

New CDC director erases 2 measles deaths from the record

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has removed two confirmed measles deaths from the national count. The Pennsylvania Department of Health announced the deaths on August 25—two unvaccinated Lancaster County residents—and the first such deaths in the commonwealth in 35 years. But in its latest weekly update, the CDC placed an asterisk where the death toll should be and said the two would not be counted while it reviewed the circumstances and causes of death. The same update reported 2,903 confirmed cases nationally as of August 27, already past the 2,289 recorded in all of last year.

The CDC claimed that available information does not establish whether measles caused or contributed to the deaths, or whether the two “died from other causes while infected with measles.” That last phrase is the argument itself, written into the surveillance record in the agency’s own voice.

The decision came from the CDC’s new director, Erica Schwartz, according to three current and former officials who spoke to the *Washington Post* on condition of anonymity, citing fear of retaliation. Deb Houry, the CDC’s former chief medical officer, who resigned a year ago in protest at the firing of Schwartz’s predecessor Susan Monarez, called it “a big deviation in protocol.”

The medical substance of the claim, dying “with” or “of” measles, is nothing. Measles is almost never the immediate cause of death on a certificate. The immediate cause is pneumonia, or encephalitis, or in this case hemorrhage, and measles is the underlying cause that produced it. Nor does the national tally turn on the distinction. Nirav Shah, the CDC’s principal deputy director until February 2025, explained that infection-associated death counts have always covered anyone who tested positive and died within roughly 10 days, without adjudicating with or from. For a director to overrule a state epidemiologist on that basis, he said, is the definition

of the politicization of public health.

Kennedy did not improvise the formula last week. In a Fox News op-ed on March 2, 2025, after the first Texas child died, he wrote that “tens of thousands died with, or of, measles annually in 19th Century America,” and credited the collapse in measles mortality to sanitation and nutrition rather than to vaccination.

Nor did Kennedy invent this sleight of hand. The “with” or “of” distinction was manufactured during the pandemic and run for six years as a propaganda campaign, sharpest in its application to children. In March 2022 the CDC recoded its data and cut its count of child COVID-19 deaths by nearly a quarter overnight. Greg Travis, who built the only independent excess-death tracker in the country, told the WSWWS that he had never seen the toll in an age group shoot up and then come crashing down. The object was to remove dead children from the argument for closing schools.

The United States has recorded more than 1.2 million confirmed COVID-19 deaths. By May the central excess-mortality estimate stood at roughly 1.45 million against 1.22 million confirmed. Thus, over 200,000 Americans died because of the pandemic and were never counted in it. That gap was not a failure of measurement. It was produced by the refusal to fund testing, by hospitals left to be overwhelmed, by medical care forgone and by the systematic narrowing of the criteria under which a death may be certified. What was done to hundreds of thousands with COVID-19 is now being done to two with measles, and it is only the beginning.

Confirmed in July on a party-line vote, Schwartz promised the Senate “radical transparency.” Asked what she would do if Kennedy ordered her to approve recommendations unsupported by evidence, as he had demanded of Monarez before removing her, she answered obsequiously that he would never ask. Weeks into the job she has removed two dead people from the national count.

The press has covered the outbreak as a story about Amish and Mennonite families refusing vaccination. The state's own case data says otherwise. Pennsylvania had confirmed 530 cases across 36 counties as of Wednesday, up from 393 nine days earlier, with 242 in Lancaster County and the rest spread through half the state.

Paul Offit of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia estimates the true figure is nearer 2,000, reasoning that two deaths among the roughly 400 infections then reported implies a fatality rate of one in 200, five times the rate measles ordinarily produces. The state is undercounting the sick while the federal government refuses to count the dead.

One of the dead was a newborn. The *Atlantic* found the family, an Amish household on 45 acres with 13 children. Without internet or television, they learned that their son's death had become a national controversy only when a reporter reached their farm. They did not even know who Josh Shapiro or Robert F. Kennedy Jr. were.

Measles moved through the house in early August. Their mother, who was pregnant, ran a fever of 102 degrees and was taken to a clinic on August 13. She went into labor the next day, still in the acute phase of the infection. The boy died about half an hour after birth. The coroner's pathologist attributed the death to a ruptured spleen and found the organ neither enlarged nor inflamed. Coroner Stephen Diamantoni told reporters measles had played no part, before later calling it a contributing factor, and measles was entered on the death certificate as one. Offit has since noted that congenital measles can enlarge the spleen and thin its capsule, that a burst spleen is difficult to assess, and that splenic rupture in a newborn is otherwise vanishingly rare.

Whatever the pathology establishes, it does not license what the CDC has done. A state health department made a determination; the agency's function is to record it.

The mother could not have protected herself. The MMR vaccine is contraindicated in pregnancy, and she had never received it. Only the immunity of the people around her could have protected them both, and it has been eroding for years. The unvaccinated children of past decades grew up unvaccinated, and for 40 years nothing happened to them, because everyone around them was vaccinated.

On the day the deaths were announced, Lancaster County Commissioner Josh Parsons declared on social media that the coroner's office knew of no measles deaths. Kennedy amplified him within 24 hours and wrote on X that the deaths "may even have been altogether

fabricated by one of the Governor's hopeful staffers."

In response to these developments, Shapiro has gone silent. He held a news conference to announce the deaths and attack Kennedy, then withheld the epidemiological substance that would have settled the matter. Having made the deaths a political event, the Democrats declined to investigate them.

Nor is this confined to Lancaster County. Measles has been spreading throughout immigration detention since January, with 14 confirmed cases and 112 quarantined detainees at Camp East Montana on Fort Bliss as of March, and two cases among the more than 400 children held at Dilley. The Democrats built those camps. The Republicans are filling them while dismantling the agencies that might respond to the outbreaks they produce.

Over the 50 years to 2024, immunization averted 154 million deaths worldwide, and the measles vaccine alone accounted for 93.7 million of them, more than every other vaccine combined. Nothing else in medicine comes close.

So long as a death can be attributed to what a family did or failed to do, the policies that produced it are never examined. The attacks on these parents are a political diversion aimed at every working-class family that will be told its own losses were a matter of personal choice.

Neither party will defend public health. A scientist is prosecuted for telling the truth about the origins of the pandemic, while a dead infant is removed from a federal database. It is a class policy, and its object is the life expectancy of the working class.

Healthcare workers, scientists, educators and parents must build rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and of both capitalist parties, to place public health under the democratic control of the working class, expropriate the pharmaceutical monopolies and operate them as public utilities, and take up the fight for the socialist reorganization of society. That fight must be unified internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) and the building of sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).



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