

Coronavirus total in US skyrockets as testing expands

Bryan Dyne
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Officially confirmed coronavirus cases in the United States increased by nearly 14,000 over the weekend to 32,356, and the number of deaths more than doubled from 158 to 414. Worldwide, there were 60,000 new cases in the past two days, bringing the total to more than 335,000, along with just under 15,000 deaths. The United States now leads the world in new cases and is second only to China and Italy in the number of patients infected with COVID-19.

The majority of new cases have occurred in New York City, where there are now over 9,000 cases in the city alone and nearly 16,000 cases statewide, along with 114 deaths. New Jersey has surpassed both Washington and California to have the second largest number of cases in the country. Thirty states now have at least 100 cases and thirty-four have at least one death.

Despite having fewer cases than Italy, hospitals across the US are already being overrun. Nurses, doctors and other medical professionals are reporting a shortage or lack of masks, gowns, gloves and other personal protective equipment necessary to keep themselves from getting coronavirus in cities across the country, including New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Seattle. There is also a shortage of intensive care units and ventilators, which are used to keep the most critically ill patients alive.

An intensive care nurse in a Midwestern city gave her account from being a front-line health care provider during this pandemic. “As I sit here after my 16-hour shift, 8 of it being our designated COVID floor, I can't keep quiet any longer. This is no joke people. This is nothing like the flu. This is nothing like anything I've experienced before in my 8 years that I've been a nurse. I don't think that people can understand the realness of this situation unless you are on the front line like me and all the other healthcare professionals.

“This is just the beginning. It will only get worse before it gets better. Numbers continue to rise. Hospital policies are changing by the hour. Step-down units are no longer that, they are designated coronavirus units because of their proximity to the ICU. I can't imagine what our healthcare would be like if we weren't doing everything we've been doing, like closing schools or social distancing. As healthcare workers, we've all been exposed. We all go back to our families, our young

children or elderly parents and risk exposing them.

“Then we come back to the hospital for our next shift and even more uncertainty. Are we going to have the proper PPE to help keep ourselves safe? What if we are quarantined to the hospital for days and can't see our families? What would I do if I get it? Making plans with my husband about how I would be quarantined to my basement and how hard it would be for my children to have to stay away. When will I get to see my parents again? This is no joke. So please stop saying this is all political or it is just an irrational fear. I know, because I'm it.”

Conditions in New York City are increasingly dire. Mayor Bill de Blasio, appearing on the NBC program “Meet the Press,” described the conditions in apocalyptic terms, warning there would be many, many deaths, some of which he attributed to the failure of the Trump administration to provide necessary medical supplies and equipment. “If the president doesn't act, people will die who could have lived otherwise,” he said.

“I'm worried about saving lives right this minute. And I don't see the federal government at this moment,” de Blasio continued. “April is going to be worse than March. And I fear May will be worse than April. So bluntly, it's going to get worse, a lot worse, before it gets better.”

Remarkably, Trump was not asked either about the huge rise in coronavirus positives or the warnings from de Blasio in the course of a 90-minute White House press briefing Sunday evening. The reporters had either internalized Trump's threats against media questioning, from Friday's press conference, or had been directed by their editors not to mention the skyrocketing infection total because it might further inflame popular anger.

Such acts of censorship and self-censorship will not save either the Trump administration or the entire social order of American capitalism as working people become aware, through bitter experience, of the complete indifference of the US ruling elite to the impending public health catastrophe.

Official Washington is preoccupied, not with saving lives, but with carving out various pieces of a new bailout bill, estimated at as much as \$2 trillion, to reward the corporations and industries that control both the Republican and Democratic parties and dictate their policies. The bill stalled in the Senate Sunday, amid wrangling over its precise terms, but the bulk of

the funding will go straight into the coffers of the giant corporations and the billionaires.

The sudden increase in new cases is partly a reflection of the increase of testing for COVID-19, particularly in New York. While both the United States and South Korea had their first confirmed cases the same day, January 20, it took the Trump administration two months to begin testing on a mass scale, with nearly 200,000 tests in the past seven days, compared to under 26,000 before then.

The experience in New York, and the example of countries which have tested aggressively, like South Korea, indicate that if testing were implemented in such a scale in other states, the case numbers would increase by a factor of five or even ten.

In addition, testing is still only provided to those who show symptoms of the coronavirus. New York City's coronavirus web page explicitly says that, "Unless you are hospitalized and a diagnosis will impact your care, you will not be tested." In other words, even if the level of testing currently being implemented in the city is implemented across the country and based on the level of hospitalization needed in China and Italy, it would still likely underestimate the number of infected people in the United States by a further factor of ten.

This has essentially been the policy of every state and the entire Trump administration since the coronavirus entered the country. It was established at the onset of the outbreak that COVID-19 can be transmitted from person to person even when an infected patient has no symptoms. Even as late as March 10, Trump patronizingly told the country that, "It will go away. Just stay calm. It will go away." Millions of people in factories and distribution warehouses across the country have still not been provided with adequate safety equipment to continue working, even though these are areas where the virus can easily spread.

The only official document regarding the coronavirus from the federal government to the general population is the two-page guideline encouraging "social distancing" to "slow the spread" of the pandemic. As has been repeatedly pointed out by the World Health Organization, this is wholly insufficient. WHO has repeatedly pleaded with world governments to expand their testing capabilities and to test everyone with the symptoms of the coronavirus and everyone with whom they were in contact.

This is both to stop the pandemic now, as well as in the future. A study released last week by London's Imperial College makes clear that the coronavirus will return even after large-scale efforts to prevent social gatherings. Even in the best-case scenarios, the disease still spreads to large sections of the population and, by their estimates, at least 1.1 million die in the US alone. The research underlines the fact that any type of mass quarantine is only truly effective when systematic testing is available to the entire population.

These numbers also assume that adequate care will be available for every coronavirus patient. The Society of Critical

Care Medicine notes that there are only 96,600 intensive care units in the country and 62,000 ventilators. Even if they are all dedicated to helping coronavirus patients, which would sacrifice tens of thousands suffering other ailments, hundreds of thousands of people each day would not have access to these lifesaving devices.

The danger of loss of life in the millions is not the chief concern of the Trump administration or its counterparts in Europe, who have provided many trillions of dollars to financial markets and major corporations in the forms of bailouts and promises to purchase various toxic assets. At the same time, paltry sums to provide economic relief for the tens of millions of workers facing destitution from reduced hours, being laid off and a myriad of other financial hardships are still being haggled over in Congress by both the Republicans and Democrats.

There are also increasingly high-profile calls for the military to be deployed to deal with the pandemic. During yesterday's broadcast of "Meet the Press," New York City Mayor de Blasio called "for the military to be mobilized" and that soldiers "should be sent to places where this crisis is deep, like New York, right now." He claimed that the US military is "the best logistical organization in the nation" and as such should be used to distribute masks, ventilators and other medically necessary equipment to combat the coronavirus.

Whatever the military is being used for in the short term, workers should have no illusions that the military will not be at some point ordered, alongside the police and National Guard, to suppress the growing social unrest from the increasing physical and economic suffering caused by the pandemic. There are already numerous reports, although currently being denied, that the governors of New York and California are considering declaring martial law to enforce the lockdown of their states.



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