Three million in Los Angeles County have been infected with COVID-19 as workplace outbreaks reach all-time high

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Officials in California now believe that 3 million Los Angeles County residents have contracted coronavirus, or one-third of the population of the most populous county in America. This estimated figure is three times the number of cases confirmed through testing, according to a *Los Angeles Times* report. At least 13,000 residents are confirmed to have died, in what is among the most severe outbreaks of coronavirus in the world.

The virus is so widespread, according to the *Times*, that the infection rate has likely been slowed down by the large numbers of people who have already contracted it and developed a temporary immunity.

Health experts estimate that 75 percent of LA County residents will need to be vaccinated in order to slow down the spread of the virus. One official, Dr. Roger Lewis, director of COVID-19 hospital demand modeling for the LA County Department of Health Services, told the *Los Angeles Times* that even if half of LA County was vaccinated, without proper social distancing measures "we will still have a very, very devastating pandemic."

Last week, LA county had a daily average of 15,000 new confirmed COVID cases a day, one of the highest rates yet seen in the pandemic. Health officials, pushed to the breaking point, have been forced to ration care among the sick and injured, having to choose which patients receive life-saving ventilators and which patients only receive care to lessen their suffering.

By far, the greatest source of transmission has been workplaces throughout the region and yet the government has not ordered the closure of non-essential businesses. Even with the grossly inadequate $300 weekly supplemental unemployment benefits passed by Congress last month, workers still face the impossible choice between working and risking contracting and transmitting the virus to their loved ones or staying home and risking financial destitution.

County officials are currently investigating 538 workplace coronavirus hotspots, the highest number yet. The county launches such an investigation when at least three laboratory-confirmed cases have been reported. Nearly every type of workplace is now being investigated, including warehouses, offices, factories, distribution centers, police and fire stations, courthouses, retail stores, car dealerships, restaurants and supermarkets.

As one official put it during a news conference held Monday, "there are outbreaks everywhere."

Large retail stores have been especially prone to contagion. A combined 349 workers tested positive at 15 Target stores in LA County, followed by 263 workers at nine Home Depots, 92 at six Whole Foods Markets and 383 at nine Costco outlets. According to county data, more than 11,800 workers have been infected at workplaces currently under investigation.

County officials and company spokespersons insist that the outbreaks are not necessarily tied to any safety lapses. However, during safety inspections, officials noted how some businesses did not comply with capacity limits or made sure that employees and customers were wearing face masks and maintaining safe distances from one another.

The county has issued a mere 83 citations since January 3, bringing the total number of citations written since last August to 613. Businesses that were ticketed include hair salons, gyms, restaurants, churches and malls, according to public health officials.

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LA County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer told the *Times* that people who live in crowded dwellings (i.e., workers) were especially susceptible to the virus saying, “All it takes is one mistake and soon, five, 10 or 20 other people become infected.”

She added, “A great deal of transmission happens in household ... [people] go to work, they’re an essential worker, they become infected, they’re asymptomatic, and then they get a high-risk family member infected.”

The county is expected to pass the 1 million mark of confirmed coronavirus cases likely this week. The rate of infection in the county has increased so rapidly that as many people became infected last month as were infected during the first 11 months of the year.

While new COVID-19 hospitalizations have leveled off for now, hospitals are still stretched beyond capacity with extremely high rates of hospitalizations. For example, the ICU at Memorial Hospital of Gardena is operating at 320% capacity.

Over the last few weeks, an average of 700 to 850 new patients every day have been admitted to LA County hospitals. Dr. Christina Ghaly, LA County director of health services, told the *Times*, “That’s three times higher than what was seen earlier in the pandemic.”

While the numbers may have temporarily stabilized, this may reflect a stabilization of transmission brought by the stay-at-home order officials issued after Thanksgiving, but before Christmas. It will take more time before the effect of the Christmas and New Year gatherings can be observed in the hospitals.

Ghaly said, “We just don’t have the information available at this point in time to determine whether or not that surge happened and, if so, how steep those numbers will climb.”

She added that if there was a surge during the holiday season, “this would be absolutely devastating to our hospitals.”

Ghaly noted that before any relief could be expected for hospital workers, there would have to be a significant decline in hospitalizations for one to two months, “at a minimum.” She also said that even if transmission over the holidays was limited to one infected person passing on the virus to just one other person, the county could expect to see “very high continued demand” for emergency services, like ICU’s, over the next four weeks.

The situation in many hospitals is already without precedent in modern history. In Ventura County, there were a total of 1,002 patients hospitalized, with 448 infected with coronavirus. More than 388 people have died from the virus in the county alone, with half of them, 189, reported since mid-December.

Ventura County Supervisor Carmen Ramirez told the *Times*, “Many of us watched what happened in New York and Italy and saw horrific scenes. And we’re getting close.”

Hospital morgues are reportedly full in some cases, with delays of up to three days in getting a body into a mortuary. Some mortuaries face a backup if they receive more than four bodies per day. One mortuary, which only dealt with seven to eight families a week before the pandemic, is now reportedly dealing with 50 every week.

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