

Global rate of measles surged by 20 percent in 2023

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Cases of measles globally have surged in 2023 infecting 1.3 million people, according to the statement published by the World Health Organization (WHO) last Thursday. The figure is a 20 percent increase from the year prior, product of declining vaccination rates. Although the disease is completely preventable, more than 22 million children missed their first dose in 2023.

While 95 percent or greater coverage is required in each country to prevent outbreaks from this extremely contagious virus, only 83 percent of children worldwide received their first dose of the measles vaccine last year and fewer than three-quarters received their second dose. By comparison, in 2019 that level was 86 percent. Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO General-Director, warned, “Measles vaccine has saved more lives than any other vaccine in the past 50 years. To save even more lives and stop this deadly virus from harming the most vulnerable, we must invest in immunization for every person, no matter where they live.”

The failure to achieve vaccination targets has also meant that approximately 107,500 people, most who are children under the age of five, died from measles infection last year. Although in 2022, the figure of fatalities was higher at just above 136,200, as the WHO report notes, “the surge in [2023] cases occurred in countries and regions where children with measles are less likely to die, due to better nutritional status and access to health services.” These deaths are thus a byproduct of the disinformation campaign that has been prosecuted to the hilt in the last two decades by reactionary elements in affluent countries like Robert F Kennedy Jr., who Trump has named to lead the Department of Human and Health Services (HHS).

The WHO also warned that measles can have life-

long repercussions even for those who survive it. Complications from the disease include blindness, pneumonia, and encephalitis, (inflammation and swelling of the brain with the potential of sustaining brain damage).

In a WHO report published in December 2023, the international health agency sounded the alarm, noting that measles cases had increased 30-fold in the WHO European Region from the year prior—941 in 2022 to more than 30,000 cases in 2023 across 40 of the region’s 53 member states. Vaccination rates had dropped from 96 percent in 2019 to 93 percent in 2022, with 1.8 million infants in the region having missed their shots from 2020 to 2022.

Dr. Hans P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe, said then, “We have seen in the Region not only a 30-fold increase in measles cases, but also nearly 21,000 hospitalizations and five measles-related deaths. This is concerning. Vaccination is the only way to protect children from this potentially dangerous disease. Urgent vaccination efforts are needed to halt transmission and prevent further spread. It is vital that all countries are prepared to rapidly detect and timely respond to measles outbreaks, which could endanger progress towards measles elimination.”

In the US, vaccine coverage declined during the COVID pandemic and has yet to recover. Pre-pandemic, routine immunizations that include measles-mumps-rubella (MMR), diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTaP), polio and varicella had remained steady for a decade. National kindergarten coverage for these vaccines stood at 95 percent. This figure has fallen to 93 percent nationally, and to far lower in many states.

Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin are states with less than 90 percent two-

dose completion of the MMR vaccines, as well as the District of Columbia, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For the MMR vaccination rates, the coverage by state has ranged from 81 percent to 98 percent. Much has to do with the rise in exemption rates across 41 states with ten states seeing a historic exemption rate of over 5 percent, the vast majority for nonmedical reasons. Those living in poverty, lacking health insurance, or living in rural areas are more likely to miss vaccinations. The hospitalization rate for measles patients under the age of five is over 50 percent.

In a companion report to the WHO's statement on the surge in measles globally, the CDC published a statement on the same day underscoring that 60 million lives worldwide have been saved through measles vaccination since 2000. They warned, however, that these gains may be eroding. They cited the compelling fact that the number of countries affected by large or disruptive outbreaks had increased from 36 to 57.

Vaccines are not only highly effective, but they are also extremely cost-efficient form of preventative health treatment. For instance, while it costs pennies to manufacture measles vaccines, the median cost of treating a measles case in a hospital in the US can range from \$7,400 to \$76,150 per patient.

In a *Lancet* report published this year, the authors found that since 1974, global vaccination campaigns have prevented 154 million deaths of which nearly 95 percent would have been of children under the age of five, and two-thirds would have been of infants in their first year of life. Of these, the measles vaccine accounted for preventing 93.71 million deaths.

These are remarkable achievements in public health that require more discussion in the media and should be part of the educational curriculum in every country. These achievements have provided longevity and well-being for billions of people and required the collaboration of millions of public health specialists, healthcare providers, teachers, and parents. All this was possible only under conditions where the existence of a powerful working class movement and the threat of social revolution made such social progress possible.

With the entrance of the second Trump administration and at the helm of HHS, anti-vaccine zealot and chief disinformation propagator Robert F.

Kennedy, Jr., who has been given carte blanche to “go wild,” has significant implications. Although he has promised not to take away people's vaccines, the matter of financing access to them is no small thing.

One must recall President John F. Kennedy's words from February 1963 on international health, when he said, “We must continue our collaborative efforts with other nations in the global struggle against disease. Over the past few years, the United States has rapidly expanded its international medical research activities and support. We have also been instrumental in encouraging research under the aegis of the World Health Organization. These efforts are consistent with and in furtherance of our goals of world peace and betterment, and it is important that they be continued.”

Kennedy, the uncle of Trump's vaccine-denying HHS nominee, concluded his message to the Congress on improving the Nation's health, “Good health for all our people is a continuing goal. In a democratic society where every human life is precious, we can aspire to no less. Healthy people build a stronger nation and make a maximum contribution to its growth and development.” This requires, as he noted then, an investment in education, sciences, and the delivery of these to the public. Clearly, in the more than 60 years that have passed since those remarks, the crisis of capitalism and its turn to fascistic forms of rule are the driving forces to attack science and destroy public health.



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