

AMLO government falsified COVID-19 data to avoid shutdowns in Mexico City

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The government of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) falsified data on the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico City to prevent the alert level being raised to “red,” which mandates a shutdown of “nonessential economic activities.”

In the second largest metropolitan area in the Americas with 21.6 million people, Mexico City and the neighboring State of Mexico have been the epicenter of the pandemic in the country. Together the two entities have recorded 458,000 cases and 34,700 deaths out of 1.39 million cases and 123,000 deaths confirmed nationwide.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government has connived with corporations and trade unions to cover up outbreaks in factories and other workplaces. Testing levels are so low that Mexico currently has the highest positivity rate—the percentage of tests that come out positive—in the world at 40.6 percent. Moreover, the year is expected to end with 280,000 excess deaths.

The resulting official figures, which greatly minimize the pandemic’s real spread and death toll, are plugged into a formula with 10 indicators to determine each state’s alert and restriction levels under a “semaphore system.”

On December 4, Deputy Health Minister Hugo López-Gatell, who leads the pandemic response, provided Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, who belongs to López Obrador’s Morena party, a report with lower figures than the official ones.

According to documents reported by the *New York Times* last week, López-Gatell’s report stated that 45 percent of hospital beds with ventilators were occupied, and that the positivity rate was 25 percent in the capital. Official data, however, had shown 59 of these beds occupied and a 35 percent positivity rate.

If the official numbers had been used, the semaphore formula would have exceeded the 32-point threshold to activate a red light. When contacted by the *Times*, the Health Ministry refused to explain the source of the lower numbers.

The authorities did not declare the red light in Mexico City until a new report was filed on December 18. “Yet officials kept the capital open for business for an extra two weeks, its streets thronged with shoppers, its restaurants teeming with diners,” the *Times* reported.

Even by December 4, numerous hospitals had reached full capacity. That day, local media said the Ajusco Medio Hospital had reached 122 percent general capacity and 116 percent for ICU beds. This major city-run facility in the south of the capital had seen demonstrations by workers throughout November.

By December 18, coronavirus patients in several hospitals were being examined outside the facilities or inside their vehicles, while oxygen tanks bought by families to treat infected patients in their homes were running out in several stores in the capital. As early as September, only one in five patients who had died of coronavirus nationwide had received ICU care.

Last week, the Center for Research and Teaching Economics (CIDE) and Stanford University projected, assuming greater social distancing measures, that demand for hospital beds for coronavirus patients will exceed capacity by 50 percent by mid-January.

On December 24, hospital occupancy had reached 90 percent in Mexico City. There were 5,559 COVID-19 patients hospitalized, 1,455 of whom were intubated, while there were only 619 beds available in total and 205 ICU beds.

Mayor Sheinbaum announced that there will be 1,240 new beds available by December 31, far from what will be needed. Several hospitals, moreover, have reported

shortages in medicines, personal protective equipment, and specialized personnel, while exhaustion among medical workers is universal.

In this context, the Mexican corporate media and state officials have focused their attention on the first vaccinations on Christmas and the contracts to purchase 198 million doses for the population of 127 million. According to the current timelines, which are far from certain, Mexico will receive just over 3 million doses by the end of March.

The lies regarding Mexico City figures are yet another exposure of the AMLO administration's conscious policy of sacrificing hundreds of thousands of lives in order not to impinge on the profits of the financial and corporate oligarchy.

As early as January and February, the Chinese authorities and US and European intelligence agencies briefed governments on the health care disaster ahead. Their Mexican counterparts undoubtedly had access to this information, but AMLO continued holding large rallies and calling people to "keep going about our lives as normal."

On November 30, as the resurgence of cases became clear in Mexico, the World Health Organization specifically asked the López Obrador government to "get very serious" and for Mexico's "leaders to set the example." The Mexican president responded to the WHO that he would continue refusing to wear face masks since they are "not indispensable."

Shutting down commerce, particularly during the Christmas holidays, constituted a major blow for the economy, with further bankruptcies leading to losses in the financial system. The employer organization COPARMEX estimated in early December that nearly 50,000 businesses had closed this year in Mexico City, and about 10,000 more could close if the red light was declared.

On the other hand, there are fears that these closures will increase social unrest as the AMLO administration refuses to provide any aid to workers or small businesses, the majority of whom operate in the devastated informal sector.

Instead of providing income for workers and small business owners to shelter at home, the government has prioritized social austerity to meet interest payments to Wall Street financial vultures and raise the military budget.

In an insulting decision, the Mexico City government announced last week loans of 10,000 pesos (US\$500) for small businesses and a one-time check of 2,200 pesos (US\$110) for restaurant workers who can prove that they were suspended or fired due to the pandemic. Countless workers in the shut-down "nonessential" sectors, including restaurants, will be forced to work to sustain their families.

At the same time, many economic activities that are not essential for the maintenance of human life and combatting the pandemic will remain open. On June 1, the López Obrador administration declared all transportation, manufacturing, construction, and financial services as "essential" in order to secure the supply of parts, finished goods and services for transnational corporations and the banks.

The known result of these policies has been the deaths of workers and their families on a massive scale. According to researcher Héctor Hiram Hernández Bringas at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), 90 percent of confirmed coronavirus deaths are among manufacturing or manual workers, drivers, maids and pensioners, and 75 percent of victims had no studies beyond high school. The pandemic has also killed more than 2,000 health care workers, the highest number in the world.



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