

Trump administration expands assault on coronavirus testing

Bryan Dyne
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In an interview with Chris Wallace that aired Sunday on “Fox News Sunday,” US President Donald Trump continued his attacks on mass coronavirus testing in the United States. While claiming that countries in Europe “don’t test,” supposedly explaining the continent’s lower case count, Trump decried testing in the US for “really skew[ing] the numbers.” He asserted, “In a way we’re creating trouble.”

The president also said that “many of those cases shouldn’t even be cases,” because “many of those cases are young people that would heal in a day.” Trump then added, “They have the sniffles and we put it down as a test.” Wallace was forced to correct Trump, stating that “Testing is up 37 percent. Cases are up 194 percent. It isn’t just that the testing has gone, the virus has spread. The positivity rate has increased.”

Trump’s interview was broadcast as the number of cases in the US has already exceeded 3.8 million, more than any other country in the world, and as the number of deaths has soared to 143,000. Worldwide, there are now 14.6 million cases and 608,000 deaths. The majority of reported daily new cases and deaths are from the United States, Brazil, India, South Africa and Mexico.

Florida continues to be the epicenter of the pandemic in the United States, having recorded more than 12,000 new cases yesterday and at least 87 deaths. California had the second highest number of new cases, 8,115, and 11 deaths. Ohio, which Governor Mike DeWine has touted as doing “very well,” had the second highest death toll yesterday, 40 people, along with more than 1,000 new cases. Texas ranked third in both metrics, with 7,389 new cases and 39 reported deaths.

Even New York, which has been hailed as a success story in controlling the coronavirus after being the world epicenter in April, recorded 850 cases and 18

deaths. The state of Montana, which had two multi-day stretches of no new cases in May, now has one of the fastest-growing outbreaks in the country.

Other states with large case counts or deaths rates—or both—include Georgia, Arizona, Louisiana, North Carolina and South Carolina. According to the coronavirus tracking website covidexitstrategy.org, 17 states in the American South and West have “uncontrolled spread” of the disease while only four across the country are “trending better” in regard to their outbreak.

In the interview with Fox News, Trump also reiterated his demand that children attend school in the fall, regardless of their safety. “Young people have to go to school. There are problems when you don’t go to school, too.” He then again threatened to withhold federal money from states and school districts that don’t reopen. “There is going to be a funding problem. When they don’t open their schools, we’re not going to fund them.”

There is a connection between Trump’s two main talking points. He and his administration are aware of the enormous risks involved in sending the nation’s children back to school amid a contagious and deadly pandemic. It is not out of the realm of possibility that most of the 50-60 million school-age children in this country, packed into increasingly crowded classrooms, contract the disease, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and perhaps hundreds of thousands of debilitating lifelong conditions.

The danger of a quick and massive spread among children was made clear in data from Florida’s Department of Health, which currently shows that 31 percent of all children that have been tested for COVID-19 have tested positive, compared to an 11 percent positivity rate for the state as a whole. While

questions have been raised as to whether the children tested were at a higher risk of infection, the fact that such a high proportion of those tested have been infected has raised concerns among local health officials even as Governor Ron DeSantis moves ahead with reopening all Florida schools in August and September.

But, at least according to Trump's logic, it will be much harder to conclusively prove that the virus caused such a catastrophe if the students, teachers and parents no longer have access to testing. The same can be said for workplaces across the US: the virus will in fact "disappear," as the president has continued to claim, fabricating an excuse to force even more people back to work. The ongoing deaths in factories, plants and workplaces will become a nonissue for Trump and the financial and political interests for which he speaks.

Further details about the state of testing in the US came out during an interview on NBC's "Meet the Press" between host Chuck Todd and the director of the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Francis Collins. Todd noted that, "There's a report this morning that the White House is actually pushing back on a congressional proposal that would add more money to your budget, by the way, more money to states for testing and contact tracing."

Todd then asked specifically about how tests are conducted. "What can the federal government do right now to improve the testing lag issue, okay? ... I've had my own family members have to wait five to seven days to get, to get a, to get the result. That becomes useless at some point if you're asymptomatic. What do we do to fix that?"

Dr. Collins responded that it can take "as long as a week" to get testing results back, which "really undercuts the value of the testing." Collins then explained that since "you do the testing to find out who's carrying the virus and then quickly get them isolated so they don't spread it around."

Moreover, both Collins and Todd are assuming that one can even get tested. While testing has been ramped up across the country, there are an increasing number of reports that have emerged of miles-long lines of cars at testing centers in Arizona and Florida, as well as testing centers closing down completely in Houston, Texas.

The risk of unknowingly spreading the disease was highlighted in a weekend *Washington Post* article on

"Coronavirus superspreaders," where one or two cases can cause a cluster of dozens or even thousands of new cases. There are at least a thousand suspected cases worldwide, dozens in the United States alone. One instance reported by the *Post* occurred in Ingham County, Michigan, where two infections at a college bar on June 18 led to 187 cases by July 17. Health officials have also linked Trump's rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma last month to a surge of cases in that state.

Todd also took the opportunity to ask Dr. Collins about the supposed "hacking issue that apparently the Russians were behind." He then provocatively asked, "Did you guys lose any key information?"

Collins responded somewhat indifferently. "It's not entirely clear to me what this was all about. Now, we certainly are deeply engaged in this vaccine effort. The vaccine that's about to have its phase three trials started in just the next ten days or so was initially designed a few hundred yards from where I'm sitting right now at NIH. And certainly, we are always under cyberattacks of various sorts. But I would say most of what we do in science, we publish it. We put it out there. People don't have to go hacking to find it. We're all about transparency. So, I'm not exactly sure what serious risk is involved here."



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