Religious Exemptions Fact Sheet

All but two states in the U.S. – Mississippi and West Virginia – allow individuals to refuse immunizations for religious reasons (known as “religious exemptions”). However, the level of difficulty required to obtain these exemptions varies significantly and by state.¹

States that enable parents to more easily claim religious exemptions for their children often have higher religious exemption rates.

• Overall, the complexity of obtaining an exemption is inversely associated with the proportion of exemptions filed. In a 1999 study, the 19 states with the most formal requirements did not have a high proportion of exemptions, compared with states with less formal requirements.²

• During the 2011-2012 school year, while 0.7% of all kindergarteners were given exemptions in New York (known for its stricter exemption requirements), 5.9% of all kindergarteners were given exemptions in Oregon (known for its more lenient exemption requirements).³ This variance exists even though, under both Oregon and New York laws, parents can claim medical and religious, but not philosophical (or “personal belief”), exemptions for their children, indicating that the easier it is to claim an exemption, the more likely parents will do so.

  o Parents in Oregon simply have to check the necessary boxes and sign a Certificate of Immunization Status available from schools and/or child-care facilities to show that their child is “being reared as an adherent to a religion the teachings of which are opposed to such immunization.”⁴, ⁵

  o In comparison, New York requires a written and signed statement from parents that states “sincere and genuine religious beliefs which prohibit the immunization of their child,” as well as additional documentation for the school which can decide whether to accept or reject the exemption request.⁶

Exemptions – religious or otherwise – are dangerous and put individuals at risk for contracting potentially debilitating and deadly infectious diseases.

• Children exempt from vaccination requirements were more than 35 times more likely to contract measles and nearly six times more likely to contract pertussis, compared to vaccinated children.⁷

• States with loose exemption policies had approximately 50% more cases of whooping cough compared to stricter states in a 2006 study.⁸

• According to Salmon et al.’s (1999) study, an increase or decrease in the number of exemptions affects the incidence of measles in nonexempt populations. If the number of exemptions doubled, the incidence of measles infection in nonexempt individuals would increase by 5.5%, 18.6%, and 30.8%, respectively, for intergroup mixing ratios of 20%, 40%, and 60%.⁹
History illustrates that outbreaks are often common in communities that are unsupportive of vaccinations.

- **Measles** is one vaccine-preventable disease that has plagued multiple religious communities known to be hesitant of or against vaccination.
  - **“Measles in Boston: Collision of Church and State, Science and Journalism“**: In 2006, an employee at the Christian Science church headquarters in Massachusetts was found to have measles, eventually infecting at least 12 others. This was the most recent major outbreak of measles in the U.S.
  - **“Vaccination Fear Causes Measles Spate“**: In 2005, an unvaccinated teenager, who had returned from a mission trip in Romania, attended a church gathering of an antivaccination religious community, infecting 34 people in total (most of whom were unvaccinated children).
  - **“Parents claim religion to avoid vaccines for kids“**: Between 1990 and 1991 in Philadelphia, nine children died and over 1,400 people in total were infected when a major measles outbreak occurred among unvaccinated school-age children who belonged to two fundamentalist churches that were against immunizations. Of the mostly unvaccinated 892 church members, 486 contracted measles and six of the nine youths that died were members of these churches.

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