New year brings increased coronavirus deaths to New Jersey

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As residents of New Jersey rang in the new year, the novel coronavirus continued to spread largely unimpeded through the state. The seven-day average number of new cases increased sharply on New Year's Day, and the general public will not begin to receive the coronavirus vaccine until April or May.

Despite these developments, the state government is taking no serious measures to stop the spread of the virus. In fact, Governor Phil Murphy, a Democrat, lifted a ban on indoor organized sports on January 2. Restaurants, nail salons, gyms and other businesses remain open, and there has been no statewide shutdown of schools.

Instead of enacting the necessary restrictions, Murphy has emphasized personal responsibility, as if it were sufficient to control the pandemic or as if the lack thereof were the main cause of the current spread. "As we begin the new year, stay vigilant. Social distance. Mask up," he tweeted. Murphy is pursuing the same herd immunity strategy that Republican governors and President Donald Trump have promoted since March 2020.

Seven-day average of new cases has increased

On January 6, New Jersey had 6,369 new cases of COVID-19 and 124 confirmed deaths related to the virus. Since the pandemic began, New Jersey has lost 19,638 residents to the coronavirus, the fifth highest death toll in the US.

New Jersey's seven-day average for new positive tests was 4,942 as of January 5. The most recent statewide test-positivity rate was 11.27 percent.

The viral transmission rate was 0.92 for the second consecutive day on Monday and has reached its lowest level since September 1. The transmission rate is decreasing because the number of cases is not increasing as rapidly as it did during the spring, according to state officials. Recorded fatalities are a lagging indicator, however, and the number of deaths will increase, they warned.

Approximately 101,417 residents had received their first doses of the vaccine at the start of this week. Health care workers and people who live in group settings (e.g., residents of nursing homes and prisoners) have been the first recipients of the vaccine in the state's multiphase approach. The Murphy administration intends to vaccinate 70 percent of adult residents (4.7 million people) in the coming six months. This means that immunity will not be widespread until at least the fall.

Outbreaks at schools continue

Outbreaks of the coronavirus at schools are the consequence of Murphy's refusal to mandate remote learning statewide. State data indicate that 108 school outbreaks involving 546 students, teachers and staff have occurred since the school year began in late August. This number is artificially low, however, because these data exclude Catholic schools, yeshivas, private preparatory schools and other private K–12 schools.

At a school in Essex County, at least 83 students or staff members became infected with the coronavirus. This appears to be the largest outbreak at a single school building. On the bogus pretext of protecting individuals' privacy, the state did not disclose the name of the school or the municipality.

The outbreak in Essex County was one of three new outbreaks that occurred during the same week. The others took place at schools in Passaic and Sussex counties. The

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counties with the most outbreaks to date are Bergen (21 school outbreaks, a total of 99 cases) and Camden (13 school outbreaks, a total of 66 cases).

In the state's definition, a school outbreak occurs when contact tracers conclude that two or more students or staff members caught or transmitted the coronavirus in the classroom or during academic activities at school. The definition excludes infections that take place during sports practice and at other extracurricular activities. It also excludes infections transmitted from family members or others outside of school. These deliberate exclusions create the impression that schools are safer than they are.

Monthly deaths at nursing homes have tripled

Throughout December, the number of deaths resulting from coronavirus almost tripled at New Jersey's nursing homes. At least 310 residents of long-term care facilities and one worker died that month. This ghastly death toll exceeded the combined death tolls of September, October and November. No part of the state was spared from this increase in preventable deaths among the elderly.

At least 111 facilities recorded confirmed COVID-19 deaths in December, according to a review of state data by NJ Advance Media. This number includes 25 facilities at which five or more residents died. More than 5,600 residents and workers tested positive for the virus in December, which represents a 72 percent increase in new cases compared with November.

Nursing homes account for approximately 45 percent of New Jersey's confirmed coronavirus deaths. Events such as the discovery of 17 bodies piled in a nursing home's small morgue focused attention on the deplorable conditions at these facilities during the spring. Despite public outrage and solemn vows from local and state officials, practices related to infection control and testing requirements have remained criminally inadequate.

The New Jersey Department of Health selectively releases data to conceal the extent of the ongoing catastrophe in nursing homes. Its list of facilities where outbreaks are occurring do not show whether any given facility has had an increase in cases since the previous list was published. Nor does the department make archived versions of these lists publicly available.

State officials oppose release of prisoners

Prisons, where inmates are kept in close quarters and sometimes gathered in groups, promote the spread of the coronavirus. Tarrick Tucker, who is incarcerated in Essex County, told NJ Advance Media that rooms were overcrowded and that several units were detecting positive coronavirus cases.

The state public defender's office and the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey petitioned the state Supreme Court in December for the release of prisoners awaiting jury trials, which have been delayed during the pandemic. Keeping these people in jail is unfair, the groups argued, because they have not been convicted of a crime and have endured long waits.

The plan, if adopted, would make eligible for release approximately 650 people who have waited for more than six months and who have not been accused of the most serious crimes. New hearings would be granted to an additional 400.

Arguments on the plan will begin on January 19, but Attorney General Gurbir Grewal and the county prosecutors' association oppose it. They argue that anyone who could be released safely has been released already.

The state's opposition to the release of more prisoners is consistent with the Murphy administration's response to the pandemic since it began. Murphy, a multimillionaire and former Goldman Sachs executive, refuses to take the necessary measures to stem the spread of the virus because they would interfere with the ongoing extraction of profits from the working class. His conscious subordination of public health to private profit has resulted in nearly 20,000 deaths.

The working class in New Jersey, united with their class brothers and sisters internationally, are the only force that can oppose this criminal policy, protect public health and save lives by shutting down non-essential production while ensuring full compensation for workers and small businesses until the pandemic is suppressed.

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