

# More reports highlight undercounting of Florida COVID-19 deaths

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Last month, an investigative report released by the *American Journal of Public Health* (AJPH) found that Florida is dramatically undercounting the number of people who are dying from COVID-19, by thousands of cases. Florida has been one of the leading epicenters for the spread of the virus in the US, with well over 2 million infections and more than 33,000 deaths.

The analysis released by AJPH was aimed at ascertaining the number of excess deaths occurring in Florida since the COVID-19 pandemic struck the state in March 2020. This meant assessing those deaths exceeding historical or previous trends after accounting for COVID-19 deaths, with special emphasis placed on forecasting monthly deaths from January to September of 2020 if the pandemic had not occurred. A comparison was then conducted with monthly recorded total deaths during the pandemic and deaths only from the virus.

Results from the research suggested that Florida saw 19,241 additional people die between March and September of 2020, a staggering 15.5 percent increase in deaths for the seven-month interval. Of the excess death totals, 14,317 of them had been COVID-19 deaths not logged into the state's official coronavirus tracker and 4,924 other deaths, excluding COVID-19. The study concluded that the impact of COVID-19 on mortality is significantly greater than the official COVID-19 data suggests.

AJPH's findings add further insight into the far-reaching and deadly impact the pandemic has had on the state while adding damning evidence discrediting claims made by Republican Governor Ron DeSantis and Florida Department of Health officials that the official numbers on COVID-19 deaths paint an accurate picture.

In recent weeks, DeSantis and state officials have seized on the declining rate of infections to celebrate the government's handling of the pandemic, even though Florida stubbornly remains the third-highest state for total

COVID-19 cases, behind only California and Texas. Data drawn from the AJPH report underscores the falsity of claims that Florida has contained the pandemic and the state government has succeeded in reducing mortality. Furthermore, official state data has been exploited to pursue politically motivated and homicidal policies, such as the complete lifting of lockdown measures and the back-to-school campaign to resume in-person learning.

Florida's state officials have been some of the most enthusiastic proponents for these policies while showing utter indifference to the health and safety of the population. Public health scientists have noted one of the main contributors to the undercounting of deaths nationwide was the severe lack of testing and contact tracing in the early months of 2020, a result of the deliberate suppression of information on the part of the government and corporate media.

The negligence of state officials in the early months was exemplified in Florida, with DeSantis avidly following the line dictated by Trump that the virus was not spreading uncontrollably throughout the country despite reports proving that government officials had been briefed on the impending danger.

Hospital patients in Florida reported symptoms of the virus as early as January 1, just days before the World Health Organization began releasing its first major investigative reports on SARS-CoV-2. Florida did not announce its first two presumed coronavirus cases until March 1, well after COVID-19 reached community transmission.

When case and death numbers began soaring in New York and other northeast states in the spring, DeSantis and other state officials were indulging in self-congratulatory praise over Florida's relatively low numbers. DeSantis labeled the virus a "significant health threat" in January, but consistently downplayed the likelihood of it spreading in Florida before the state's first

cases were confirmed in March.

The governor then moved to institute a few meager travel restrictions to reduce transmission, including banning visitors from nursing homes and imposing quarantines on travelers from New York. These measures, however, did little to nothing to halt community spread as DeSantis refused to issue a statewide shutdown order for weeks, leading to more cities and counties to issue their own lockdowns.

The Florida government was eventually forced to inaugurate its own state-mandated, 30-day lockdown and expand testing at the beginning of April, as cases began to burgeon nationwide and workers demanded that action be taken to save lives from the pandemic. Since that time, corporations, capitalist politicians and the major news media have pushed for the reopening of the economy in defiance of scientific and public health guidelines warning that the virus was not yet contained fully enough to end restrictions.

Florida officials were among the first to lift shutdowns in the months of May and June, in a feverish campaign to end all previous public health measures starting with the premature reopening of restaurants and retail stores throughout the state.

Since then, DeSantis has viciously opposed any new shutdowns or restrictions, even as Florida saw a massive surge in cases in June and July. At the beginning of Florida's summer wave, new daily cases were hovering around the tens of thousands, topping at 15,000 on July 12.

The indifference to the lives of the population has been epitomized in the wholly inadequate approach Florida officials have taken towards testing and contact tracing, which has been overseen by Democratic Party-controlled counties and mayors as well as Republican-dominated ones. By late April, there were only 500 contact tracers for the entire state, far short of what medical experts said Florida needed to effectively contain the disease.

A report from the National Association of County and City Health officials released in spring of last year said states should have had at least 30 tracers per 100,000 people, or an estimated 6,500 tracers in the case of Florida. The state, however, only maintained 2.3 per 100,000 at its highest point in May, with the FDH deputy secretary of health admitting in April that the state had no plans to hire more.

The undercounting of infections and deaths led Florida data scientist Rebekah Jones to set up an independent COVID dashboard tracker and release information on

social media documenting the virus' spread in schools, which was found to be more than 83,000 cases across all districts. Her efforts have ended up giving a more comprehensive and detailed examination of community transmission in the state than the official state dashboard. Jones was the leading scientist in the FDH in charge of tracking the state's official COVID-19 database before she was fired last May for refusing to manipulate the official figures.

Jones rose to prominence as a truth-telling whistleblower in the months following the exposure of her dismissal and her efforts to expose the lies being propagated by the political establishment to justify reopening. In December 2020, she was the victim of a fascistic police raid on her home in response to her work exposing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Florida schools. In January, a warrant was issued for her arrest, in an anti-democratic effort by the DeSantis administration to browbeat all opposition to his homicidal policies.

For workers and educators to defend their right to truthful information on the spread of the deadly virus and freedom of speech, they must wage a political struggle against the same social forces aiming to conceal this knowledge through illegal and undemocratic means, including violent repression at the hands of the police and state.

This struggle raises the necessity of shutting down schools and non-essential production to contain and ultimately eradicate the pandemic. The Socialist Equality Party calls on educators to build a statewide Florida Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to unite their struggles with educators across the US in a fight to prepare the ground for a political general strike against these policies.

*Visit [wsws.org/edsafety](https://wsws.org/edsafety) to sign up and find a committee near you.*



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