

Explosion of COVID-19 cases in Wisconsin continues as schools remain fully open

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26 September 2021

Wisconsin is in the midst of an enormous COVID-19 outbreak that is not showing any signs of slowing down or plateauing in the coming weeks.

On September 20, 7,832 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported, with the average number of daily cases reaching over 3,100, as of September 23. Northwestern Wisconsin has been hit especially hard with a large number of unvaccinated residents falling sick to the Delta variant. While deaths have remained low, at 13 per day, fatalities tend to rise in the weeks following mass outbreaks.

In the last two weeks of June, the average number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 per day in the state of Wisconsin had slipped down into double digits for the first time since March 2020. As with many other states, mask mandates were lifted and all social distancing measures were removed from indoor and outdoor gatherings. But by the end of July, the more highly transmissible and lethal Delta variant had begun to spread, raising the daily average of confirmed cases back into the hundreds. Now, with schools fully open and operational weeks after the Labor Day holiday, daily COVID-19 cases are back in the thousands.

The surge of cases will most likely not peak until October. As of last week, two counties in Wisconsin were designated as having “critically high” levels of transmission, a designation that had to be reinstated by the state, considering the massive number of new cases. As of September 21, the number of counties with critically high transmission was eight. Meanwhile, vaccinations have plateaued since early September, with 56 percent of residents fully vaccinated and 60 percent with at least one dose.

The rise in cases has pushed the Wisconsin health care system to the brink of collapse. Ninety-five percent of all ICU beds and medical-surgical beds in

the state are in use, according to data from the Wisconsin Hospital Association. In north Wisconsin there are zero beds available in the region’s 17 hospitals. Patients are also coming in very sick, meaning they are staying in the hospital longer.

The lack of beds and resources poses a grave risk even to those not infected. In an interview with Fox6, University of Wisconsin (UW) chief health quality officer Dr. Jeff Pothoff said, “The critical care capacity is so maximized that ... if your emergency happens at the wrong time of the day and there are no ICU beds within 100 miles of your location, that takes risks with your life.” Those who need emergency medical attention in any capacity are at risk of death or of having to cross state lines in order to find a bed and treatment.

At a news conference reported by Channel 3000, Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) Secretary Karen Timberlake stated, “We are not at a plateau yet, we are not at a leveling off. We are seeing a concerning rate of growth.” The state’s chief medical officer, Dr. Ryan Westergaard, said later in the press conference, “We have not seen a turning of the corner.” As the variant continues to spread unabated throughout the state, there is plenty of reason to believe more counties will reach critically high levels of transmission, only now with even less of a chance to receive immediate and proper medical assistance.

It is no coincidence that this massive surge has occurred as schools have fully reopened. Children in the state of Wisconsin account for more COVID-19 cases than any other age group. With mask mandates in schools not being applied equally in all counties—a minimal mitigation measure—the disease has spread rapidly among children, many of whom are not yet eligible for vaccination. Timberlake noted that cases

were increasing especially among the 9-13 age range. According to DHS's dashboard, 1,540 children in this age group were confirmed to carry the virus the week of September 12. Meanwhile, the 14-17 age group still retains the highest per capita case rate, at 470.6 per 100,000 youth.

Last Wednesday, 17-year-old high school student Dylan Passa died after testing positive for COVID-19, the second reported Wisconsin student to die from the virus since the school year began four weeks ago. Passa, a high school senior at Mondovi High School in northwest Wisconsin, was admitted to the hospital with pneumonia on September 14, just one day before the Mondovi School Board voted unanimously to remove rules requiring students exposed to those testing positive for COVID-19 be quarantined.

The state's flagship university, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has also reported an increase in COVID-19 cases among students since the semester started on September 8. While the school reports that 91 percent of students and 94 percent of employees are fully vaccinated, there is still an average of around 26 new confirmed daily cases according to the UW COVID dashboard. Surrounding Dane County also revealed a significant increase in cases, rising to around 167 a day, a number much higher than in early August before the fall semester began.

In a recent interview with Wisconsin PBS, a Madison teacher who wished to remain anonymous, said she and coworkers had a feeling of "impending doom" as the start of the school year neared with the spread of the Delta variant.

The very limited "mitigation" measures being implemented in piecemeal fashion will not stop COVID and widespread infection and death. The situation in Wisconsin is not unique. The CDC recently reported that over 94 percent of all counties in the US are at "high" levels of transmission. By putting children who are truly defenseless against the virus back in the classroom, lawmakers and public officials are once again demonstrating their prioritizing of the profit interests of big business over protecting human life. The fight against the pandemic requires as an urgent first step the halting of in-person learning and the development of an independent political movement of parents, teachers and workers that demands the global eradication of COVID.



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