

Half a million dead in the US from coronavirus pandemic: Catastrophe, crime and historical turning point

Joseph Kishore
22 February 2021

The official death toll in the United States from the coronavirus pandemic, as reported by the main sources cited in the media, surpassed 500,000 on Monday—a staggering loss of life that is almost impossible to comprehend.

The number of people killed in just one year from the coronavirus is more than the number of US soldiers killed on the battlefields of World War I, World War II and Vietnam combined. It is greater than the entire population of Miami, Florida (454,000); Raleigh, North Carolina (464,000) or Kansas City, Missouri (486,000).

One out of every 670 people in the United States died from COVID-19 over the past year. Among those over the age of 65, disproportionately the victims of the disease, one out of every 100 has died. Beyond those who have died, more than 28 million people have been infected, and the long-term health effects are still unknown. Millions of people have been directly impacted by the loss of loved ones—parents and spouses, co-workers and children.

The pandemic has profoundly affected every part of the country, from the major urban centers to small towns and rural areas. One in 295 people has died in New York City, and one in 500 people in Los Angeles County, both well above the national average. And as the *New York Times* noted, “In Lamb County, Texas, where 13,000 people live scattered on a sprawling expanse of 1,000 square miles, one in 163 people has died of the virus.”

Life expectancy has plummeted in the United States at a rate not seen since the Second World War. Life expectancy for men is now 75.1 years, a decline of 1.2 years from 2019. For women it is 80.5 years, a decline of almost one year. And this just takes into account the first half of 2020—that is, before the massive surge of cases and deaths in November, December and January.

The pandemic has had a staggering impact on every aspect of society. The arts and culture have been devastated. Tens of millions of people have lost their jobs, with millions falling into the ranks of the long-term and permanently unemployed. Workers have accumulated enormous levels of debt, which far exceed the pittance in government assistance. A generation of young people has seen its future decimated. The psychological

trauma from economic and social dislocation is incalculable.

The horrific impact of the pandemic is more than a tragedy. It is a monumental social crime that has exposed the comprehensive social, political, economic and intellectual failure of capitalist society.

On Monday evening, President Joe Biden delivered a perfunctory ten-minute speech marking the milestone of half a million people dead. In remarks characterized by verbal pabulum and empty sanctimony, Biden acknowledged a striking fact: The death toll in the US is “more than any other nation on earth.”

Yet Biden did not even attempt to explain the policies and actions that produced this reality. China’s ability to contain the disease through a stringent program of testing, contact tracing and lockdowns demonstrates that the uncontrolled spread of the virus was not inevitable. Mass death was the outcome of conscious decisions made by the ruling class and its political representatives to prioritize profit over lives.

There were a number of critical nodal points in the spread of the pandemic when decisive action could have been taken. The first known death in the US occurred in February. The Trump administration—with the collaboration of the Democratic Party and the media—deliberately downplayed the scale of the threat and refused to take emergency measures to prevent it from spreading throughout the country.

In March, when the death toll was still under 1,000 but growing rapidly in major urban centers, particularly New York City, the ruling class utilized the crisis to organize a massive transfer of wealth to the rich, sanctioned through the near unanimous bipartisan passage of the so-called CARES Act by the US Congress.

This was followed by a coordinated campaign of the entire political establishment to force workers back to work. It was Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* who introduced the phrase, “The cure can’t be worse than the disease,” a slogan taken up by Trump. In practice, this meant that the necessary measures to save lives had to be subordinated to the profit interests of the ruling class and the endless rise of the stock markets.

The Trump administration spearheaded the “herd immunity” policy, inciting fascistic organizations to demand an end to all restrictions on business activity. But states throughout the country, run by both Democrats and Republicans, implemented the measures that spread the infection. As a consequence, the death toll surged, reaching 100,000 by the third week of May; 200,000 by the middle of September; and 300,000 by early December.

As this catastrophe was unfolding, the entire political establishment responded with a staggering level of indifference. At no time in the course of the past year was there a single congressional hearing to address how this happened and what had to be done. The endless toll of death was treated by the media as something that the population had to accept as a fact of life.

Even in the second half of 2020, the scale of the disaster could have been curtailed through emergency measures, including the shutdown of all nonessential workplaces, the closing of schools, and the emergency provision of the financial support necessary to sustain the population until the crisis was overcome.

The political establishment, however, rejected these necessary steps to save lives. Throughout the 2020 elections and after, Biden insisted that there would be “no national lockdown” under a Democratic Party administration. Following Trump’s January 6 coup attempt—involving the same forces mobilized to enforce the back-to-work campaign—the watchword of the Democratic Party has been “unity” and “bipartisanship.”

On Monday evening, Biden declared that it was necessary not only to remember the dead but also “to act. To remain vigilant. To stay socially distant.” His words, however, are contradicted by the policy of his administration, which has centered on the effort to reopen schools and keep non-essential businesses operating. Last week, Biden reiterated his demand that schools be opened “five days a week” by April 1.

Even as the death toll surpasses half a million, the pandemic is far from over. While new reported cases and deaths have fallen from their most recent peak of five weeks ago, both remain far above the average for most of 2020. The spread of new, more infectious variants of the virus means a likely surge of new cases before a vaccine is widely available.

In the final analysis, two interrelated factors blocked any rational, scientific and humane response to the COVID-19 virus. The first was the prioritization of personal wealth and profit over social need. The only consideration of the ruling class and its political representatives was to safeguard the financial markets and the wealth of the oligarchy.

Indeed, the ruling elite, operating under the principle, “never let a good crisis go to waste,” used the pandemic to engineer a transfer of wealth unparalleled in American history. Even under conditions of mass death and increasing poverty, the rich got richer. The wealth of US billionaires has increased by \$1.1 trillion since March 2020. The process of wealth accumulation,

epitomized by the rise of the stock market, was made possible by the same policies that made mass death inevitable.

The second factor was the subordination of the response to a global pandemic to nationalist geopolitics. At a meeting held on February 24, 2020, almost exactly a year ago, at a point when the pandemic was just beginning to spread in the US, *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board Chairman David North pointed to its global character:

As the national states prepare to fight over markets and pieces of territory, the coronavirus takes no notice of borders and spreads across the globe. The virus, traveling without a passport and without bothering to apply for a visa, is utterly indifferent to the nationality, ethnicity, racial background and religion of its potential victims.

The nationalist politics of all capitalist governments—and the policy pursued in the US has been implemented throughout the world—blocked the necessary global coordination of resources and scientific expertise to stop the virus.

The pandemic is a catastrophe and a crime. It is also a historical turning point. American capitalism has been irretrievably discredited. For those who have passed through this experience, particularly an entire generation of young people, it will frame their life experience and the way they see the world.

The pandemic is, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, a trigger event. In a manner similar to World War I, it has exposed the bankruptcy of the entire social and economic order—not only the political parties, but also the pseudo-intelligentsia and its obsession with racial and gender identity, the corrupt media and the lying mouthpieces of the ruling class, and the corporatist trade unions that function as instruments of the corporations and the state.

It is proving to masses of workers and youth, in the United States and throughout the world, that a solution to the crisis produced by capitalism can be found only through a program of socialist internationalism and the struggle of the working class for power.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)