Berkshire County Residents Hesitate to Vaccinate, Even Post-COVID.

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On Thursday Feb. 13, the Louisiana Department of Health announced it would stop “promoting” mass vaccination and instead encourage discussion of risks and benefits of immunizing between individuals and their providers. This news came just hours after Robert F. Kennedy Jr. — a staunch disbeliever in vaccines — was sworn in as the new secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services.

The threat here is simple: “When vaccination rates drop, you get worse outbreaks,” said Dr. Jennifer Avegno, director of the Health Department for the City of New Orleans. Thus, in anticipation of a troubling national trend against immunizing, pre-existing anti-vaccination sentiment in Western Massachusetts does not bode well for the future.

As of 2023, Berkshire, Franklin, and Hampden Counties each account for the [highest rates of unvaccinated preschool and kindergarten-aged children in the state](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1z1tbgpRI4mKJx_qqQs9z8h_12027Ldkg/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=116475240765979749310&rtpof=true&sd=true) without a medical or religious exemption. These students fall into the “gap” of undocumented vaccination information, meaning that even if they have been immunized, their schools have no record of it.

Suffolk and Nantucket Counties also maintain high “gap” percentages of preschool and kindergarten children, but appear to be more regionally isolated due to their unique populations. The question then becomes: why do Western Massachusetts residents disproportionately drag their feet on immunizing their kids?

One answer may lie in a former Pittsfield resident who, famously, allowed himself to be infected with smallpox in 1902 in the name of immunization resistance: Immanuel Pfeiffer. A famous bee in the bonnet of Boston health officials at the turn of the 20th century, Pfeiffer loudly and publicly rallied against mandated vaccinations, spreading his gospel from one end of the state to the other. A licensed doctor, Pfeiffer traversed the Berkshires from 1898-99 and reportedly “healed” patients of everything from alcoholism to tonsillitis.

Although his claims were “outrageous” to the medically keen, it was his life’s mission to disprove them; and by some miracle, survived his spell of smallpox. Though his name may be a blip in Massachusetts history, he had established seeds of anti-vaccination thought all over the state — some of which have blossomed into full-fledged community distrust of any state or federal health mandates, certainly with the help of the modern anti-vax movement.

Some historic skepticisms of health mandates are indeed bound by reason. In the thick of 2021, former Massachusetts governor Deval Patrick hosted a panel urging residents in his home county of Berkshire — specifically, black and brown residents — to vaccinate against COVID-19, despite a deep distrust of mandated vaccinations. Medical maltreatment was historically rampant in minority communities, and any health-related mandates could be understandably met with skepticism.

Efforts to overcome these hesitations during the COVID pandemic were widespread, while a separate, much less reasonable crowd was being fueled by the Trump Administration. Co-opting the famous reproductive rights slogan, anti-vaxxers rallied: “My body, my choice.”

Ultimately, rates of children in Western Massachusetts who do not meet immunization requirements already pose threats to the schools they attend and communities they participate in. Under the guidance of Secretary Kennedy, that “gap” may very well widen.