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Top U.S. researchers are asking Trump administration officials to enforce a nationwide closure of schools and businesses. AP PHOTO/ALEX BRANDON

Disease experts call for nationwide closure of U.S. schools and businesses to slow coronavirus

By **Jocelyn Kaiser** | Mar. 16, 2020 , 2:55 PM

Infectious disease experts across the United States are calling for tougher enforcement of social distancing measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus behind the COVID-19 pandemic, including a nationwide closure of schools and nonessential businesses. Such a move would go beyond the spotty closures now in place in some states and major cities.

In an **open letter** posted today on Twitter and widely circulated by email, scientists and physicians write that they “have been watching the COVID-19 pandemic unfold with increasing concern as the global community has taken disparate and at times delayed action to reduce the spread of the novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV2.” The letter calls for “immediate action on the part of national, state, municipal, and local governments to enforce social distancing in order to truly minimize contact among individuals,” including “enforced social distancing measures” including “closing or severely limiting all non-essential businesses and closing schools nationwide as soon as possible.”

The letter was spearheaded by Kacey Ernst of the University of Arizona and Karen Levy and Carlos del Rio of Emory University. Levy says she was motivated by a bike ride this weekend along Atlanta’s Beltline, a popular trail connecting parks and nightlife spots. “Everybody was out shoulder to shoulder in bars and restaurants and hanging out and

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clearly had not gotten the memo. Without messages from top leadership, people are not taking this seriously enough," Levy says. At the moment, Atlanta has not imposed any restrictions on restaurants, unlike Washington, D.C., New York City, Seattle, and San Francisco.

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Religious leaders in Georgia also seem to not grasp the seriousness of the situation, and are continuing to hold services, del Rio says. "Everybody's finding a way to circumvent it as opposed to doing the right thing." The letter also calls for an "immediate scale-up of testing," including drive-through testing sites, as well as preparation by health care facilities for "an onslaught of patients."

The signers "recognize the serious economic impact this pandemic and social-distancing measures may have. However, the sooner the United States moves to uniform broad-scale social distancing, the more time we will have to create plans to help support those with business losses, those who are unable to stay home to care for children, and those who do not have paid time off from work," the letter states.

More than 100 established infectious disease scientists and 25 trainees have signed the letter since it was posted online late this morning. Signers include such prominent researchers as Yale University epidemiologist Albert Ko; Michael Worobey of the University of Arizona, who studies virus evolution; and Thomas Gillespie at Emory, an expert on the ecology of pathogens.

The organizers intend to send the letter to high-level U.S. officials including Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who is helping lead the Trump administration's response to the pandemic, as well as Brett Giroir of the Department of Health and Human Services, and the White House. "Making this decision is going to be political but it has to be informed by science," del Rio says.

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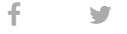
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