

One month after schools reopened in Missouri, COVID-19 infections among children jump

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Many school districts in Missouri began their school year on August 23. Since then, thousands of new cases among children have been reported, ensuring that COVID-19 will continue to spread and infect and even larger share of the population. As of September 26, more than 830,000 Missourians have tested positive for COVID-19 and more than 12,000 have died, with an average of 38 people succumbing to the disease every day.

Johns Hopkins University released alarming data September 15 confirming that 1 in every 500 United States residents has died from COVID-19. There are officially more deaths in the US from the current pandemic than the total of Americans who were killed by the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. Six children in Missouri have died from COVID-19 so far, with the most recent being a child from St. Louis who died the week of September 5. No further details were released about the child's identity or condition of health upon contracting the virus.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children's Hospital Association reports that for the first week of classes, a quarter of all new cases in Missouri were in children ages 0-17. About one in three children ages 12-17 in Missouri have been fully vaccinated. Nearly 34,000 children were confirmed to have contracted COVID-19 during the summer season. Some local health departments report that a third of new COVID cases are being diagnosed in children. Just over 53 percent of the population has received at least one vaccine dose; 64.4 percent of adults 18 and older have received at least one dose while those under 12, as in the rest of the country, remain ineligible for vaccination.

Parents, teachers and students are being left to fend for themselves to try to mitigate rising COVID-19 infection rates which are being driven by the reopening of schools.

St. Louis County Executive Dr. Sam Page released a preliminary report September 8 on new COVID-19 diagnoses at county school districts. For the public and private schools that had released data at the time, there were 373 student cases and 56 staff cases. And 1,318 people had to quarantine in response to these cases. The positivity rate among 10-14-year-old children was 16.2 percent, significantly higher than the overall average of 10 percent. This is a significant increase from before the start of the school year, when children made up 11.8 percent of Missouri cases. "These numbers reveal that the level of transmission among our children is much too high. It's crucial that parents and educators take steps now to stop the transmission of COVID in schools," Dr. Page said.

Speaking to KMOV4 for Jefferson County, a rural portion of the St.

Louis metro area, Public Communications Officer for the Jefferson County Health Department Brienne Zwiener warned of the inevitable increase in deaths that will come from the reopening of schools. Children made up 30 percent of new cases in the county the week of September 6. "When cases tend to rise, we in a few weeks see a hospitalization rise, and then we tend to see deaths, so we're really watching this trend of increased cases and hospitalizations across not only the state but within our region as well." The county health department has steadily advocated for masking and vaccinations, though local adoption of these is low. "We're trying to prevent as much as we can now before we see a huge increase in cases that is unlike what we've seen before."

The sharp rise in cases is having a drastic effect on rural schools. South Nodaway School District serves children in Nodaway County in northwest Missouri, population 22,000. The district's elementary and junior/senior high schools were closed September 2 and 3 for cleaning and sanitation after 49 students, more than a quarter of the district's student body, and three staff members could not attend classes or work due to illness or quarantine. Upon reopening, a mask mandate was issued for the district but only through September 17.

K-12 students are being affected by a shortage of bus drivers throughout the St. Louis region, as in the nation as a whole.

Granite City, Illinois is part of the Metro East region of the St. Louis metro area. Granite City Community Unit School District #9's bus driver shortage is so severe that the district is not providing bus service for grades 5-12 except for special education students, which is federally mandated for many of these students. The crisis has district superintendent Stephanie M. Cann considering the National Guard for bus driving duties. National Guard members have already been called on to drive students in Massachusetts by the state's governor.

Despite the rapid spread of COVID-19, the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services (DHSS) has maintained its official policy of keeping schools and businesses open. DHSS Director Don Kauerauf said directly, "Kids need to stay in the classroom," and only advocating for voluntary vaccinations and masking. He said that mandates are a "political decision."

KMOV4 also reported on an 18-year-old from St. Charles County who is fighting for his life in an ICU. High school senior Elijah Johnson, a football player, tested positive September 1. After several visits to local hospitals, he was airlifted September 12 to St. Louis Children's Hospital, where he must use a BiPAP machine so that he can breathe. "I never would've thought that I would see my boy the football player, healthy kid go from running people over on the field

to laid up in the hospital, struggling. It's hard on me," said Cynthia Johnson, Elijah's mother.

She explained that without the BiPAP machine, "he cannot sustain his own air. [He's] very lethargic. His fever has been all over the place. Also, with him being laid up for days, he's also acquired blood clots in both legs. He has pneumonia on top of the COVID. So, it's hard." When asked if she thought her son caught COVID-19 from going to classes this year, she said, "I do, I do. I hate to say it, but it's the truth, I do." Elijah had initially chosen not to get vaccinated but changed his mind, but he caught COVID-19 before he could get a shot. His school district, Fort Zumwalt School District, does not require students to wear masks. As of September 15, 416 students in that district were under quarantine.

Both adult and pediatric hospitals in Missouri have been overwhelmed with patients. Even as daily hospitalizations have been on the decline since a peak in August there are still so many COVID-19 patients being admitted, ICUs are filling up, creating a situation where patients have to be sent many miles away from home to be treated, under conditions when minutes can mean the difference between life or death.

At St. Louis' SSM Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital, the total daily admission rate has risen from 40 patients to nearly 200. Cardinal Glennon Chief Medical Officer Dr. Marya Strand told KSDK of how the current phase of the pandemic has been the worst yet for children. "We're now seeing it in infants, toddlers, school age children and teenagers with more symptoms than we really recognized during the first phase of the pandemic." She added, "These kids are really sick. We're not seeing mild kids hospitalized. We're seeing really severe illness." Pediatric nurse Abby Meyers spoke of the burnout the rise of COVID-19 in children is causing at the hospital. "It's been really, really crazy and hard on nurses. We're just drowning. We're really drowning."

Despite this latest wave of death and illness, the state government and some local governments are actively undermining vaccination efforts. Governor Mike Parson posted a Tweet on September 9 saying, "The Biden Administration's recent announcement seeking to dictate personal freedom and private business decisions is an insult to our American principles of individual liberty and free enterprise." This was a response to President Joe Biden's proposed vaccine or testing mandate for private-sector businesses with over 100 employees. Officials in Franklin County, part of the St. Louis metro area, passed a resolution September 7 stating that the county "will not allow the Federal Government to force us to go against the Constitution we've sworn to uphold."

The Missouri legislature passed House Bill 271, a law limiting the ability of local governments to impose restrictions on the operations of businesses, churches and schools to a maximum of 30 days under a statewide emergency, with only a majority vote from a body like a city council overruling the new law. The Missouri Attorney General's office has filed a lawsuit against St. Louis County over its mask mandate; the mandate cannot be enforced while this litigation is ongoing. On September 20, a St. Louis County Circuit Court judge denied a motion from the county to dismiss the lawsuit.

Health care workers are suffering from the mental toll the overwhelmed hospitals and mass deaths of COVID-19 patients are taking on them. Dr. Steven M. Brown of Mercy Virtual Care Center in St. Louis tweeted September 5, "In 40 years, I have not encountered so much death in 12 hours, as last night. I imagine this is what a nuclear incident would feel like." The tweet ended up getting over

70,000 likes.

Dr. Brown explained further to KSDK, "I had four people dying in about three hours, but then they just kept coming and coming and I think, at the end of the 12-hour shift, 7, 8, 9 people died...I was leaving my shift with people with very low blood pressures, I was leaving my shift with people who had been resuscitated multiple times throughout the night." The deaths weigh on him heavily. "You were taught early on in medical school not to take things home. But sometimes, I just have a really good cry." He noted 95 percent of his ICU patients are unvaccinated.

Small cities in areas outside of the state's two major metropolitan areas, St. Louis and Kansas City, have also seeing sharp rises in cases. In the southeast city of Sikeston, with just 16,000 people, data showed that the two counties that make up the city's area (Scott and New Madrid) had the worst rates of new COVID-19 infections in the first week of September. At that time, eight of the nine worst-hit counties in the state for new infections were in the southeast region. Missouri Delta Medical Center reported that six patients were hospitalized with COVID-19 in June, 21 in July and 79 in August. The first six days of September alone had seen 20 new admissions, none of whom had been vaccinated.

CNN recently published a story detailing the social and economic pressures that discourage rural Missourians from volunteering to get vaccinated or stay home when sick.

In southeast Carter County (population 5,200), there is still hesitation to get the vaccine, though residents acknowledge that COVID-19 is infecting a significant portion of the county's population. Resident Brandon Helvey told the CNN crew, "Everybody's scared. Everybody's coming down with it. And it's almost like a plague," though he said he was still afraid to get the vaccine. Only 27 percent of the county is fully vaccinated.

The Current River runs through Van Buren, the largest county town (population 800), which relies on tourists visiting for boating and float trips. The jobs serving tourists do not allow the opportunity to work from home and are low-wage, meaning that many employees try to conceal COVID-19 symptoms instead of reporting illness to go into quarantine. Debbie Turley said, "They want to hide the fact that they're sick so they can work. You don't get vaccinated. You don't get tested. You hide your symptoms if you're able to. And you just go out in the community and spread the virus."

Jim Rodebush's wife died from COVID-19 on July 20. He expressed dismay when he watched the 2020 report CNN recorded on COVID-19 in Carter County. "Those boys sitting in the coffee shop don't know what they're talking about when they're talking about Covid. They need to walk through the Covid ward. That'll change your mind. Just stay a day there. See how you like it. It's a different story then."



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