# The return of measles in the US and the bipartisan dismantling of public health

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**8 November 2026**

In 2026 state health departments have reported eight measles-associated deaths in the United States, six in Pennsylvania, one in New York and one in Wisconsin. From 2016 through 2024, no one in the country died of measles. Three people died in 2025. In less than two years of the dismantling of public health by the Trump administration, spearheaded by anti-vaccine fanatic Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a record built over decades has been undone, and among the dead are infants too young to have received the vaccine.

These deaths were preventable, and they were permitted. Measles was declared eliminated in the United States in 2000, the result of a public program of mass vaccination that cost little and was not organized for profit. From November 10 to 13, a commission of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) will meet to determine whether that status has now been lost.

The return of measles is a byproduct of the malign neglect that the financial oligarchy adopted as its answer to the COVID-19 pandemic, putting the interests of Wall Street above the health and lives of the working class. It has advanced alongside an assault on every social program on which working people depend.

The scale of the resurgence is without precedent in a generation. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recorded 5,182 confirmed cases this year as of November 5, against 2,289 in all of 2025 and 285 in 2024.

Even the death toll is in dispute. State health departments report eight measles-associated deaths. The CDC counts four, without naming a single state, having stopped adding deaths confirmed by state officials to its national tally.

The decisive turn in public health came with the abandonment of any measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, a bipartisan policy begun under the first Trump administration and continued under Biden. As COVID-19 was allowed to spread unchecked, routine care collapsed. Measles is the most contagious virus known and requires 95 percent vaccination coverage to stop its transmission.

National kindergarten coverage with two doses of the MMR vaccine stood at 95.2 percent in the 2019–20 school year, the last to begin before the pandemic. It has fallen every year since, to 92.4 percent in 2025–26. Exemptions reached a record 4.2 percent of kindergarteners, the fourth record in as many years, as the anti-vaccine campaign moved from the margins into the leadership of the Department of Health and Human Services under Kennedy. The virus has found the gap.

The burden of measles falls on those with the least protection. It falls on infants too young for the vaccine, on rural working families without health insurance who live far from a clinic, and on patients whose cancer treatment has destroyed their immunity. Natalie Dailey Garnes of the MD Anderson Cancer Center told *The Cancer Letter* that some children on immunosuppressive treatment “cannot be re-vaccinated” and “are really dependent upon the broader community to be vaccinated.”

The Amish and other Plain communities have been made the scapegoats of this epidemic. They face real barriers to medical care, including the lack of health insurance and of regular contact with physicians, alongside long-standing religious convictions regarding medical intervention. But as *The Cancer Letter*’s Claire Marie Porter wrote, the Plain communities “have been largely unvaccinated for 300 years,” and so “something else has changed.”

What has changed is the collapse of immunity in the population around them, as vaccination rates in the public schools fell and the political assault on public health tore down the wall that once kept the virus out. Lancaster County, the center of the Pennsylvania outbreak, accounts for fewer than half of the state’s 1,487 cases.

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This policy has found its political expression in Kennedy's anti-vaccine and anti-science pronouncements. On February 26, 2025, the day a child's death in the West Texas outbreak was announced, Kennedy declared that "it's not unusual" and that "we have measles outbreaks every year."

In August 2026 he suggested that the first two Pennsylvania deaths "may even have been altogether fabricated." He then asked the CDC's director to remove them from the agency's online tally, after CDC staff had already accepted the state's finding.

Kennedy did not begin the dismantling of public health, which was well advanced under both parties, but he now administers it on behalf of a government of the financial oligarchy.

The attack on vaccinations is bound up with the attack on the social conditions of the working class as a whole. The language of "medical freedom" and parental "choice" promoted by Kennedy's Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) movement provides the ideological cover for this program. What is presented as the right of the individual to refuse a vaccine is the abandonment by society of any responsibility for the health of its members.

Vaccination has averted 154 million deaths worldwide since 1974, and the measles vaccine alone accounts for 93.7 million of them, according to a study in *The Lancet*.

The measles vaccine is safe and effective, and mass immunization is an elementary requirement of public health and of the self-defense of the working class.

The anti-vaccine movement is reactionary and must be opposed. It is a petty-bourgeois reaction that preys on legitimate grievances over the cost and inaccessibility of medical care and channels them to the right, and Kennedy's MAHA is the spearhead of the fascist assault on public health. Workers' distrust of the state is earned through experience with a ruling class that has dismantled public infrastructure, but that distrust is an indictment of the ruling class, not a reason to refuse vaccination.

None of this is peculiar to the United States. When governments worldwide abandoned COVID-19 elimination, healthcare systems everywhere were thrown into disarray, and by mid-2020, 90 percent of countries reported disruptions to essential services, routine immunization among them. Measles cases among children under five rose 40 percent worldwide between 2019 and 2023, according to a study in *Nature Medicine*.

Bangladesh is now the site of the world's largest outbreak. In 2025 the interim government of Muhammad Yunus abandoned vaccine procurement through UNICEF and secured about a quarter of the doses the country needs, while the US aid freeze suspended more than 100 health projects. More than 1,000 confirmed and suspected measles deaths have been recorded there since March.

The Americas, which lost their elimination status when measles was declared endemic in Canada in November 2025, have recorded 57,666 cases this year, with 53 deaths in Guatemala and 23 in Mexico.

The historical record of the workers' movement stands against this retrogression in public health. In December 1919, with the Soviet republic besieged by civil war and blockade, and typhus cutting down the Red Army, Lenin told the Seventh All-Russia Congress of Soviets, "Either the lice will defeat socialism, or socialism will defeat the lice!"

Amid extreme devastation, the workers' state treated an epidemic as an existential threat and mobilized hundreds of doctors to fight it at the front. A century later, the wealthiest society in history permits a disease it had eliminated to return.

The eight deaths were preventable with a vaccine that is safe, cheap and more than six decades old. Health authorities at every level published the falling coverage figures year after year, knew where immunity was giving way and allowed it to give way.

The defense of public health cannot be left to the parties and the class that dismantled it. The international working class must take it into its own hands, organizing independently of both capitalist parties and the ruling class.

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