

COVID-19 infections spread rapidly in Spain amid government inaction

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Tens of thousands of people continue to be infected with the coronavirus in Spain every day. Despite a slight dip in the number of daily cases reported, infection rates remain extremely high: 15-20,000 a day, according to official statistics.

Spain has now recorded around 1.6 million coronavirus cases since the start of the pandemic. It surpassed one million cases on October 21; in the space of just 20 days, the case total increased by 50 percent, reaching 1.5 million on 17 November.

Last Tuesday, Spain reported 435 deaths from the virus in a 24-hour period, the highest daily fatality figures in the autumn. Between 250 and 400 people have died of COVID-19 across Spain every day over the last two weeks. At the end of last week, the 14-day cumulative incidence rate stood at 436 per 100,000 inhabitants, a decrease from the start of November, when this key indicator stood at 529.

Despite these dangerously high figures, the Podemos-Socialist Party (PSOE) government has refused to take the action required to curb the virus, imposing only limited and ineffectual curfew measures, with some areas of the country even scaling back restrictions.

After implementing limited closures in October across the hospitality and leisure sector to combat the pandemic, the Catalan government announced last Thursday that regional restrictions would start to be relaxed. This week, bars and restaurants will be able to reopen at 30 percent of their capacity and with an enforced closure time of 9:30 p.m. Cinemas, theatres and similar venues will also be allowed to open again at 50 percent of usual capacity.

While the number of cases reported in Catalonia has gradually started to decline, thousands of infections are still being discovered each week. In the week ending 17 November, 13,907 cases were discovered in this region

alone, with 414 deaths from the virus. There has been little change in the number of COVID-19 patients admitted to hospital, with 2,402 admissions during this period, compared to 2,661 and 2,720 reported in the previous two weeks.

Furthermore, the proportion of COVID-19 tests which return a positive result stands at 7.75 percent, meaning that the virus is still far from under control in Catalonia. According to criteria published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in May, a positive rate of less than 5 percent is an indicator that the epidemic is under control in a country.

Across Spain, the average coronavirus test positivity rate is 11.9 percent, rising to 17 percent or above in four areas: Andalucía, Aragón, Castilla y León and Valencia. A test positivity rate this high indicates that many cases are probably going undetected.

Meanwhile, the proportion of Intensive Care Unit hospital beds occupied by coronavirus patients stands at over 30 percent in Spain and at more than 50 percent in the regions of Aragón, Melilla and La Rioja. The vast majority of Spain's provinces are considered to be at "Extreme Risk"—the highest level—according to the government's own four-stage framework.

At the end of October, Socialist Party Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez declared a state of alarm, allowing regional governments to implement measures to confine areas with high rates of infection. A countrywide 11 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew was also imposed, which regional authorities could adjust by up to an hour each way. The state of alarm was initially passed for 15 days, before being extended to May next year by a vote in the Congress of Deputies.

Last Tuesday, several of Spain's 17 autonomous provinces declared that they will keep their regional borders closed into late November or early December,

after initially shutting them for short durations at the end of October. These measures prevent people from entering or leaving the areas unless for authorized reasons such as work, medical appointments or taking care of dependents. All of Spain's regions other than Galicia, Extremadura, the Balearic Islands and the Canary Islands have now imposed some sort of perimetral lockdown.

In Madrid, however, regional lock-down measures will only be in place for ten days, between 4 and 13 December, covering the public holidays on 7 and 8 December, when large numbers of Spaniards would usually travel to visit family and friends across the country.

Such limited measures are completely inadequate to curb the spread of the virus and save lives. The PSOE-Podemos government has ruled out "stay-at-home" orders or closing workplaces and schools. This forces workers and children to travel on crowded public transport and gather in facilities where hygiene and social distancing measures are non-existent, creating perfect conditions for continued transmission of the virus.

In order to facilitate these efforts to keep workers at work and children at school no matter the risk to their health and lives, the right-wing Popular Party regional president of Madrid, Isabel Díaz Ayuso, announced last week that the region would be rolling out "COVID passbooks." These documents will include each individual's health records relating to the virus, including results of PCR tests and antibody tests, in order to demonstrate if they have been infected with the coronavirus and are therefore supposedly immune.

Such "immunity passports" were condemned by the World Health Organization when they were first suggested in the early weeks of the pandemic, due to their anti-scientific and discriminatory nature. There is still no evidence to suggest that those who have been infected with the virus once and have antibodies have any lasting or strong immunity to it or that they are incapable of carrying the virus and passing it on to others.

There is widespread opposition to these attempts to force a "return to normality" across the country. According to a survey conducted by daily *El País*, the majority of Spaniards support stricter confinement measures to stem the spread of the virus. The poll,

based on interviews with 2,000 people, showed that more than six in ten (61.2 percent) would support a second home confinement policy if it helped curb the pandemic. Meanwhile, 72 percent of respondents said measures aimed at protecting health should be prioritised over the economy.

Nearly 80 percent of respondents thought that the pandemic had exacerbated economic inequality in Spain.

The economic impact on the working class has already been devastating. With millions more workers left unemployed and without financial support as employers carried out a jobs massacre, many families in Spain have been unable to afford basic necessities to live.

According to the charity Spanish Federation of Food Banks (FEBA), the number of families forced to rely on food aid from their organization has increased by about 70 percent since the start of the pandemic.

FEBA spokesperson Ángel Franco stated that the pandemic had significantly "exacerbated" reliance on food banks, which even prior to the outbreak of the virus had been very high. "In 2019, we had 1.05 million beneficiaries," he stated, "when the [first] state of alarm ended [in June] we had got to 1.5 million, and we calculate that we will end December with 1.8 million." FEBA predicts that they will hand out 192 million kilos of food this year, compared to 145 million in 2019.

Similarly, Miguel Ángel Rodríguez, director of communications at the Spanish Red Cross, stated that "after the declaration of the state of alarm [in March], we put in place a response program to Covid-19, and we have so far helped 2.7 million people, the vast majority in need of food. Demand has increased five-fold since the start of quarantine. Food distribution has shot up and 75 percent of those who came to us in 2020 were new users, who had never resorted to the help of an NGO [Non-Governmental Organisation] before, not to ours or any other."



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