Mitigating Harms From Crisis Events: Public Health

POLARIZATION & EXTREMISM RESEARCH & INNOVATION LAB
SCHOOL of PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Manipulation and Harmful Narratives Surrounding the Measles Outbreak

Crisis Background

Over the past two years, the U.S. has been hit by its largest measles outbreak in over three decades. In 2026 alone, there have been 2,231 confirmed measles cases across 42 U.S. states, according to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) figures from July 9, 2026. This surge is set to surpass the 2,289 confirmed cases in 2025 and risks stripping the U.S. of its measles elimination status held since 2000.

Research indicates that declining vaccination coverage is the primary driver of the outbreak. Approximately 94% of confirmed cases have occurred among individuals who are unvaccinated or whose vaccination status is unknown. At the same time, the outbreak has become a flashpoint for online misinformation, where anti-vaccination conspiracies (e.g., clot shot, depopulation) and xenophobic narratives—particularly claims blaming migrants for disease transmission—have spread widely despite lacking evidence.

Themes: Harmful Narratives

Faulty assertions—claims presented as factual despite lacking evidence—have been common in online narratives about the measles outbreak. These claims often rely on pseudoscience, arguing vaccines are unnecessary due to "natural immunity" or falsely linking vaccines to serious harms. Users frequently cite false "studies" and anecdotal evidence to dispute the well-established fact that measles can cause severe illness and death—increasing health risks while undermining trust in public health institutions and efforts.

Anti-vaccine **conspiracy theories**, which similarly lack supporting evidence, have also been common in online narratives. While some conspiracies have linked alleged "risks" of taking vaccines to an overarching Jewish and/or liberal-led conspiracy to poison the population, others have alleged that the pharmaceutical industry, or "big pharma," has engineered viruses like measles to sell their vaccines and increase their profits—narratives that further antisemitism, deepen polarization, and decrease trust in institutions.

Additional posts have relied on **scapegoating**, blaming entire communities for the outbreak without evidence, suggesting that it was the fault of migrants. Despite logical contradictions from leading narratives identified above, scapegoating narratives serve a common purpose: to divert attention from root causes of the outbreak and onto already marginalized communities by reinforcing harmful stereotypes and normalizing hostility towards them.

Word Cloud of Common Terms in Sample Posts Related to Measles Outbreak

Posts from December 2025 to March 2026 were identified using key term searches related to the measles outbreak. The term "measles" was removed from the sample, as well as common "stop words." The size of the word indicates its prominence in the sample. Notably, COVID, illegals, big pharma, poison, MRNA, and unvaccinated were all included as some of the most prominent words of the sample.

Preventing Manipulation

PERIL's evidence-based research shows that teaching about manipulative tactics is more effective than counterarguing with facts. A starting point is always to point out manipulation as a tactic of bad actors who are trying to persuade you. In addition, these three tactics can be addressed directly through evidence-informed responses:

Faulty assertions can be countered by identifying the fallacies/faulty logic at play, providing counter evidence, focusing on arguments instead of actors, and educating about how to engage in more sound logic and arguments.

Conspiracy theories can be reduced by fostering critical thinking, engaging in empathetic communication, and providing education on digital literacy.

Scapegoating can be addressed by speaking out against the unjust targeting of groups, building alliances with other communities to enhance solidarity, and calling out discriminatory attitudes.

PERIL analyzes harmful, salient, and fast-moving narratives to inform violence prevention. In this series, we highlight prevalent manipulation strategies that appear in the aftermath of common crises.
Scan QR for more resources developed from PERIL's research.