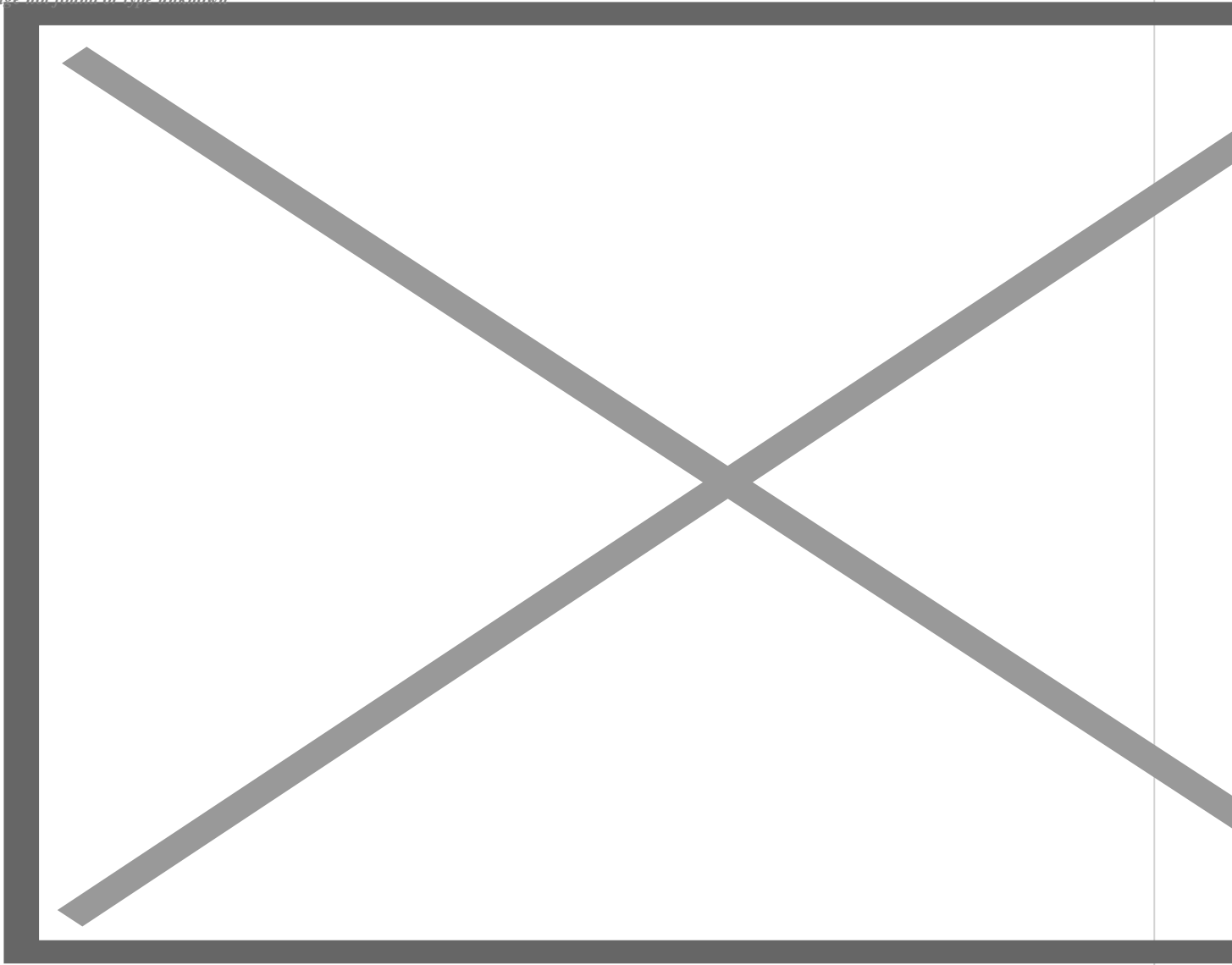


U.S. sees record number of children in hospital with COVID

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Various US school districts have mandated that masks be worn to protect children against the coronavirus amid a recent surge in cases [File: Lucy Nicholson/Reuters]

New York, August 15 (RHC)-- The number of children hospitalised with COVID-19 has hit a record-high in the United States, which continues to grapple with the rapid spread of the highly contagious Delta variant, especially in areas with low vaccination rates.

Paediatric hospitalizations hit 1,902 on Saturday, according to data from the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) – accounting for about 2.4 percent of the country's total coronavirus-related hospitalizations.

Children below 12 years of age are not eligible to receive the coronavirus vaccine, leaving them more vulnerable to infection from the highly transmissible variant. "This is not last year's COVID. This one is worse and our children are the ones that are going to be affected by it the most," Sally Goza, former president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, told CNN on Saturday.

For weeks, U.S. health officials and top infectious disease experts have urged Americans to get vaccinated to stem a rising wave of infections, deaths and hospitalisations that they say is linked to the Delta variant.

Dr Anthony Fauci, the White House's chief medical adviser, has described the current wave as "an outbreak of the unvaccinated."

While 50.5 percent of people in the US are considered fully vaccinated, according to US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data, and 59.4 percent have received at least one dose, millions of people have not received a single jab.

The recent increase in cases has spurred heated debate across the country around whether state and local governments should institute vaccine mandates – a move that Fauci and other officials recently said they support.

Last week, California became the first US state to require teachers and other school staff to be vaccinated against, or get tested regularly for, COVID-19. "We think this is the right thing to do and we think this is a sustainable way to keeping our schools open and to address the number one anxiety that parents like myself have for young children," Governor Gavin Newsom said.

The nation's largest teachers union, the National Education Association (NEA), also came out in support of mandatory vaccination for its members this week.

NEA President Becky Pringle said on Saturday that schools should employ every mitigation strategy, from vaccines to masks, to ensure that students can come back to their classrooms safely this school year. "Our students under 12 can't get vaccinated. It's our responsibility to keep them safe. Keeping them safe means that everyone who can be vaccinated should be vaccinated," Pringle told CNN.

In Florida, Texas and Arizona, some school districts have gone against the orders of their Republican governors and mandated that masks be worn. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has threatened to withhold funding from districts that impose mask requirements, and Texas Governor Greg Abbott is appealing to the state Supreme Court to overturn Dallas County's mask mandate, the Dallas Morning News reported on Friday.

A fifth of the nation's COVID-19 hospitalisations are in Florida, where the number of hospitalised patients hit a record 16,100 on Saturday, according to a tally from the Reuters news agency. More than 90 percent of the state's intensive care beds are filled, according to data from HHS.

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