

# childrenshealthdefense.org

The website of an anti-vaccine nonprofit chaired by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., which has published false and unproven scientific and health information, including about the COVID-19 pandemic.



**Proceed with caution: This website severely violates basic journalistic standards.**

**Score:** 12.5/100

## Ownership and Financing

Children’s Health Defense is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Peachtree City, Georgia, whose board chairman is Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., an attorney and environmentalist turned anti-vaccine advocate. In 2018, its most recent tax filing with the U.S. Internal Revenue Service, the group reported \$1 million in revenue.

The site solicits donations from visitors and offers a “lifetime membership” for \$10, that includes access to anti-vaccine presentations and materials from Kennedy.

## Content

ChildrensHealthDefense.org primarily publishes articles expressing skepticism about vaccination, vaccine safety, and related policies. Articles appear in sections with titles such as “Too Many Sick Children,” “Countering False Narratives,” “Federal Failures,” and “Health Freedom.”

Some pages on the site include general information about a subject, such as “Vaccines,” “Aluminum,” or “Lead,” while other stories are more specific about a news event, such as “RFK, Jr.’s Moving Speech to Sacramento Health Freedom Advocates,” “Vaccination and the Media – Conflicts of Interest in Australia,” and “Fluoride Toxicity Trial Update.”

The site also includes a Research section, with a database of studies about what the website calls “environmental contaminants that are implicated in the rise of the childhood epidemics we are currently experiencing in the U.S. and other industrialized nations.”

## Credibility

Children’s Health Defense has published false information that contradicts broad scientific consensus

✗ Does not repeatedly publish false content (22points)

✗ Gathers and presents information responsibly (18)

✗ Regularly corrects or clarifies errors (12.5)

✗ Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly (12.5)

✗ Avoids deceptive headlines (10)

✗ Website discloses ownership and financing (7.5)

Clearly labels advertising (7.5)

✓ Reveals who’s in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest (5)

✗ The site provides names of content creators, along with either contact or biographical information (5)

*Criteria are listed in order of importance.*

[More information.](#)

and research on the safety of vaccines.

For example, the site has repeatedly made the false claim that thimerosal, a mercury-based preservative used in vaccines, can cause autism. A page titled “Mercury/Thimerosal/Autism” asserted that “The science continues to accumulate that mercury and thimerosal are potent drivers of the autism epidemic.”

On a page titled “Autism,” the site falsely stated that “Since 2000, the medical literature has been flush with cumulative research supporting a causal role for mercury in the etiology of autism spectrum disorders.”

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states on its website that “many well conducted studies have concluded that thimerosal in vaccines does not contribute to the development of autism.” Multiple studies published since 2004 have found no evidence of a link between thimerosal and autism.

To back its thimerosal claims, Children’s Health Defense has repeatedly cited research presented in 1999 by Dutch scientist Dr. Thomas Verstraeten. A July 2019 article claimed that Verstraeten’s research “clearly inculpated thimerosal as the principal culprit behind the autism epidemic.” In another story from the same month, the study was described as “evidence establishing a causal vaccine-autism connection.”

The Children’s Health Defense articles do not quote from Verstraeten’s completed research, but from the first part of a two-phase study assessing the safety of vaccines with thimerosal. When Verstraeten’s final study was published in 2004 in the journal *Pediatrics*, it stated: “In no analyses were significant increased risks found for autism.”

Kennedy first made claims about Verstraeten’s research in a 2005 story co-published by *Rolling Stone* and *Salon*. Five corrections were issued to the story, and the story was ultimately retracted by *Salon*.

Kennedy alleged in the story that during a 2000 CDC conference in Simpsonwood, Georgia, held between the first and second phases of the study, Verstraeten was pressured to alter his findings. Kennedy said that

the CDC and pharmaceutical organizations at the conference conspired to cover up a proven connection between vaccines and autism.

Verstraeten denied Kennedy's claims in a letter to the editor published in 2004 in the journal *Pediatrics*. "Did the CDC water down the original results?" he wrote. "It did not. This misconception comes from an erroneous perception of this screening study and other epidemiological studies." He added, "An association between thimerosal and neurological outcomes could neither be confirmed nor refuted, and therefore, more study is required."

A 2007 inquiry by the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee also reported that allegations of a CDC cover-up were "unsubstantiated."

However, [ChildrensHealthDefense.org](http://ChildrensHealthDefense.org) articles have repeated the claims of a cover-up, as recently as 2019. In July 2019, an article claimed that "the transcripts from a secret 2000 meeting between government regulators and vaccine makers at Simpsonwood, Georgia, show HHS officials plotting to create phony studies to exonerate vaccines." An August 2018 story claimed, "The Simpsonwood meeting set that stage for the way the CDC has conducted themselves ever since: control the damage, bury the data, and ensure that the National Immunization Program never misses a beat."

The site has made other false claims about mercury to advocate against the safety of vaccines. For example, on a page titled, "The Comparable Dangers of Ethylmercury and Methylmercury," the site falsely claims that ethylmercury, the type of mercury used in thimerosal, is more dangerous than methylmercury, the mercury found in some fish. In another post from June 2018, the site falsely stated that "Ethylmercury is an organic mercury compound with toxicity mechanisms similar to methylmercury." In fact, methylmercury is considerably more toxic than ethylmercury. As the CDC states on its website, ethylmercury "is cleared from the human body more quickly than methylmercury, and is therefore less likely to cause any harm."

In a September 2019 telephone interview with NewsGuard, Children's Health Defense Director of Marketing and Media Laura Bono defended the site's reporting on vaccines. "We take facts very seriously and we have citations for everything on the website. And we're meticulous about that. We attribute all the articles," she said.

Bono said the site stands by its claims that "Vaccines do cause injuries in great quantity" and pointed to "close to 200 studies" in the site's "Science Library" which purport to show a connection between thimerosal and autism. She also said that the connection "has been documented by hundreds of thousands of parents who have watched their kids regress into autism after receiving vaccines. The evidence is there."

Bono rejected the CDC and WHO's scientifically backed consensus and argued that they were corrupt institutions. "The CDC owns over 50 patents of vaccine processing," she charged. "They get money from vaccines, we don't. All we know is that parents are suffering and children are suffering." She added, "The conflicts that the CDC have and the WHO have with the pharmaceutical industry, we don't have any of those conflicts."

The CDC did not provide a comment in response to NewsGuard's questions about Bono's allegations about conflicts of interest. The organization does list on its website 54 "Available Technologies for Licensing and Collaboration" related to "Vaccine and Therapeutic Candidates," which are patents. The CDC says on its website that it bans patent holders from serving on an advisory committee that makes recommendations on vaccine policy.

The National Institutes of Health's Office of Technology Transfer, which licenses health patents, says on its website that patents held by the CDC, the NIH, and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 2018 generated \$110.9 million combined in 2018. The CDC's overall budget in 2018 was \$11.9 billion.

In 2020, Children's Health Defense advanced false and misleading claims related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the claim that wearing a face mask can cause health problems. A May 2020 article headlined "The Risks vs. Benefits of Face Masks- Is There an Agenda?" said, "Wearing a face mask causes one to re-breathe the carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), that the lungs are attempting to expel. This in turn reduces the immune response, negatively affects epithelial cell function (cells in the lungs and blood vessels) and lowers the amount of oxygen exchange across the alveolar membranes." Children's Health Defense based its claim on an article from Dr. Russell Blaylock, a retired neurosurgeon, posted on the anti-technology website Technocracy.news, which NewsGuard found to have repeatedly published false content.

Wearing a face mask will not cause a person to "re-breathe" carbon dioxide, as Blaylock and the Children's Health Defense article claimed. Health care workers who regularly wear face masks for long periods of time do not experience an accumulation of carbon dioxide. According to a May 2020 article from health fact-checking website HealthFeedback.org, even surgical and N95 masks used by health care workers are porous enough to allow gas molecules such as carbon dioxide to pass through, while limiting exposure to the respiratory droplets that could spread the COVID-19 virus.

The same article also falsely claimed that "face masks restrict the elimination of virus, recirculating the virus into the nasal/sinus and upper respiratory passages." It quoted Blaylock's original article, which said, "By wearing a mask, the exhaled viruses will not be able to escape and will concentrate in the nasal passages, enter the olfactory nerves and travel into the brain."

Sarah Stanley, an infectious diseases professor at the University of California, Berkeley, told The Associated Press in May 2020 that Blaylock's claim is false. "Breathing out the virus is not going to appreciably change the amount that is there," Stanley told The AP.

“Therefore, there should be no reason why wearing a mask would increase your chance of infection in the brain.”

The site also spread unsubstantiated claims about a proposed U.S. law known as the COVID-19 Testing, Reaching, And Contacting Everyone (TRACE) Act. In a May 2020 article titled “The ‘TRACE’ Act—Is This the World We Want?,” the website said, “if passed, it would lead to family separations — as promoted by the World Health Organization — despite the fact that children rely on their parents and guardians in every way — physically, emotionally and psychologically.”

The TRACE Act proposed providing \$100 billion in grants to fund contact tracing and testing services in an effort to limit the spread of COVID-19. The bill did not mention anything about separating families. A press release from U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush, the Illinois Democrat who introduced the bill, said, “This bill does not authorize anyone to enter your home, for whatever reason, without your permission, nor does it allow the government to remove anyone from your home because of the coronavirus.”

Bono did not respond to an email and phone call from NewsGuard in June 2020 seeking comment on the stories related to COVID-19.

Children’s Health Defense has made false claims to raise alarms about 5G cell phone technology. For example, in a July 2019 story, “5G – The Global Human Experiment without Consent,” the site falsely claimed that “5G will significantly increase our wireless RF radiation (radio frequency microwave) exposure” with the potential to cause such effects as “Brain tumors and other cancers,” “DNA damage and altered gene expression,” and “Neurological effects and cognitive impairment,” among others.

In a February 2019 story, the site falsely claimed that “cell phone radiation causes cancer” and warned that “One of the novel dangers introduced by 5G technology is its reliance on high-frequency millimeter waves.”

Multiple studies have not conclusively proven that cell phone exposure causes cancer in people, and none have focused on the emerging 5G technology. The U.S. Federal Communications Commission also states on its site, “currently no scientific evidence establishes a causal link between wireless device use and cancer or other illnesses.

Bono did not comment to NewsGuard about the site’s coverage of 5G technology.

Because of the site’s history of promoting false and unsupported health claims in articles and headlines, NewsGuard has determined that Children’s Health Defense has repeatedly published false content, does not gather and present information responsibly, and does not avoid deceptive headlines.

On a page titled “Why We Do What We Do,” Children’s Health Defense states its mission “to end the childhood health epidemics by working aggressively to eliminate harmful exposures, hold those responsible accountable, and establish safeguards so this never happens again.”

The description does not describe the site’s position toward vaccine safety, although much of its content advances an anti-vaccine point of view. Because Children’s Health Defense publishes articles that advance views about the dangers of vaccines, without disclosing its agenda on the website, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not handle the difference between news and opinion responsibly.

Bono disagreed that the site’s primary mission pertained to vaccines and said other children’s health issues were covered. However, she acknowledged in a telephone call that vaccines have recently been the site’s focus of coverage “because of California and New York doing [vaccine] mandates, but that’s more of a human rights issue. These are examples of government overreach telling parents what to do about a medical procedure. Parents should be in the driver’s seat with their children’s health, especially when their children can be injured.”

The website does not publish a corrections policy. The most recent correction found by NewsGuard was published in November 2019, but a significant number of false stories that remain uncorrected, which is why NewsGuard has determined Children’s Health Defense does not meet its standard for regularly correcting errors.

Bono directed NewsGuard to the form on the site’s Contact Us page for users to seek corrections. “If someone sends in something, we take them all to heart and we check it out,” she said. She did not explain why the site does not regularly issue corrections.

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Transparency

The site includes information about the board of directors, including Kennedy as the board’s chairman, and other staff for Children’s Health Defense in an About Us section of the site. However, the site does not disclose information about the organization’s major donors, which does not meet NewsGuard’s standard for revealing ownership and relevant financing.

Bono told NewsGuard that Children’s Health Defense did not wish to disclose information about their donors. “We follow all the rules for the government, but for donors a lot of people want to keep that information anonymous,” she said.

Articles and information pages on the site are typically attributed to “the Children’s Health Defense Team” instead of content creators. A few articles are attributed to Kennedy or to guest contributors. An Our Team page identifies the site’s staff, along with their biographies, but does not provide contact information.

Because articles are rarely attributed to authors, NewsGuard has determined that ChildrensHealthDefense.org does not meet its standard for providing information about content creators.

Bono told NewsGuard that articles attributed to the “Children’s Health Defense Team” involve each of the 10 staff members identified on the Our Team page in some capacity. “The majority of articles, we are all working on them,” she said.

The site does not run advertisements.

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## History

ChildrensHealthDefense.org was previously known as the World Mercury Project.

Kennedy founded the World Mercury Project, and a website of the same name, in 2016, describing it in a press release as “a public health advocacy organization dedicated to ending exposure to neurotoxic mercury in fish, medical products, dental amalgams and vaccines.”

In May 2018, the group changed its name and the website’s name to Children’s Health Defense. In an interview on the site, Kennedy stated that his involvement in the organization “emerged from the promotion we were doing for the film Trace Amounts,” an anti-vaccine documentary which falsely purported to link autism with mercury in vaccines.

*Editor’s Note: This Nutrition Label was updated on July 1, 2020, to add new examples of the site’s content related to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

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**Send feedback to NewsGuard:** [Click Here](#)

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