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Vaccine Refusal An Expression of Privilege

(August 2014) – Not all of the children returning to school this month and next will be up to date on their vaccinations. According to the [National Network for Immunization Information](http://www.imz.org), three children per 1000 in the U.S. have never received any vaccines, with almost half of all children receiving vaccines [later](#) than recommended. The number of unvaccinated children has led to several recent vaccine-preventable outbreaks in the U.S., including [measles](#) and [whooping cough](#) (pertussis).

A new study published in *Gender & Society*, a top-ranked journal in Gender Studies and Sociology, shows that the reasons why children may not be up to date depends on the class privilege of their mothers. Under-vaccinated children from higher income backgrounds, whose parents are college-educated and white have parents who are intentionally choosing to refuse or delay vaccinations out of a belief that they are protecting their children. On the other hand, children from families with lower incomes and with less educated parents tend to be under-vaccinated because they lack access to resources.

The study, “[Neoliberal Mothering and Vaccine Refusal: Imagined Gated Communities and the Privilege of Choice](#)” to be published October 2014, reports what sociologist Jennifer Reich at the University of Colorado Denver found when she interviewed 25 mothers who have either refused recommended vaccines or have consented to select vaccines for their children on a schedule of their own making. (Reich notes she initially planned to interview both mothers and fathers, but it became evident that decisions regarding children’s health were primarily handled by the mothers.)

Privilege and Protection

The research finds that middle and upper class “vaccine-refusers” are mothers who have the resources, education, and time to make decisions regarding vaccinations. They consent only to those vaccines they believe are most beneficial for their children. They rely instead on other intensive practices in their children’s health, which they saw as rendering vaccines less necessary, including focusing on breastfeeding and nutrition in support of their children’s health and monitoring their social interactions and travel, which they saw as preventing disease exposure.

Reich found that these mothers saw themselves as experts on their own children and questioned the relevance of public health claims that vaccines are necessary for all children, given their lifestyles and close monitoring of their children. They believe that they have the right to challenge the safety of certain vaccines, and question pro-vaccine authorities and institutions. As the research reveals, they do this because they trust that “mother’s intuition,” alongside their own personal research, best protects their children from potential harm.

Lack of Health Care Makes Poor Children More Vulnerable

On the other hand, underprivileged mothers often lack the time to consider individual choices around vaccination. If their children are under-vaccinated it is more likely the outcome lack of access to medical care. This same lack of health care access makes poor children who are under-vaccinated potentially more vulnerable to health risks as rates of vaccine-preventable diseases continue to rise.

Thus, these findings suggest, women with more time, education, and resources claim greater freedom to reject public health interventions, which potentially carries consequences for undervaccinated children from lower income backgrounds who may not have access to care.

New Direction

Public health researchers describe parents who make the choice not to vaccinate their children are “free riders” – those who can reject vaccines without health risks are able to do so because they are protected by the large portion of the population who is vaccinated. The privileged parents Reich interviewed understood this critique but reiterated that their own children are their primary responsibility and suggest other mothers should advocate for their own children.

A new direction in tackling the vaccine refusal controversy may be evolving – one where society agrees that regardless of status or other forms of disparities – everyone carries a responsibility for all children. This strategy may help all mothers consider how their individual choices regarding vaccination impacts everyone their child comes into contact with.

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Source: Reich, Jennifer. 2014. "[Neoliberal Mothering and Vaccine Refusal: Imagined Gated Communities and the Privilege of Choice](#)" to be published October *Gender & Society*.

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Related Experts

Interviews available upon request

Laura Carpenter, Associate Professor of Sociology, Vanderbilt University, Co-author of "A Tale of Two Technologies: HPV Vaccination, Male Circumcision, and Sexual Health."

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Further information

[Gender & Society](#) is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of Sociologists for Women in Society, and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and gender studies. *Gender & Society*, a journal of Sage Publications, publishes less than seven percent of all papers submitted to it. For additional commentary, you can also read the [Gender & Society blog](#) and follow the journal on Twitter: [@Gend_Soc](#).

For more information, contact Gender & Society editor Joya Misra, Professor of Sociology and Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts. Her research and teaching focus is primarily on gender inequality. She can be reached at misra@soc.umass.edu.

[Sociologists for Women in Society](#) (SWS) currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women's lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Joey Sprague, Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas and SWS Executive Officer, at jsprague@ku.edu. Follow us on Twitter and Facebook: [@socwomen](#) and facebook.com/SocWomen.