

Epidemiologist warns that the fourth COVID-19 surge is under way in United States

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4 April 2021

Leading US epidemiologist Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy in Minneapolis, gave a stark warning of a devastating new stage of the COVID-19 pandemic in interviews Sunday on two national television networks.

Dr. Osterholm explained the context and real dangers hinted at in the statement by Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, when she declared last Monday that she was afraid and felt a sense of “impending doom” about the pandemic.

On Sunday, speaking with host Chuck Todd on “Meet the Press,” Osterholm said, “At this time, we are in a category five hurricane status with regard to the rest of the world. At this point, we will see in the next two weeks the highest number of cases reported globally since the beginning of the pandemic ... I think it was a wake-up call to everyone yesterday when Michigan reported 8,400 new cases and we are now seeing increasing numbers of severe illnesses, ICU [cases] and hospitalizations in individuals who are between 30 and 50 years of age who have not been vaccinated.”

After discussing the concerns posed by the rise in more virulent and immune-evading variants, Osterholm explained, “Chuck, I’m even more worried what’s coming down the pike over the next several years. Right now, if you look at vaccine distribution around the world, ten countries have received about 80 percent of the vaccines. Thirty countries haven’t seen even a drop of it. If we continue to see this virus spread across low- and middle-income countries unfettered, they are going to spit out variants over the course of the next years that can in every and each instance challenge our vaccines. This is why we need not only a US response, but we also need a global response to get as many people vaccinated.”

Globally, the number of cases of COVID-19 is approaching 132 million, and the number of deaths over 2.8 million. The seven-day average in daily cases and fatalities has climbed to 581,000 and more than 10,000, respectively. With 40 million total cases, Europe sees more than 3,000 deaths per day with the total number of fatalities approaching one million. Poland, Turkey, and Ukraine face severe struggles as they are in the worst phase of their surges. India’s COVID-19 cases are rapidly accelerating and will exceed 100,000 new cases per day this week, the country’s highest total during the pandemic. Brazil appears to have reached its peak with 3,000 deaths per day.

Meanwhile, the US seven-day average has been slowly rising, with over 66,000 new cases per day. Cases in the upper Midwest and Northeast have public health officials worried. Speaking on Fox News, Osterholm was blunt in dismissing the actions of state and federal governments in relaxing restrictions and reopening schools, particularly in light of the spread of new variants like B.1.1.7.

“We are the only country in the world right now experiencing this increasing number of cases due to this variant and at the same time, opening up, not closing down,” he told host Chris Wallace, who seemed taken aback by the forthright warning. “The two basically are going to collide, and we are going to see a substantially increased number of cases.”

Osterholm continued, “I understand the absolute resistance in this country even to consider that and you know—it’s kind of like trying to drink barbed wire—but the bottom-line message of the virus is it’s going to do what it’s going to do, and we are going to have to respond somehow.” He added that this might involve pulling “back on some of the restrictions that we’ve loosened up on.”

This resistance derives primarily from the drive by the US ruling elite, backed by both capitalist parties and the corporate media, to force children back to school and their parents back to work, in order to produce profits for the capitalist class.

Osterholm, who served as a member of President Biden's COVID-19 transition advisory board, has been phased out since his blunt warning in January that the drop in coronavirus cases was "the eye of the hurricane" and not genuine progress. This warning is now being tragically confirmed.

The epidemiologist focused much of his discussion on the danger that B.1.1.7 was more dangerous to children than the initial form of the virus. "They are now, as kids, getting infected at the same rate that adults do," he explained. "They're very effective at transmitting the virus. Just in Minnesota in the last two weeks we've had 749 schools with cases," he said.

According to the *Washington Post's* vaccination tracker, approximately 106 million people have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, accounting for just 32 percent of the population. Seventeen percent have been fully vaccinated. By comparison, Europe has barely vaccinated ten percent of its people.

The steep rise in cases in the Midwest and Northeast is predominately being driven by COVID-19 cases in children, which has been driven by the rabid school reopening campaign.

According to the Michigan Department of Health and Humans Services, cases among younger children have increased by 230 percent since February 19. Minnesota's state epidemiologist Dr. Ruth Lynfield confirmed that the B.1.1.7 had a higher attack rate among children compared to earlier versions. "We certainly get the sense that the youth is what we might refer to as the leading edge of the spread of the variants," she said.

The Massachusetts health department reported that the most significant number of new COVID-19 infections in the last two weeks were among children and teens. Concerns are also being raised that the infections with the B.1.1.7 variant lead to a higher burden of illness among children.

There are now 12,505 cases of B.1.1.7 variants detected across all US states and territories (this refers only to cases identified through genetic testing, which accounts for only a tiny fraction of total cases). The CDC now estimates that the B.1.1.7 version of the coronavirus is the predominant strain across areas representing two-thirds of the US populace.

Bloomberg stated on Friday, "The CDC identified five of 10 regions Friday, saying they include much of the Eastern seaboard, from New York south to Florida, as well as the Midwest and most of the sunbelt. About 220 million people, or two-thirds of the US population, live in those five regions." This makes up 26 percent of cases nationally. Additionally, it should also be noted that 353 cases of the B.1.351 variant first seen in South Africa have been detected across 31 states, while the P.1 variant first seen in Brazil has rapidly spread across 22 states with 224 cases detected.

Throughout the month of March, Osterholm was warning that the American people "are walking into the mouth of this virus monster as if somehow, we don't know it's here, and it is here." This is an apt description of an historic crime, one being committed against the American people by the US ruling class and its political servants.

The coronavirus is an existential threat that brings with its dire consequences to the working class. It is critical to appreciate that the emergence of the new variants is not merely the escalation of the present pandemic but the rise of a new pandemic with the more dangerous characteristics.

The ruling elites have repeatedly shown that their concerns for profits determine their response to the pandemic. They care nothing for the life of working people.

It is critical that working people assimilate the lessons and experiences gained over the last year and recognize that they are the only force capable of bringing this pandemic to an end, by casting off the shackles of the capitalist mode of production, which is ultimately the cause of this present pandemic. This means the building of an independent movement of the working class for socialism.



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