Measles Outbreak Mounts Among Children in One of Texas' Least Vaccinated Counties

Public health practitioners warn such outbreaks will become more common because of scores of laws that lower vaccine rates.

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A measles outbreak is growing in a Texas county with dangerously low vaccination rates.

In late January, two school-age children from Gaines County were hospitalized with measles. Since an estimated one in five people with the disease end up in the hospital, the two cases suggested a larger outbreak.

As of February 12, there were 24 cases, mainly among children, with at least 14 hospitalizations, said Zach Holbrooks, executive director of the South Plains Public Health District, which includes Gaines. A few cases are in surrounding counties. The department is investigating many other potential cases in hopes of treating people quickly and curbing the spread of the virus. "There may be active cases out there and the individual has chosen not to seek medical attention," Holbrooks said.

Public health practitioners warn such outbreaks will become more common because of scores of laws around the U.S. — pending and passed — that ultimately lower vaccine rates. Many of the measures allow parents to more easily exempt their children from school vaccine requirements, and a swell of vaccine misinformation has led to record rates of exemptions.

As Robert F. Kennedy Jr., one of the most influential purveyors of dangerous vaccine misinformation, prepares to take the helm of the Department of Health and Human Services, researchers say such bills have a higher chance of passing and that more parents will refuse vaccines because of false information spread at the highest levels of government.

"Mr. Kennedy has been an opponent of many health-protecting and life-saving vaccines, such as those that prevent measles and polio," scores of Nobel Prize laureates wrote in a letter to the Senate. Having him head HHS, they wrote, "would put the public's health in jeopardy."

Most people who aren't protected by vaccination will get measles if exposed. Gaines County has

one of the lowest rates of childhood vaccination in Texas. At a local public school district in the community of Loop, only 46% of kindergarten students have gotten vaccines against measles, mumps, and rubella. Vaccination rates may be even lower at private schools and within homeschool groups, which don't always report the information.

Holbrooks' team is scrambling to track transmission, ensure that kids and babies seek prompt care, and offer measles vaccines to anyone who hasn't yet gotten them.

"We are going to see more kids infected. We will see more families taking time off from work. More kids in the hospital," said Rekha Lakshmanan, chief strategy officer for The Immunization Partnership in Houston, a nonprofit that advocates for vaccine access. "This is the tip of the iceberg."

As a rule, at least 95% of people need to be vaccinated against measles for a community to be well protected. That threshold is high enough to protect infants too young for the vaccine, people who can't take the vaccine for medical reasons, and anyone who doesn't mount a strong, lasting immune response to it.

Measles is extremely contagious, so health workers preemptively treated infants too young to be vaccinated who had shared the emergency room with children later diagnosed with the virus, said Katherine Wells, public health director in Lubbock, Texas. Some children from Gaines were hospitalized in that county. The disease can cause severe complications, and about one of every thousand children with measles die.

An outbreak among a largely unvaccinated population in Samoa in 2019 and 2020 caused 83 deaths, mainly among children, and more than 5,700 cases. Kennedy, who peddles misinformation about measles vaccines, had visited the island earlier on a trip arranged by a Samoan anti-vaccine influencer, according to a 2021 blog post by Kennedy.

Without evidence, Kennedy cast doubt on the fact that measles caused the tragedy in Samoa. "We don't know what was killing them," he said at his first confirmation hearing. Samoa's top health official denounced this evasion as "a complete lie," in an interview with The Associated Press.

Last school year, the number of kindergartners exempted from a vaccine requirement — 3.3% — was higher than ever reported before, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Numbers were far higher than that in Gaines County, where nearly one in five children in kindergarten had a vaccine exemption for philosophical or religious reasons in 2023-2024.

Over the past couple of years, several states have allowed more parents to obtain exemptions. Already, about 25 bills have been filed in the 2025 Texas legislative session that could limit vaccination in various ways.

"We're seeing a level of momentum this legislative session that we've never seen in the past," Lakshaman said. Changes are afoot at the local level, too. For example, a school board in the

Houston area voted to remove references to vaccines in its curriculum. “There is a top-down and bottom-up assault on these protections,” Lakshaman said.

About 80% of the public believes that the benefits of the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccines outweigh the risks, according to a 2025 KFF poll.

“Lawmakers who put forth dangerous policies need to know the people they hear from don’t represent the majority,” Lakshaman said. Her group offers resources on its website to help people influence decisions on vaccination policies.

[Update: This article was last revised at 6:25 p.m. ET on February 12, 2025, to reflect news developments.]

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