State University of New York system surpasses 3,000 COVID-19 cases one month into semester

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The State University of New York (SUNY) system has reached a concerning milestone one month into the new semester of in-person classes. Since January 30 all SUNY schools have reported 3,000 cases of COVID-19. More than 2,000 of these have come from on-campus residents, with the other 1,000 occurring among students living off campus.

If SUNY students were their own county, they would far surpass any other county in New York for daily cases per 100,000. Even if only the on-campus cases were considered, the infection rate would still be dangerously high at 41.6 cases per 100,000 for February and 53.2 cases per 100,000 for the last two-week period. Either figure is higher than the 14-day average for New York state, which stands at around 40 cases per 100,000 during the same period.

Since the beginning of the fall 2020 semester, nearly 12,000 cases have been recorded. Over the course of the fall semester while in-person classes were in session, with data collected from August 28 to November 20, 5,251 students contracted COVID-19. A further 3,632 cases were recorded while classes were not in session between December 5 and January 29, likely driven by the general explosion in cases that occurred across the country during December and January.

In just one month, cases at SUNY campuses have surpassed half of the total infections for the entire fall semester. Even with overall cases declining in the country, SUNY is set to record more cases in just five weeks of in-person classes than during the two months students were home and daily case numbers were twice what they are now.

The rapid rise in case numbers has been driven by a few schools, in particular, which have reported disturbingly high rates of infection. Stony Brook University has recorded 139 cases among on-campus residents since January 30, and the University at Buffalo has reported 153, both over 1.25 percent of the total on-campus population.

SUNY Delhi's 42 cases appears low, but it is a concerning 2.4 percent of the campus population. Similarly, SUNY Potsdam's 57 cases constitute 2.5 percent of student residents, and SUNY Maritime's 67 represent 3.4 percent.

Two of the state university system's largest schools, Albany and Binghamton, are also facing large outbreaks. Albany's 205 on-campus cases constitute nearly three percent of the residential population, and Binghamton's astonishing 371 cases is 2.6 percent.

However, large schools in urban areas are not the only ones facing considerable outbreaks. SUNY Cortland, which suffered from some of the highest case numbers last semester, has recorded 189 on-campus cases and 261 cases for on- and off-campus students among their 3,885 residential students in rural New York. Using just the on-campus cases, that is 4.8 percent of the campus population.

Even higher is SUNY Geneseo, another relatively small school in rural New York. Geneseo was largely spared from COVID-19 in the fall but has recorded 225 on-campus cases among 4,443 students, a five percent infection rate that is the highest in the entire SUNY system.

To further stress how high these case numbers are, the average daily infection rate must be considered. Using the total of 3,000 SUNY students infected during February, the daily average infection rate was 60.6 per

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100,000 students. In just the last two-week period, the average was 73.6 per 100,000 students.

No matter how the data is examined, the numbers do not lie: the reopening of college campuses during a deadly pandemic has been disastrous. It is only by chance that no SUNY students have been killed by the virus, and no one knows what long-term health effects these infections will cause. Even more concerning is the role that these outbreaks may play in expanding cases in the surrounding communities.

Multiple studies have provided evidence to show that outbreaks at universities across the country can result in higher case numbers in the surrounding communities. With limited contact tracing resources for studying this phenomenon, it is difficult to know the real extent to which SUNY campuses are linked to outbreaks in other areas.

There are warning signs that this is already occurring.

Broome County, where Binghamton is located, had been experiencing a persistent drop in daily case numbers since mid-January. Average daily infections per 100,000 dropped from a peak of 98 on January 12 to 29.9 on February 14. But this trend reversed around the same time that cases began to explode on campus, and daily infections in the county are now over 44 per 100,000 people.

Even after college students are taken into account, the daily case numbers are still beginning to swing upwards. This could be for a variety of reasons, but the correlation is significant enough to warrant consideration and concern.

Other counties with SUNY schools have early warning signs as well. Livingston County, where SUNY Geneseo is located, has seen an uptick in cases in the past week following a several week decline. Cortland County has seen its decline in cases stall over recent weeks. Albany, Erie and Suffolk counties, all home to large universities with large outbreaks at SUNY schools, have all seen cases begin to rise recently.

With new more transmissible variants of the coronavirus spreading throughout New York, there is a real possibility that colleges and universities will act as vectors for these new variants and amplify their spread, both on and off campus.

Larry is a freshman student at Edinboro University in northwestern Pennsylvania near western New York, which is also experiencing a surge in COVID-19 cases. There were 83 confirmed student cases since January 11. He expressed his concern about the situation at SUNY schools to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"I personally think that the SUNY schools have done a really bad job of handling the pandemic outside of testing everyone each week now. The SUNY chancellor is using his power of being close to the New York governor for gain in order to make the SUNY schools look better than they actually are doing.

"They're now opening sports and intramurals to students on top of more in-person classes, and all it is doing is allowing for a better chance of further spread of the virus.

"I think [James] Malatras being the chancellor of the SUNY schools as well as playing a major role on the governor's COVID-19 board gives way too much power to him to make this work so they can try to maximize profit. They are just hurting way too many people with the virus."

He concluded, "I seriously think this is all a big business ploy in order to make the [businesses] of the country better. I strongly feel that nothing will be done with public education during my lifetime. They don't care about the normal people of the country."

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