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U.S.

# Stricter Mandate, More Education Lifts California Child Vaccination Rates

Less than 5% of kindergartners weren't fully vaccinated in 2017, down from 9.8% four years earlier



The measles-mumps-rubella vaccine is safe and the most effective method for preventing measles outbreaks, according to scientific studies. PHOTO: ELAINE THOMPSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

*By Brianna Abbott*

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The percentage of kindergartners without up-to-date vaccinations dropped in California following the tightening of requirements in the state, according to a new study, whose findings suggest stricter vaccine mandates and education can raise immunization rates.

California strengthened immunization requirements in the state starting in 2014, after the rate of kindergartners who weren't fully vaccinated rose to 9.84% the year before. By 2017, the rate dropped to 4.87%, according to the study published online in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* on Tuesday.

“This is the best evidence so far about how changes in vaccination requirements can lead to changes in” immunization rates across an entire state, said Matthew Davis, head of Academic General Pediatrics and Primary Care at Ann and Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, who wasn’t involved with the study.

Policy makers and public health officials are grappling with the best policies to encourage vaccination amid measles outbreaks this year that have resulted in the highest number of confirmed cases in the U.S. in 25 years.

Several states have considered new legislation to strengthen school vaccination laws. Maine and New York recently became the fourth and fifth states to eliminate all exemptions from the mandate granted for nonmedical reasons, joining West Virginia, Mississippi and California.

Some proposals, including a California bill meant to crack down on doctors who may be distributing fake medical exemptions, are facing pushback from protesters and parents expressing concern about the safety of measles-mumps-rubella vaccine. The vaccine is safe and the most effective method for preventing measles outbreaks, according to scientific studies.

California started updating its vaccination requirements in 2014, when the state mandated that parents submit proof that they had discussed the risks of not vaccinating their children with a health-care provider before opting for a personal exemption.

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In 2015, the California Department of Public Health launched a campaign to educate school staff on requirements and conditional admission for students who had fallen behind the immunization schedule. The next year, a ban on exemptions for nonmedical reasons went into effect, a policy driven by a large measles outbreak that started in

Disneyland in Anaheim in 2014 that ultimately infected 131 California residents.

For the study, a team of epidemiologists at multiple universities analyzed publicly available immunization data from the California Department of Public Health for the years 2000 to 2017. All schools and home schools are required to report student immunization data to the agency each year, though home-schooled students aren't subjected to the same vaccination requirements.

The researchers found that the increase in vaccination rates reduced the chances that unvaccinated students would come into contact with each other, an easy way for measles to spread. The chance that two unvaccinated students would come into contact with each other at school fell to 4.56% in 2017, down from 26.02% in 2014, according to the study.

Clusters with high rates of students without up-to-date vaccinations also decreased substantially in Central and Southern California but continued to remain high in Northern

California, the study found.

Yet the study also found the rate of kindergartners in California without up-to-date vaccinations rose slightly from 2016 to 2017, as the numbers of medical exemptions, students not subjected to immunization requirements and students overdue for vaccinations increased.

“Unintended effects such as this need to be carefully evaluated,” said Cassandra Pingali, a former epidemiology graduate student at Emory University and now a research fellow at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who is the first author on the study. “Policy makers should consider such consequences when creating new legislation.”

California has reported 55 confirmed measles cases in 2019 as of June 26, which includes a continuing outbreak of 21 cases in Northern California.

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