Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: TA | AP Insight

How did the US and Mexico allow diseases of the past to return?



The U.S. has lost its measles-free status, international health officials said Tuesday, as the highly contagious virus once relegated to medical textbooks has spread — largely among the unvaccinated — at the highest rate in more than 30 years.

Mexico also lost its measles-elimination status, following a resurgence of the virus there that included a massive outbreak in Chihuahua state. Bolivia, too, lost its status.

The Pan American Health Organization declaration has few practical implications and is largely symbolic, but it marks a sharp turnabout in a disease largely controlled through decades of scientific advances.

It also may be seen as the beginning of an era in which diseases of the past become deadly problems for the modern world.

“Measles elimination is not a trophy that is won once and placed on a shelf,” Dr. Jarbas Barbosa, PAHO’s director, said at a news conference. “It is an achievement that must be safeguarded every day by closing immunity gaps and ensuring we reach every community.”

PAHO expects the U.S., Bolivia and Mexico to submit plans "in the coming weeks” for how each country will go about trying to stop transmission for at least a year and regain measles elimination status, said Dr. Daniel Salas, the organization's executive manager for immunizations.

Measles has been spreading throughout the Americas since 2024. The outbreaks in North America started in close-knit Mennonite communities and have since spread to areas with low vaccination rates. Last year, Canada lost its measles-free designation for the first time since 1998.

International health officials consider measles eliminated when the virus is not locally spreading among residents.

The designation hinges on whether a single measles chain has spread uninterrupted for at least 12 months.

Tuesday's announcement signals an erosion of public health preparedness.

Vaccination rates have been falling against a number of diseases, in the U.S. and globally.

And as one of the most infectious diseases known to medicine, measles was seen as likely to be one of the first vaccine-preventable diseases to reemerge when vaccinations falter.

That means others are likely to follow, some experts said.

“It can be the canary in the coal mine to other things,” said Dr. Susan Kansagra, chief medical officer of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials.

Vaccine rates fall and cases go up

Measles vaccines have safely stopped the virus’ spread in the U.S. for 30 years.

It takes a community vaccination rate of 95% to prevent outbreaks, experts say.

But as fewer parents vaccinate their children and federal leaders sow doubt and confusion about the importance of getting vaccinated, the virus has found footholds in communities across the U.S. All but three states have reported a confirmed case of measles this year.

The last two years have been the worst in a generation in the U.S., with more than 7,000 cases and 11 deaths.

Nearly all of those people were either unvaccinated or didn’t report whether they were vaccinated. More than 10% of those infected had to be hospitalized.

The illness typically begins with a high fever followed by a telltale rash that starts on the face and neck.

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Most people recover, but it's one of the leading causes of death among young children, according to the World Health Organization.

Serious complications, including blindness and swelling of the brain, are more common in young children and adults over age 30.

Ten measles-associated deaths have been reported in the U.S. this year. Health officials have not released detailed information on each death, but at least five of the dead were children.

This year's measles death count is higher than what has been seen in any previous year in more than three decades.

And the U.S. is experiencing its worst year for measles illnesses since 1991.

The U.S. has seen major outbreaks in Texas, Utah, South Carolina and Pennsylvania

Since the U.S. eliminated measles in 2000, public health officials usually logged less than 200 cases a year, most of them tied to international travel.

But since 2025, measles has sickened thousands. It started with a major outbreak in the southwest.

In Texas, more than 760 people got sick and two children died. And in New Mexico, about 100 people got sick and one adult died.

> The outbreak tallies are almost certainly an undercount

In the summer of 2025, measles exploded in extremely rural border towns in Arizona and Utah.

And a major outbreak in South Carolina in the winter and spring sickened nearly 1,000 people to become the fastest growing measles outbreak the nation has seen in decades.

Bad as 2025 was, this year has been much worse. The more than 5,400 confirmed cases so far this year are already double the 2025 tally, driven largely by an outbreak in Pennsylvania that has dwarfed the earlier ones.

And the outbreak tallies are almost certainly an undercount, public health experts say.

Critics say the US response is falling short

U.S. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. was a leading voice in the anti-vaccine movement before President Donald Trump appointed him to oversee federal health agencies.

Kennedy and other federal leaders have argued that vaccination rates were waning for years before Trump took office a second time, that measles is not an "American phenomenon," and that the U.S. government is handling measles better than other countries.

In January, a U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention leader told reporters that the loss of the nation's elimination status would be the "cost of doing business" globally.

> The outcome in the U.S. wasn't inevitable

It's true that other countries are struggling with measles, and some also have lost their measles-elimination status. But some experts say the outcome in the U.S. wasn't inevitable.

"This humiliating determination is the tragic yet predictable result of an ongoing campaign by grifters, quacks and charlatans to put their

own greed and self-worth ahead of the health and safety of children," said Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat from Oregon.

The government has been taking some steps. In August and September, the CDC awarded $100 million — in two tranches — to support state and local measles-response work.

The moment demands a louder federal voice

And Kennedy and CDC Director Dr. Erica Schwartz have made statements that vaccination is the best way to prevent measles from spreading.

"The measles elimination designation is not what protects Americans. Vaccination does," Schwartz said in a statement Tuesday. "We know where transmission is occurring and we've invested $100 million in state and local health departments to reach those communities."

But state and local health officials say the cost is far higher than that.

"It wasn't a lot of money, frankly," said Chrissie Juliano, executive director of the Big Cities Health Coalition, which represents three dozen of the largest U.S. city health departments.



Experts also say the moment demands a louder federal voice — and a bigger push for vaccinations — than Kennedy and Schwartz are providing

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Some noted that neither Kennedy nor the CDC has scheduled a news conference for this week to address how they plan to try to regain measles-elimination status.

"When the people at the front of the room are not speaking loudly and frequently in support of vaccination, the program starts to falter. And that's what we're seeing in the U.S.," said Noel Brewer, a University of North Carolina public health professor who chairs a committee that presented an analysis of U.S. measles data to PAHO last week.

"The federal government has had such a ho-hum response," he said. "How many kids have to die before they start getting concerned?

After hugely successful vaccination campaigns, the Americas became the first region in the world to be free of measles in 2016. Health officials estimate the measles vaccine prevented 6.2 million deaths in the Americas between 2000 and 2023.

Now, the entirety of North America faces the task of earning back the designation.

Some individual countries have achieved, lost, and then regained measles-elimination status.

Brazil is one example. Another is the United Kingdom, although it lost its status a second time — this year.