

Carefree youths fuel global rise in virus infections

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Health officials fighting the coronavirus pandemic say they have a new problem—carefree youths who are ignoring social distancing rules and letting loose around the world, fuelling a surge in infections.

As authorities lifted restrictions on gatherings after months of lockdown and summer holidays began in the northern hemisphere, bars and nightclubs have filled up with teens and young adults. And where venues are closed, young revellers are simply moving the party elsewhere—to beaches, parks and streets which have become COVID-19 hotspots.

Near the British city of Manchester thousands of people have gathered in outdoor rave parties organised on social media while the sprawling Bois de Vincennes park in Paris has regularly hosted illegal techno music parties featuring paper lanterns and electric generators that power turntables.

"Partying is crucial," said one of the organisers of the gatherings in Vincennes park, Antoine Calvino.

Alcohol flows freely at these events, leading many to drop rules about wearing masks and keeping your distance intended to stop the spread of the virus which has claimed over 700,000 lives worldwide.

Police routinely try to break up these outdoor gatherings but more keep appearing. As a result the number of infections among youths has jumped in numerous countries, prompting repeated appeals from the

World Health Organization for young people to act responsibly.

"Ask yourself the question: do I really need to go to that party?" WHO emergencies chief Michael Ryan said Wednesday.

'Reckless'

While young people are less likely to suffer a severe form of the respiratory disease, "they can infect their families", the head of Germany's Robert Koch Institute for public health, Lothar Wieler, said at a recent press conference where he hit out against "reckless... wild parties".

In Canada those under the age of 39 now account for the majority of new infections and the Health authority has warned they are "not invincible" against the virus.

Several French coastal cities such as Nice and Biarritz have seen a jump in cases involving youths who frequented bars or parties.

And in the Swiss city of Geneva, 40-50 percent of infections detected in the last two weeks were among people who went to "nightclubs and bars, places where people dance and kiss," said epidemiologist Didier Pittet.

Officials in Switzerland and other countries have responded to the rise in infections by closing down nightclubs and bars again or reducing their hours.

The world-famous mega nightclubs on the Spanish holiday island of Ibiza, which draw big name international DJs, have remained shut this year because regional authorities forbade dance floors from opening and kept clubs with a capacity of more than 300 closed.

"Youths are the most difficult group to control. They have a lifestyle, a desire to live, which is very different from other groups," the Spanish health ministry's emergencies coordinator, Fernando Simon, said last week.

"Punitive" measures may be needed to get youths to follow social distancing rules but they should not be "demonised", he added.

Natural immunity?

Finding the right way to reach people though is a challenge.

Mariano Urraco, a sociologist at Madrid's Open University UNED, said young people had understood the end of lockdown measures to mean that they would enjoy "total unsupervised" freedom now.

The regional government of Madrid launched a hard-hitting ad this week to try to get youths to take the virus more seriously.

It begins by showing a group of smiling [young adults](#) drinking beers at a bar, then dancing at a nightclub before showing an intubated patient—and finally a crematorium oven.

"There are things that make you hotter than a mask," appears written at the end.

Some experts have suggested that young people instead should be left to their own devices so they gain resistance to the virus by becoming infected and then recovering.

"This age group could acquire much more quickly a collective immunity. But old people would have to be protected with masks inside the home," said Eric Caumes, an infectious disease specialist at the Pitie-Salpetriere

hospital in Paris.

"The ideal would be that everyone under 30 develops natural immunity and we protect those over 50 until there is a vaccine or effective treatment" for the disease, he added.

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