

Data shows erosion of vaccine coverage

Rates across U.S. falling as measles cases rising

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Vaccination coverage is eroding across the United States at the same time measles cases are surging, according to new county-level data compiled from state health agencies.

Measles outbreaks are infecting more people this year than in any year since the early 1990s and have already killed three. So far in 2025, all but eight states have reported measles cases, a disease the United States declared eliminated in 2000. Nearly 92% of these cases were among the unvaccinated or people with unknown vaccination status.

Federal data released in July showed that childhood vaccination rates, which had remained steady for years, have declined, while the share of children exempted for religious and philosophical reasons has increased.

“What we see is that as trust erodes, as vaccination rates drop, the first thing that you see are measles outbreaks,” said Adam Ratner, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Committee on Infectious Diseases.

Ratner said the outbreaks should act as a public health warning system, signaling that other diseases could follow.

“You have to look beyond that, because the diseases that are also vaccine-preventable, but maybe are a little less contagious than measles, are the ones that you’ll see after that,” he said.

To assess coverage at the local level, Johns Hopkins University compiled data from state health agencies that, in the absence of a federal database, sheds light on how vulnerable communities are to outbreaks. USA TODAY later expanded this effort by adding data for states missing from the university’s database and filling gaps.

An analysis of this combined data, covering counties in 41 states, showed that routine vaccine coverage among children has slipped in most counties, leaving more communities vulnerable



A September survey found that 9% of parents believe the false claim linking the MMR vaccine to autism. JAN SONNENMAIR/GETTY IMAGES FILE

today than before the pandemic.

At least 3 in 4 counties have vaccination coverage below 95%, an immunity threshold experts estimate as necessary to prevent virus spread.

“The fact that there are so many counties below this threshold means there is a lot of exposure risk,” said Lauren Gardner, director of Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Systems Science and Engineering.

Misinformation

Vaccine skeptics falsely claim that the measles vaccine causes autism, a claim repeatedly disproved by extensive scientific research. Regardless, rising vaccine skepticism has discouraged parents from vaccinating their children against dangerous diseases.

A September Kaiser Family Foundation-Washington Post survey found that 9% of parents believe the false claim linking the MMR vaccine to autism, and nearly half are unsure what to believe. About 1 in 6 parents reported delaying or skipping vaccines – excluding seasonal flu and COVID-19 shots – often citing safety concerns or distrust.

Parents who identify as Republican, are younger or homeschool their children are among the most likely to delay

or skip vaccines, the survey found.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends two doses of the MMR vaccine for children: first at 12-15 months, then at 4-6 years. The agency also recommends vaccines for polio, chickenpox and hepatitis B, a viral infection affecting the liver. Public health experts say these recommendations are facing challenges under Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., an outspoken vaccine critic. Kennedy fired all 17 members of the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices in June, replacing some with vaccine skeptics.

The committee has already changed the MMRV – measles, mumps, rubella and varicella – vaccine schedule, removing the recommendation for children under 4. The committee also considered changes to hepatitis B recommendations, but a vote was delayed.

Experts warn these shifts could add confusion and further erode vaccination rates, even as clarity on vaccine safety and access remains critical.

Measles cases on the rise

Measles once sickened millions of Americans and killed hundreds each year. In the 1960s, the United States

launched its vaccination program, eventually eradicating measles before the turn of the century. By 1980, all 50 states had adopted school vaccine mandates, requiring children to be vaccinated before enrollment.

This year, the United States has reported over 1,400 measles cases, surpassing totals from any outbreak since the early 1990s. The first outbreak in 2025 occurred in a Mennonite community in Gaines County, Texas, where vaccination rates are low. The virus then spread across West Texas, New Mexico and Oklahoma. Gaines County has reported 414 cases this year, nearly a third of the national total.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 57% of counties were considered fully protected against outbreaks. That figure has since dropped to 23%.

The decline in coverage spanned nearly three-quarters of counties, with each experiencing an average 4-point drop. Only two states, Connecticut and Maryland, now have every county above the immunity threshold, while 9 in 10 counties in Maine and New York meet it. No counties clear the bar in Alaska, Arkansas, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Utah or Wisconsin – the same states with high exemption rates.

In July, the CDC estimated that nearly 286,000 kindergartners lacked proof of completing the MMR vaccine series during the 2024-25 school year.

More parents exempting kids

Meanwhile, more parents are exempting their children from vaccination on religious or philosophical grounds, though medical exemptions have remained flat. Non-medical exemption rates rose to 3.4% in 2024-25, up from 2% a decade ago.

Experts recommend keeping exemption rates below 5%, yet 17 states now exceed that level. Idaho leads at 15%, followed by Utah and Oregon at 10% each, and Arizona and Alaska at 9%.

Policy shifts may further lower vaccination rates. Many states have introduced changes that make it easier for families to obtain waivers. Florida plans to remove the mandate entirely from public schools.

Group warns of ‘rampant’ book bans

Report documents over 22K instances since 2021

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USA TODAY

A free speech advocacy group warned on Oct. 1 that book censorship in public schools across the United States has become “rampant and common,” with book bans increasing significantly over the last few years.

Though book censorship is not a new issue, the United States has seen a sharp rise in book bans and attempted bans since 2021. PEN America’s “Banned in the USA” report, released on Oct. 1, recorded about 6,800 instances of books being removed from schools during the 2024-2025 academic year.

While the new number is down from the more than 10,000 bans reported in the 2023-2024 school year, PEN America noted that it was still an uptick from previous years when the advocacy group did not release an annual report or index of book bans. Since July 2021, PEN America has documented more than 22,800 cases of book bans across 45 states and 451 public school districts.

According to the report, the systematic removal of books from schools and school libraries in many parts of the country has resulted in the “normalization and routinization of censorship” in public education.

PEN America cited “alarming censorship pressures” on school districts, including recent federal efforts to restrict education, continued attacks on LGBTQ+ identities, and state-mandated book bans.

Just days after President Donald Trump took office in January, the Department of Education called book bans a “hoax” and rescinded all department guidance that had suggested school districts’ “removal of age-inappropriate books from its libraries may violate civil rights laws.”

“Censorship pressures have expanded and escalated, taking on different forms – laws, directives, guidance that sow confusion, lists of books mislabeled as ‘explicit’ materials, and ‘do not buy’ lists,” Kasey Meehan, director of PEN America’s Freedom to Read program, said in a statement. “A disturbing ‘ev-



A display of books banned in certain states or targets of censorship is seen at the Hoboken Public Library in New Jersey in 2024. Faced with growing book bans across the country, the library has become a sanctuary for challenged books. ANA FERNANDEZ/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES FILE

eryday banning’ and normalization of censorship has worsened and spread over the last four years. The result is unprecedented.”

States with most banned books

Between July 2024 and June 2025, PEN America tracked 6,870 instances of book bans across 23 states and 87 public school districts, according to the report.

The report said that Florida led the nation for the third straight year, with over 2,300 instances of book bans for the 2024-2025 school year. Florida was followed by Texas with more than 1,780 bans and Tennessee with over 1,600.

The advocacy group said in its report that school districts often remove titles that are attacked by extremist groups with anti-LGBTQ+ stances and are against diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

“Educators and school boards comply out of fear of losing funding, being fired or harassed, even being subjected to police involvement,” PEN America said in a news release.

The report found that some of Florida’s book bans were the result of direct pressure from local groups and elected officials rather than formal objections filed by parents with their local school boards. The report added that the increase in bans in the state was also due to the passage of multiple “vague laws” and threats to educators’ professional licenses if they failed to comply.

“No book shelf will be left untouched if local and state book bans continue wreaking havoc on the freedom to read in public schools,” Sabrina Baëta, senior manager of PEN America’s Freedom to Read program, said in a statement. “Book bans stand in the way of a more just, informed and equitable world. They chill the freedom to read and restrict the rights of students to access information and read freely.”

It’s especially important when book bans happen in Florida, according to Meehan. She said the organization watches Florida’s actions in particular since they see that the pressures placed on Florida’s school districts often happen in other states or at the federal level,

through the Trump administration’s orders.

“We have always called Florida a blueprint state, because what happens in Florida in terms of book bans then kind of trickles out to other states,” Meehan said.

Top 5 banned books

PEN America has previously reported that the majority of targeted books were written by or about a person of color, a member of the LGBTQ+ community or a woman.

“The books that continue to be most frequently targeted typically contain themes related to race and racism, gender identity and sexuality, or depict sexual violence,” the organization said.

According to the report, the top five banned books for the 2024-2025 school year were:

- “A Clockwork Orange” by Anthony Burgess with 23 bans.
- “Sold” by Patricia McCormick with 20 bans.
- “Breathless” by Jennifer Niven with 20 bans.
- “Last Night at the Telegraph Club” by Malinda Lo with 19 bans.
- “A Court of Mist and Fury” by Sarah J. Maas with 18 bans.

Most banned authors

The report noted that book bans continue to affect a “wide group of creative professionals” in the literary sector. During the 2024-2025 school year, book bans affected the works of almost 2,600 people, including over 2,300 authors, more than 240 illustrators, and nearly 40 translators, the report states.

The report said the top five banned authors in the 2024-2025 school year were:

- Stephen King: 87 titles banned, totaling 206 times.
- Ellen Hopkins: 18 titles banned, totaling 167 times.
- Sarah J. Maas: 21 titles banned, totaling 162 times.
- Jodi Picoult: 23 titles banned, totaling 62 times.
- Yusei Matsui: 22 manga books banned, totaling 54 times.

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