

# Coronavirus cases top 25 million worldwide

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Eight months have passed since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, and more than 25.5 million people worldwide have been infected with the novel virus SARS-CoV-2. There are now nearly 6.9 million people with confirmed active cases globally. Each of them will join either the 18.6 million who have recovered or the 854,000 who have died from the virus.

The United States remains the worst hit by the pandemic, with 6.2 million known cases and 187,000 deaths. The latest estimate from the Institute of Health Metrics at the University of Washington—the model largely used by the White House—predicts that 317,000 will die by December 1, assuming the rate of the pandemic’s spread remains about what it is now. If restrictions ease—if, for example, schools and workplaces continue to reopen and provide more opportunities for the deadly contagion to spread—the death toll is projected to jump to 363,000 as the winter holidays begin.

Such data support the statement issued at yesterday’s World Health Organization (WHO) press briefing by Director-General Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus Adhanom, who warned, “The reality is that this coronavirus spreads easily, it can be fatal to people of all ages, and most people remain susceptible.” He added, “Opening up without having control is a recipe for disaster.”

Such a disaster, however, is exactly what is being carried out by the Trump administration, according to a new report from the *Washington Post*. Instead of pushing for more testing and contact tracing to contain the virus, Trump’s new medical adviser, Scott Atlas, is pushing for a “herd immunity” policy, allowing the virus to spread through most of the population to build up resistance to the disease.

According to the *Post*, “the threshold for herd immunity may require 2.13 million deaths.” Atlas was selected by Trump after months of open conflict with Anthony Fauci, who recently warned that to achieve

herd immunity “the death toll would be enormous.” Atlas comes from the right-wing Stanford Hoover Institution and has been on Fox News regularly, openly supporting Trump’s policies on masks and on reopening the economy and schools. Right-wing talk show host Rush Limbaugh was most explicit, declaring, “Scott Atlas is now part of the coronavirus task force meeting with the President. And he is countering Fauci.”

The White House was forced to respond after the *Post*’s story broke, issuing a statement in Atlas’s name that stated, “There is no policy of the President or this administration of achieving herd immunity. There never has been any such policy recommended to the President or to anyone else from me.”

Such statements are belied by the actual actions of the Trump administration, which since late July has been reducing testing nationally. Brett Giroir, who is in charge of the administration’s testing strategy, recently claimed that reduced testing was warranted because the share of COVID-19 tests that are positive is going down.

The test positivity rate on Our World in Data, however, has been rising for the past few days, indicating that the pandemic continues to spread in the US and the current level of testing is insufficient to know where the virus is, and thus contain it.

The lower testing levels came after repeated statements from the president claiming that there were so many coronavirus cases in the US only because of the supposedly high level of testing in the country. Data from New York shows this to be false, with more than 100,000 tests in that state alone and a positivity rate that is currently below 1 percent.

The catastrophic implications of an untrammelled policy of herd immunity are underscored by recent reports from Hong Kong, Europe and the US of confirmed reinfections of COVID-19, all occurring

only a few months after the victim was infected the first time. These studies show both that immunity is not long-lasting and that the virus is mutating and infecting people with multiple strains. In short, “herd immunity” is a pipe dream, making the pursuit of such a policy all the more murderous.

Trump has repeatedly demanded that workplaces and schools reopen, asserting at last week’s Republican National Convention that it will be safe as long as “those at highest risk, especially the elderly” are somehow sheltered, “while allowing lower-risk Americans to safely return to work and to school.” The states, he added, “have to be open, they have to get back to work.”

Some of the worst outbreaks in recent days have been in Iowa and South Dakota, among the many states Trump is demanding be more fully reopened. Iowa had stayed at about 500 new cases each day since March, until last week, when schools were reopened. Since then, the average number of daily cases has spiked above 1,000. Similarly, South Dakota had fewer than 100 new cases per day from mid-May to early August. Now it is approaching an average three times as high and climbing.

Cases continue to climb in the most affected states. California now has 711,000 cases, more than every other country in the world except Brazil, India and Russia. Texas and Florida are not far behind, with 642,000 and 623,000 cases, respectively. Combined, the three states have officially counted more than 37,000 dead.

Of course, the actual number of dead from the pandemic is known to be much higher. New data from the *Economist* shows that from March through July, the official record of those killed from COVID-19 amounted to only 71 percent of deaths from the virus in the United States. While some were undoubtedly missed cases, the article makes clear that other “excess deaths” are the result of people not being treated for other conditions because health care systems are overwhelmed and because people are afraid to go to a hospital for fear of catching the coronavirus.

This is not just a US phenomenon. The same study found that coronavirus deaths in Peru were only 34 percent of total excess deaths during the past spring and summer. The figure for South Africa was 47 percent; for Spain, 65 percent. Data was also collated for certain

cities, showing that only 32 percent of excess deaths from March through July in Mexico City were officially attributed to the pandemic, 34 percent in Moscow, and just 12 percent in Jakarta, Indonesia.

Not only do these statistics provide a more complete picture of the impact of the pandemic over the past several months, they also reveal how health services have been disrupted internationally. A recent WHO survey found that 90 percent of countries have suffered from this problem, and that “low- and middle-income countries have been most affected.”

The WHO also revealed that “up to 70 percent of services have been disrupted for essential services including routine immunization, diagnosis and treatment for non-communicable diseases, family planning and contraception, treatment for mental health disorders and cancer diagnosis and treatment.” Such impacts on the global public health system will have an incalculable long-term impact.



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