

Why is the US doing less and less COVID-19 testing?

Bryan Dyne
11 August 2020

On June 20, US President Donald Trump boasted of having told public health officials to reduce the number of tests for COVID-19, the disease that has infected 5.2 million Americans and killed over 166,000 since the start of the year. “I said to my people, ‘Slow the testing down,’” Trump declared.

Three days later Trump added, “Cases are going up in the US because we are testing far more... With smaller testing we would show fewer cases!”

Top US public health officials immediately sought to downplay Trump’s comments, declaring that the US policy was to expand, not decrease, the amount of testing. But without any serious explanation by the government, the number of tests being done every day in the United States has dropped significantly over the past two weeks.

On July 24, the United States conducted 926,876 tests, according to the COVID Tracking Project. But that figure had dropped to just 668,546 last Saturday. The average number of daily tests conducted fell from 809,200 in the week ending July 26, to 712,112 last week, a decline of 12 percent.

At the same time, tests are often taking over a week to return, making them all but useless in tracking down and isolating those that are infected before the pandemic spreads even further. According to internal data from Quest diagnostics obtained by CNN, “the total average turnaround time for results was 8.4 days.”

Public health experts say the level of testing in the US is far too low to contain the disease. An analysis from Ashish Jha and his team at the Harvard Global Health Institute recently showed that it would take 1.2 million tests per day, with results back in time to act on them, to stop the number of daily new infections from increasing.

It would take 4.3 million tests per day, according to

Jha, to actually suppress the pandemic. This is more than six times the current level of testing and more than four times the proclaimed goal of the Trump administration, which had been to reach one million coronavirus tests per day.

Amid this massive shortage, US officials have admitted they are prioritizing tests for “certain people.” In particular, the wealthy and well-connected are able to take tests and get results within a day, while for ordinary workers results can take up to a week or more, if they are able to get them.

Federal funding for testing and contact tracing, the only measures known to contain the pandemic, stands at less than one percent of total federal spending on the pandemic response – with the vast majority going to bailouts for major corporations. Nationwide, there were just 28,000 contact tracers last month, less than one-tenth of the number called for by former Centers for Disease Control Director Tom Frieden.

Trump has boasted, “Over the past seven days, nationwide cases declined by 14 percent,” but this decline is driven by the decline in testing.

Moreover, last month the administration ordered hospitals to bypass the Centers for Disease Control and prevention and send all COVID-19 data to a centralized database in Washington, raising fears that the figures are being manipulated.

Reports have abounded of discrepancies in state statistics. Last week, the state of California disclosed that as many as 300,000 health records, mostly related to COVID-19, had not been processed, leading the state’s top health official to resign.

For workers, there is no systematic testing, even as they are forced into the factories in unsafe conditions. Autoworkers report being left in the dark by management about outbreaks at their plants, with

workers who test positive simply “disappearing” without their co-workers being notified. A statement by the Rank-and-File Safety Committee Network gives a sense of this disaster:

Work is becoming a daily horror movie. At Ford Dearborn Truck in Michigan last week, two people got sick, and they were whisked away and people on the line didn’t know what was going on. At Fiat Chrysler’s Belvidere plant in Illinois, someone tested positive, and they were also snuck off the line by management.

Amid the nationwide testing shortage, officials from both parties are pressing ahead with the drive to reopen schools, which is all but guaranteed to lead to a further escalation of the pandemic. While Trump is leading this campaign, it is supported by governors from both parties. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat, demanded this month that schools reopen throughout the state.

The fall in US testing is part of a policy of “malign neglect.” As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in March, the US government is “making a deliberate decision to minimize their response, to adopt an attitude of indifference to the spread of the virus.”

From the beginning, the US political establishment saw the pandemic as an economic, not a health problem. In late March, Congress passed, on a nearly unanimous basis, the so-called CARES Act, which sanctioned the multi-trillion dollar bailout of Wall Street by the Federal Reserve.

Once the bailout was passed, the US political establishment demanded that workers get back on the job, despite the fact that the pandemic was raging throughout workplaces and the US lacked the testing and contact tracing infrastructure to contain the disease. As predicted by public health experts, this led to a major resurgence of the pandemic.

Now, this campaign is entering a new phase with the reopening of schools, threatening another wave of infection and the lives of thousands of teachers, students and parents. As epidemiologist Michael T. Osterholm warned last week, “[T]he next six months

could make what we have experienced so far seem like just a warm-up to a greater catastrophe. With many schools and colleges starting, stores and businesses reopening, and the beginning of the indoor heating season, new case numbers will grow quickly.”

Serous public health experts are unanimous on how to stop the pandemic: Non-essential businesses must be closed, testing and contact tracing must be massively expanded many times over, and workers must be given the economic resources to stay away from workplaces.

But all of these basic public health demands are contrary to the prerogatives of the ruling class, whose only concern is to get workers back into the factories and workplaces. If they die, they can be replaced with others desperate for work. The capitalist class and the politicians, media and police that defend it are ruthless in the defense of profits over human lives.

The trillions that have been transferred to the super-rich must be seized back and the resources made available for mass testing and contact tracing, to protect doctors and nurses as they care for the sick and to provide aid for those forced to isolate and quarantine. Factories must be mobilized to make the necessary medical materials as part of a broader socialist program to meet the essential needs of working people for health care, housing, education and jobs.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact