

## Historic TB outbreak a wake-up call for US policy makers

In Kansas, USA, public health workers are battling one of the largest tuberculosis outbreaks in US history. As of Jan 31, 67 patients in the Kansas City metropolitan area had active infections and 79 latent cases have been identified, according to Jill Bronaugh (Kansas Department of Health and Environment [KDHE], Topeka, KS, USA).

"KDHE is currently managing 384 individuals associated with this outbreak who are at various stages of TB testing, diagnosis, and treatment", Bronaugh said. "This outbreak is ongoing, meaning that there could be more cases." Two patients have died. Bronaugh would not comment on the outbreak's origins or say whether any of the cases have involved multidrug-resistant (MDR) tuberculosis.

The CDC has dispatched four experts to Kansas to help state and local public health workers respond to the outbreak. US President Donald Trump ordered the CDC and other agencies to suspend contact with journalists, and CDC officials did not respond to *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine's* questions.

Anyone can contract tuberculosis from people with active cases, but those with weakened immunity are most at risk, noted Karen Jacobson (Boston University and Boston Medical Center Tuberculosis Clinic, Boston, MA, USA). Minoritised racial groups, people born outside the US, and individuals experiencing homelessness also face higher risks of infection, according to the CDC. "People commonly think that TB outbreaks are due to particularly virulent strains or to 'superspreading' individuals—but it has been repeatedly shown that most outbreaks reflect underlying social conditions and the need for a rapid public health response", said David Dowdy (Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA).

In late 2021 and 2022, Kansas saw a separate outbreak of MDR

tuberculosis, involving 13 cases of active disease and nine latent cases. That outbreak included seven adults, most of whom had lived outside the US in a country that had a previous MDR tuberculosis outbreak involving the same genotype, and several US-born children.

The outbreaks in Kansas are part of a troubling national trend. Until the COVID-19 pandemic overwhelmed public health systems across the US, tuberculosis incidence had steadily declined for close to 30 years. But rates have climbed since 2020, and 40 states and Washington, DC, reported increased rates in 2023, the most recent year for which confirmed numbers are available. The US saw more than 9600 tuberculosis cases that year—an incidence rate of 2.9 cases per 100 000, according to the CDC.

"The number of TB cases in the US in 2023, was the highest we've seen in a decade, and likely reflects, at least in part, fewer resources being dedicated to the TB public health response", Dowdy told *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine*. Alaska has struggled more than most states. Last year, its tuberculosis rate rose to 12.8 active cases per 100 000, from 10.5 per 100 000 the previous year, according to state health officials. Indigenous people accounted for most cases (86% in 2023).

First-line tuberculosis drug shortages have bedevilled the US, thanks to a dwindling number of manufacturers, and ingredient and supply chain problems. Since 2020, the country has seen shortages in isoniazid, rifampin, and rifapentine.

Worldwide, tuberculosis reclaimed its position as the deadliest infectious disease in 2023; 1.25 million people died of tuberculosis that year, according to the WHO. Trump has ordered the country's withdrawal from the WHO, and plans drastic cuts to federal health and public health

workforces. "I am deeply concerned about the current anti-public health and anti-science policies of the new administration", said Pai Madhukar (McGill International TB Centre, McGill University, Montreal, QC, Canada). "Right now, I am not confident that agencies like CDC and the National Institutes of Health are truly empowered to do their jobs. It is very alarming." The Trump administration is also preparing to label immigrants and asylum seekers as tuberculosis and measles public health risks, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. That would permit Trump to declare a health emergency under Title 42, overriding laws protecting migrants' right to humanitarian protection, as he did in his first term, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

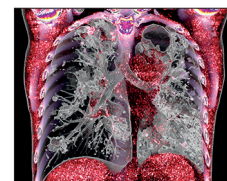
But that could backfire, discouraging immigrants from seeking medical care. "This is a very real concern, and one we witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic as well", said Ameer Patrawalla (Global Tuberculosis Institute and Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, Newark, NJ, USA). Early detection, comprehensive treatment, contact tracing, and prevention have helped contain tuberculosis for decades. Deterring immigrant care-seeking could undermine that achievement, Patrawalla warned.

"This is not a disease that has gone away", Jacobson agreed. "Continued funding for state and local health TB programmes is critical."

The Kansas outbreak "should be a wake-up call about what can happen when we divert our attention and resources away from public health", Dowdy said. "TB is a disease that rapidly fills the cracks when our public health system starts to decay."

"We know how to respond to TB outbreaks", he said. "We just need the resources to do it effectively."

Bryant Furlow



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*Lancet Respir Med* 2025

Published Online

February 12, 2025

[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(25\)00050-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(25)00050-5)

For the Kansas Department of Health and Environment's TB Outbreak updates website see [www.kdhe.ks.gov/2242/Tuberculosis-Outbreaks](http://www.kdhe.ks.gov/2242/Tuberculosis-Outbreaks)

For the CDC's report on the 2021-2022 Kansas outbreak of MDR TB see [www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7235a4.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/72/wr/mm7235a4.htm)

For more on TB reclaiming its position as the world's deadliest infectious disease see *News Lancet Infect Dis* 2024; **24**: e743-44

For more on the *Wall Street Journal's* report on Trump administration plans to label immigrants a TB and measles public health risk see [www.wsj.com/politics/policy/trump-asylum-seekers-measles-tuberculosis-risk-0e71a539](http://www.wsj.com/politics/policy/trump-asylum-seekers-measles-tuberculosis-risk-0e71a539)