social events, the daily case counts from October through November rose while cases nationally were also rising.

The spread in schools, where hundreds of millions of dollars are not being spent by each district to meticulously track the extent of the virus, will be far greater. There have already been hundreds of thousands of infections among students and teachers and hundreds of deaths. The stage is being set for millions of new cases and thousands of new deaths.

That the NFL was able to contain the pandemic to such an extent is an example of the minimum necessary to protect essential workers: proper personal protective equipment, extensive testing, tracing, any necessary isolation, and, now that they have been deployed, vaccinations. At the same time, the data clearly show the immense dangers facing the NFL players, and implicitly argue that no one should be in the workplace if he or she does not have to be.

Teachers do not have to be. As the past several months have shown, they have risen to the challenge of teaching remotely, sacrificing even more than usual to ensure that their students are as much as possible able to learn under extraordinarily hostile conditions. Parents too have been forced to go to immense lengths to provide an education for their children. Those sacrifices are now being threatened by the accelerating herd immunity policies of the Biden administration, which acts on behalf of the murderous social system that allowed the pandemic to spread so far in the first place: capitalism.



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