

VIEWPOINT

“Politicized” Science and Attacks on Public Health

JOSEPH J. AMON

On September 2, 2025, the secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that “politicized science had corroded” the purpose of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and “squandered public trust.” He laid out a vision for the CDC, focusing on infectious diseases and “effectiveness—not politics.”

Kennedy, a lawyer and politician, seems to define “politicized science” (or politicized public health) as scientific findings he does not agree with, particularly related to vaccines, about which he has said: “There’s no vaccine that is safe or effective.”² He has also claimed that “nobody knows the risk profile for any vaccine that is currently on the schedule.”³ Both statements are false.

His efforts politicizing science go back more than a decade. In 2015, he wrote a book claiming that vaccines cause autism.⁴ In 2023, Kennedy said that the COVID-19 virus was a genetically engineered bio-weapon that may have been “ethnically targeted” to spare Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese people.⁵ In response to a measles outbreak in Texas this year, Kennedy promoted the use of the unproven and risky medications budesonide and clarithromycin instead of vaccination.⁶

No sound scientific evidence supports these claims, but for Kennedy there is political capital to be gained. Although Kennedy says that his job “is to eliminate the politics from science,” his actions are the opposite: to inject his political views into the field of public health, foster division, and undermine public trust in science to advance his personal agenda.

“Politicized science” is not only about vaccines, of course. Special interest groups and politicians have conducted disinformation campaigns to cast doubt on scientific consensus on everything from gun violence to tobacco use, lead poisoning, and climate change. The goal is to limit regulations and maximize profits, regardless of public health consequences: more than 46,000 deaths from firearms in the United States in 2023; 7 million deaths worldwide annually from tobacco; and 5.5 million deaths from lead exposure.⁷

While scientists acknowledge limitations and uncertainty, Kennedy preaches certainty. Claims of

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Competing interests: None declared.

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“politicized science” rally his supporters. But “politicized science” can have real impacts, both in turning people away from effective approaches and in making health workers a target of violence. As part of my work with the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition, I have seen the consequences borne from politicized science and the subsequent mistrust and distrust of health workers that results.

Community health outreach workers, living and working in the community, are often put at risk when their work becomes politicized, whether because of misinformation and disinformation or because of the capture of public health campaigns to advance other goals, such as when the Central Intelligence Agency used a hepatitis B vaccination campaign in Pakistan to hunt for Osama Bin Laden.⁸

Between December 2012 and May 2014 in Pakistan, more than 60 polio vaccine team members were murdered. One attack, in April 2014, killed two women and injured two children when unidentified men hurled a hand grenade into the house of a polio vaccine worker.⁹ In later instances, a polio worker from the Peshawar area was kidnapped from her home, tortured, and killed, and a police constable escorting a polio team was shot dead.¹⁰

Despite increased security, attacks on vaccination teams continued. On January 13, 2016, a suicide bombing at a polio vaccination center in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan Province, killed 15 members of Pakistan’s security forces and wounded 23 other people as they gathered for a planned three-day vaccination campaign.¹¹

This kind of backlash against vaccination workers is not limited to Pakistan. In Nigeria, in 2013, gunmen attacked two polio vaccination clinics in the northern city of Kano, killing at least 10 people after a radio station broadcast a story about claims of forced vaccinations. In Afghanistan, polio vaccinators have also been killed, and armed opposition groups have destroyed or confiscated vaccination supplies and equipment.¹²

During the global COVID-19 pandemic, fear and politicized science also stoked violence against health workers, with more than 400 reports of violence and threats against health care related

to COVID-19 documented from January through December 2020.¹³ Health workers were often targeted on their way to or from work because of fears that workers were spreading the infection. In other cases, people opposed to wearing masks or to being tested attacked health workers. Health facilities were also targeted; for example, in Hong Kong, makeshift bombs were thrown at four health centers after the government listed them as designated clinics for COVID-19 treatment.¹⁴ In Mexico, three health clinics built to accommodate COVID-19 cases were targeted in arson attacks.¹⁵

Public health can be politicized in other ways too. In Bahrain, Turkey, and many other countries, health workers have been arrested for providing care to individuals protesting government policies.¹⁶ In Syria, government forces and affiliated militias have arrested, killed, and tortured hundreds of patients and health workers. Hospitals and health clinics have been targeted and bombed.¹⁷

The criminalization of same-sex sexual relations, sex work, gender-affirming care, and drug possession and use can also be seen as a type of “politicized science,” denying fundamental human rights and ignoring evidence that shows that criminalization impedes access to health care and increases exposure to police and community violence.¹⁸

Yet Kennedy somehow sees the CDC’s work, grounded in science, tracking disease outbreaks, monitoring vaccination safety and coverage across states and by age and race, promoting pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV, or conducting blood pressure screening as ... politicized science?

Worldwide, in 2024, there were more than 3,600 incidents of attacks on health workers, ambulances, or facilities documented in 23 countries, including air, missile, and drone strikes; shelling; tank fire; shootings; arson; the looting and takeover of health facilities; and the arrest and detention of health workers.¹⁹

It seems unfathomable that health workers would be targeted for providing care to others, but reports show, over and over again, that attacks on health are commonplace and that the consequences are both immediate and long term, resulting

in terror and trauma, as well as untreated illness and limited access to care, lasting for days, weeks, months, and longer.

The United States has never been included among the countries covered by the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition's reports, despite periodic violence occurring in US health centers, such as attacks on health workers during the COVID-19 pandemic or violence targeting reproductive health care providers.²⁰ This is violence outside of the context of "conflict settings."

Or so I thought, until August 8, 2025.

While I do not think anyone would confuse suburban Atlanta with a conflict zone, the August 8 attack on the CDC in which a 30-year-old gunman fired more than 500 shots, shattering 150 "blast resistant" windows among six different CDC buildings and killing DeKalb County Police Officer David Rose, does not seem too dissimilar to the kinds of attacks against health that the coalition has documented in each of the reports we have issued since 2014.

If you are skeptical about the comparison, consider the description by CDC officials of their experience and response to the gunfire that occurred late in the afternoon on an otherwise unremarkable summer day.

Aliki Pappas Weakland, the associate director for policy, planning, and communications in the CDC's Office of Readiness and Response, said: "I dropped to the floor when the shooting started. The fear that gripped me as the gunfire continued in a steady stream ... my knees are chafed and hurting from crawling on the floor with my colleagues as we scrambled to seek shelter."²¹

The director of CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, Demetre Daskalakis, told his staff, "We've experienced a horrific and intentionally targeted attack."²²

The cause of the attack was clear to many CDC staff. Weakland identified the cause as "years of vilification of public servants and public health" in American politics.²³

As a former CDC epidemiologist, the August 8 attack on the main campus of the CDC struck me as unmistakably political violence, resulting from

the politicized science of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and his fellow travelers who are responsible for ongoing misinformation and disinformation campaigns waged against vaccines. Indeed, the gunman reportedly blamed the COVID-19 vaccine for making him depressed and suicidal.²⁴

CDC Director Susan Monarez, writing to CDC staff, said as much—"the dangers of misinformation and its promulgation has now led to deadly consequences"—and was then promptly fired.²⁵

Of course, misinformation and disinformation are not the only causes of attacks on health. Easy access to assault weapons is a relevant factor, and the dismantling of the CDC's Division of Violence Prevention, which conducted research on gun violence and prevention, as well as other forms of violence such as child abuse and sexual assault, illustrates the unseriousness of the current administration in upholding its charge of protecting the nation's public health.²⁶

In the days after the attack, Kennedy said that "public health agencies have not been honest" and that public health authorities should not be trusted, because "trusting the experts is not a feature of science or democracy, it's a feature of totalitarianism and religion."²⁷

In the 2024 Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition report, most of the attacks on health we documented were partisan: nurses, physicians, and vaccination teams were attacked by opposition groups, including militias and military forces.

In some cases, however, health workers were attacked by their own government. In Yemen, health workers were arrested for "politically unacceptable" social media posts. In Cameroon, Myanmar, and Sudan, health workers were arrested for "aiding opposition forces," such as by providing medication or care to opposing parties in the conflict or joining pro-democracy movements.²⁸

When I worked at the CDC, the furthest thing I could have imagined was what is happening right now to my former colleagues. The CDC is a shining light of expertise, dedication, and commitment to improving health in the United States. In addition to the recent violence it has endured, the CDC is under ideological attack from well-organized dis-

information campaigns and from a secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services who is determined to do the opposite of the organization's mission to "improve health, safety, and well-being of America."

Robert F. Kennedy Sr. fought for the realization of human rights globally. His son's legacy is the politicization of science—something he claims to abhor.

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