

# Reopening of schools and economy fuels Michigan's new pandemic surge

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The fourth surge of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States is now decisively under way, and Michigan is the epicenter. On April 8, the state's daily case rate was by far the worst in the country, 70.2 per 100,000 people—the next highest, New Jersey, was 46.9. Daily cases in Michigan are now about six times higher than they were at their low in late February, and are approaching their highest levels ever.

The five worst-affected metropolitan areas in the US are all in Michigan: the south-central city of Jackson is the worst at 92.8 daily new cases per 100,000 people, followed by Detroit at 84.7, Flint at 79, Monroe at 72.4, and Bay City at 71.5. Michigan's test-positivity rate of 15.5 percent is also the highest in the country, followed by Puerto Rico at 13.5 and South Dakota at 10.4.

The B.1.1.7 variant, which is 50 percent more transmissible than wild-type COVID-19, is now the main variant in the United States, and some doctors describe it as a “new pandemic”. In Michigan, B.1.1.7 is totally dominant, accounting for 70 percent of all cases subjected to genetic testing. All five of the “variants of concern” identified by the CDC have now appeared in Michigan.

Children are very susceptible to B.1.1.7, and in Michigan the sharpest rise in case rates has been among youth aged 10-19, according to the state's Chief Medical Executive Dr. Joneigh Khaldun. She revealed in a March 19 press conference that 315 separate outbreaks related to school sports were reported across Michigan in January and February. Weekly outbreaks in the state's K-12 school buildings have also increased for the last six weeks and recently surged, rising 20 percent in the last week alone.

Hospitals are again filling up. COVID-19 hospitalizations in Michigan have quadrupled in the past month, and are up 40 percent in the last week.

State epidemiologist Sarah Lyon-Callo said at a press briefing that hospitalization rates are “currently the highest among those between 20-29 and 30-39, however, rates for children between 0-9 and 10-19 are at an all-time high.” Dr. Justin B. Dimick, the chair of surgery at Michigan Medicine in Ann Arbor, tweeted yesterday, “We are starting to cancel surgical cases again to accommodate rapidly accelerating COVID-19 admissions.”

This resurgence of COVID-19 in a new form is entirely the result of the deliberate decision of the US federal government, and the Michigan state government with it, to place corporate profits over the lives of masses of working people.

It is a public fact, recorded by the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, that the top sources of outbreaks in the state are the following: K-12 school buildings, with 81 outbreaks last week; manufacturing and construction jobs, with 43; long-term care facilities (nursing homes) with 35; childcare and youth programs (which includes school sports) with 29; and retail employees, with 27 outbreaks. Outbreaks are defined as two or more COVID-19 cases linked by time and location, and these are the form through which the state reports details on the spread of the pandemic.

Yet Governor Gretchen Whitmer has refused to take any measures to stop the spread of the virus in schools and workplaces. Schools across the state remain open on a district-by-district basis, and no meaningful restrictions remain on nonessential factories or workplaces.

Whitmer clearly articulated the position of Michigan's ruling elite at a February 24 press conference. “Without schools, the economy is hamstrung,” she said, because “working families are

spread too thin.” This is a reference to parents who have left the workforce during the pandemic to stay home with their young children so they can attend school virtually and safely.

Michigan’s Governor speaks on behalf of an “economy” that, since the pandemic began, has funneled trillions of dollars *upward* to the world’s billionaires, who increased their personal wealth by 60 percent in the last year. *Forbes* magazine called this “the greatest acceleration of wealth in human history.” Michigan’s richest man, Quicken Loans shark Dan Gilbert, increased his wealth from \$6.4 billion at this time last year to \$51.9 billion now, an eight-fold increase. Gilbert pocketed more than \$2.7 million for every one of the 16,400 Michiganders who have died of COVID-19 so far.

Instead of closing schools and nonessential workplaces, Whitmer’s constant refrain is that the pandemic can only come to an end if people wear masks, practice social distancing and wash their hands. “The national experts that we’ve regularly talked to say you don’t have a policy problem, you have a compliance problem,” Whitmer said on April 7.

This is a lame effort to transfer responsibility onto individuals. In reality, forcing large numbers of students, teachers and workers into badly ventilated factories and school buildings fatally undermines the use of masks and social distancing.

A recent report in *STAT* explains that scientists are urging the Biden administration to send a surge of vaccines to Michigan to counter the new surge of COVID-19. Ashish Jha, the dean of the Brown University School of Public Health, said “I would be surging a lot of vaccines to Michigan right now. To me, this is a no-brainer policy, and I would be curious to hear why the Biden team hasn’t done this.” When asked this question by a *STAT* reporter on April 7, Biden adviser Andy Slavitt stated that “we are still allocating vaccines based upon population,” and not on case rates.

Only about 2 million of Michigan’s nearly 10 million residents are completely vaccinated now, and another million or so have gotten their first dose of a multi-dose vaccine.

While vaccine eligibility was extended on April 5 to everyone in Michigan age 16 or older, actual access to the vaccine remains limited, and the demand far

exceeds the supply. For example, all of the CVS pharmacies in the state are presently booked solid for vaccinations and have stopped accepting more appointments.

On April 6, Whitmer announced there would be 27 “popup clinics” offering vaccines across the state. One of these, located at ACCESS healthcare in the Detroit suburb of Sterling Heights, administered 2,000 doses over the last three days, and is now gone. The receptionist said that each day so many came that long lines of people who waited for hours were turned away.

One woman who was turned away told a *World Socialist Web Site* reporter, “The way they are treating the distribution is a joke. They say the vaccine is important but they treat it like it’s the least important thing going on in the world. Where is the plan? What they are doing now, it’s anarchy. There is no system. I took off work to come here.”

In Detroit, the poorest big city in the US, just 22 percent of residents have been vaccinated. This compares to 44 percent in nearby Washtenaw County, 42 percent in Oakland County, and 35 percent in Macomb County, the two suburban counties directly north of the city. Vaccines are now on offer at locations in downtown Detroit such as the Ford Field football stadium and the TCF Center (formerly Cobo Hall). But no transportation has been arranged, and the city’s public transit system barely functions.



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