## [Making Vaccination Mandatory for All Children](http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/03/23/making-vaccination-mandatory-for-all-children)

An [outbreak](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/19/nyregion/measles-outbreak-in-new-york-may-have-spread-in-medical-facilities.html) of measles in Manhattan showed that even doctors had overlooked the disease as childhood vaccination became widespread. But over the last decade more people have objected to immunization. Along with the religious exemptions that almost all states allow, 19 [states](http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/school-immunization-exemption-state-laws.aspx) allow exemptions for philosophical reasons.

But are broader outbreaks like those in [Britain](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/23/opinion/the-aftermath-of-measles-vaccine-scare-in-britain.html)evidence that parents should no longer be allowed to get any exemption from having their children immunized?

Eliminate Vaccine Exemptions

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At the crux of this question is whether individual choice can be subverted for public good. Vaccines work by protecting individuals, but their strength *really* lies in the ability to protect one’s neighbors. When there are not enough people within a community who are immunized, we are all at risk.

Personal and religious belief exemptions should be curtailed because some people, whether because of age or compromised immune systems, cannot receive vaccines. They depend on those around them to be protected. Vaccines aren’t the only situation in which we are asked to care about our neighbors. Following traffic laws, drug tests at work, paying taxes -- these may go against our beliefs and make us bristle, but we ascribe to them because without this shared responsibility, civil society doesn’t work.

Public health is no different.

To justify the subversion of individual choice to public good, there are some conditions that need to be met. The behavior or intervention needs to be safe and effective, and the risk of not participating in the behavior needs to outweigh any risk from the behavior. The currently recommended vaccine schedule meets those criteria. Vaccines are safe and effective. The significant reduction in illness and death from vaccine-preventable diseases is testimony to how well they work. Yet this success likely contributes to the reason requests for personal belief exemptions have proliferated.

We are fortunate to live in an era when we rarely see many vaccine-preventable diseases -- the risk of these diseases seems minimal while the perceived risk of vaccination becomes larger. This is compounded by the proliferation of misinformation, readily available from the news media and other sources. This has resulted in what many describe as the “vaccine confidence gap.” There is no doubt that this gap needs to be addressed. It is the responsibility of the scientific and public health community to ensure that vaccines are safe. It is that community's responsibility to listen to concerns and provide accurate and clear information.

However, it is also the scientific and public health community's responsibility to support the health of patients and ensure the health of the communities in which they live. As more people choose not to vaccinate based on personal belief, our communities are at risk -- we have seen recent outbreaks of diseases like measles, mumps and whooping cough throughout the U.S. It is prudent policy to limit such exemptions to protect our own and the public’s health.

Parents Deserve to Have a Choice About Vaccination

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This January lawmakers in the United Arab Emirates [mandated](http://www.thenational.ae/uae/government/fnc-passes-mandatory-breastfeeding-clause-for-child-rights-law) that women breastfeed for two years, announcing that breastfeeding is a “duty, not an option.”

Should public health officials do everything they can to encourage, inform and facilitate breastfeeding? Yes. Do they have the right to force women to breastfeed? Not in a country that believes in freedom of choice.

There is tremendous evidence showing vaccinations prevent childhood diseases. Should public health officials do everything they can to encourage, inform and facilitate childhood vaccinations? Yes. Do they have the right to force parents to vaccinate their children? Absolutely not.

An American parent could reasonably decide not to follow the C.D.C.’s current vaccination schedule by choosing to vaccinate on the schedule they use in Norway, which has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world. In Norway no childhood vaccinations are [routinely given](http://vaccine-schedule.ecdc.europa.eu/Pages/Scheduler.aspx) in the first three months of life whereas a 2-month-old American infant has been vaccinated against at least four diseases. At the same time,[99 percent of Norwegian infants](http://www.savethechildren.es/docs/Ficheros/517/Mothers_2012_Asia_lr.pdf) are breastfed when they leave the hospital and generous family leave policies facilitate successful (and exclusive) breastfeeding. For an American mom who is exclusively breastfeeding and not putting her child in daycare, following the Norwegian schedule would be a philosophical, evidence-based, demonstrably better choice.

It is a news media-driven misperception that parents who claim philosophical or religious exemptions are uneducated or misinformed. Most parents who individualize the vaccine schedule are actively educating themselves, continually assessing their family’s specific health needs, and doing everything they can to keep their children safe and healthy.

Unlike in the United Arab Emirates, in America we believe parents are capable of making their own decisions about their children’s health. We believe in freedom of choice. This freedom of choice extends to when — and even whether— parents vaccinate their kids.

# Are Conspiracy Theories All Bad?

The United States has a [long tradition](http://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/) of conspiracy theories – a reflection of a widespread suspicion of powerful groups secretly undermining democratic society.

Though some are fueled by discrepancies in the official accounts of certain events, many conspiracy theories persist despite strong evidence to the contrary. Why is there such a strong predilection toward these narratives? What role does this kind of skepticism play in society?

The Negative Social Impact of Conspiracy Theories

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Were the moon landings a hoax? Are governments hiding evidence that aliens have visited earth?

Conspiracy theories are often seen as laughable, and the people who believe them are considered paranoid but usually harmless individuals.

But while many conspiracy theories may indeed be harmless, recent psychological research suggests that some of the social consequences of conspiracy theories deserve more serious attention.

*Many conspiracy theories undermine people’s confidence in established positions on topics such as climate change and vaccination.*

My colleague Daniel Jolley and I [found](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjop.12018/abstract), for example, that people who were exposed to anti-government conspiracy theories were less likely to want to vote than those who had read information refuting conspiracy theories. In a similar study, we [found](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjop.12018/abstract) that people who read about climate change conspiracy theories (versus those who read anti-conspiracy material and those who read no material about climate change) expressed less intention to take action to reduce their carbon footprint. In another[investigation](http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi/10.1371/journal.pone.0089177), we found that reading about anti-vaccine conspiracy theories reduced people’s intentions to vaccinate, compared with those who viewed arguments refuting conspiracy theories, or those who read no material about vaccination.

In each case, conspiracy theories decreased social engagement because they left people feeling powerless, and there is also some evidence that conspiracy theories might influence people [without them knowing it](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3200/SOCP.148.2.210-222#.VInZ02TF8oN).

Some level of healthy skepticism is undoubtedly important for individuals, and citizens cannot be expected to agree with everything they are told. Some conspiracy theories may even be useful in allowing people to question social hierarchies and discover new information for examination and discussion.

But many conspiracy theories seem to be dangerously subversive, undermining people’s confidence in established positions on topics such as climate change and vaccination. They appear to threaten the social systems that people rely upon and encourage inaction where it cannot be afforded. But the question remains: why are conspiracy theories so appealing to so many people?

A Symptom of Mass Cultural Anxiety



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Belief in conspiracy theory is a cultural symptom, one that sheds light on the way people perceive power and public knowledge in our democracy.

*Where the social theorist finds complex structural causes, the conspiracy theorist tends to find malevolent intentions.*

First, the explosion of conspiracy theories since the 1950s is partly an expression of anxiety about mass culture. It is striking how few conspiracy theories refer to traditional conspiracies, in the original sense of a tight-knit plot. Far more often, conspiracy theories describe large shadowy organizations, corporate networks or communication systems. That is, conspiracy theorists attempt something like social theory, and their perennial concerns about diminished human agency and the growing power of large systems are hardly confined to the lunatic fringe.

Where the social theorist finds complex structural causes, however, the conspiracy theorist tends to find malevolent intentions. (Ebola disproportionately affects certain countries because of poverty, for example, not because the U.S. military deployed it as a bioweapon.)

Second, conspiracy theory has always expressed suspicion of traditional authorities — journalists, academics, government officials — and their power to determine “the official story.” But for all its cynicism, conspiracy theory embraces the ideals of the democratic public sphere. This is why it so often imitates professional history, journalism and academic work. The most sophisticated and durable conspiracy narratives are annoyingly resistant to debunking. (And even the most outlandish often do illuminate real injustices.)

Third, contemporary conspiracy theory is inseparable from the rise of a cold war security state committed to covert action and what President Dwight D. Eisenhower called “psychological warfare.” It is no accident that so many conspiracy theories concern the C.I.A. — which has been blamed for 9/11, the Sandy Hook massacre, the downing of Pan Am 103 and much more.

For all its operational secrecy, covert action is a subject of intense public fascination. Twenty-five years after the end of the cold war, the U.S. has 17 intelligence agencies employing [hundreds of thousands](http://projects.washingtonpost.com/top-secret-america/articles/washington-posts-press-release/) of workers [at a cost of](http://fas.org/irp/budget/)some $70 billion per year — but most of our ideas about U.S. intelligence work come from the endless stream of melodramatic entertainment in movies and on TV. The public thus finds itself in a strange state of half-knowledge about U.S. foreign affairs. When “top secrecy” and “plausible deniability” are widely accepted ideas, is it any surprise that so many people believe political power is wielded by powerful, invisible agents?