

US “excess deaths” in 2020 surpassed the toll during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic

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According to a report published Friday by the *New York Times*, in 2020 the United States suffered the biggest single-year surge in its death rate since the federal government began publishing statistics, significantly surpassing the rise in the death rate during the 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic.

The *Times* conducted its own analysis of annual US death rates going back a century and found that the rate jump from 2019 to 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, was 16 percent, as compared to the 12 percent surge in the US during the global pandemic that occurred over a century ago. The total number of COVID-19 deaths in the US is already approaching 600,000, on track to surpass the 675,000 estimated to have been killed in the US during the 1918 pandemic.

By the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluations modeling projections, the COVID-19 death toll is expected to surpass 600,000 before June, reaching 620,000 by August under a best-case scenario.

The *Times* report aligns with an analysis of mortality data conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which found that from March 2020 until February 20, 2021, there were 574,000 more Americans who died than would be expected in a typical year. This places the deaths nationwide at 21 percent higher than what has usually been observed.

A *JAMA* report published online on April 2, 2021, authored by Dr. Steven H. Wool and colleagues from Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine, corroborated these findings in their analysis. They found that between March 1, 2020 and January 2, 2021, there were 522,368 excess deaths, accounting for a 22.9 percent increase in all-cause mortality.

At the time, there had been 378,039 confirmed COVID-19 deaths. As they explained, “Excess deaths

not attributed to COVID-19 could reflect either immediate or delayed mortality from undocumented COVID-19 infections, or non-COVID-19 deaths secondary to the pandemic, such as from delayed care or behavioral health crises.”

Adjustments must be made for the differences in population size of the United States in 1918 compared to 2020. Additionally, as health care and public health measures have improved, the population’s lifespan has risen. As a result, the per capita death rates for the two periods are substantially different, which adds complexity to these comparisons. Nevertheless, the 16 percent increase in the death rate in 2020 from preceding year, compared to the 12 percent jump during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, is staggering.

Overall, 10 percent of the 3.4 million deaths in the United States were attributed to COVID-19, making it the third leading cause of death in 2020 after heart disease with 21 percent and cancer with 18 percent.

Comparing these two pandemics highlights that the COVID-19 infection is not merely another flu. It is a dangerous pathogen that has repeatedly demonstrated a tremendous ability to wreak havoc on the population’s life, and needs to be treated with the utmost seriousness and caution. Maliciously criminal has been the repeated dismissal of this reality by the political establishment and the ruling elite in their prosecution of the policy of “herd immunity,” which has enriched them in unimagined proportions while allowing the virus to run rampant and mutate into more virulent forms.

In light of advances in our understanding of the biology of these infectious organisms, including the medical advances in the treatment of COVID-19 infections that have saved hundreds of thousands of lives, to have allowed so many to become infected and perish is a historic crime. It is the result of capitalism’s

remorseless drive to extract profits and further enrich a layer of oligarchs who number in the tens of thousands on a planet with 7.8 billion people. That the COVID-19 pandemic can even be compared to the Spanish Flu that occurred one hundred years ago speaks to the abject failure of the current political process to govern or protect the population of almost every wealthy nation.

In the US, current infection rates are approximately 64,000 per day, while the average daily death toll has settled in at just over 700. Yet the Biden administration is celebrating these developments as the success story of their vaccination campaign. Meanwhile, one state governor after another is biting at the bit to relax restrictions and fully open their economies.

As of April 23, 135.8 million people had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, accounting for 40.9 percent of the population, while 89.2 million people, representing 26.9 percent of the people, have now been fully vaccinated. According to the *Washington Post* vaccination tracker, a total of 282.2 million COVID-19 vaccines have been distributed to the states.

Despite this achievement, the recent trends in immunization indicate that moving forward, the situation will grow considerably more challenging for the Biden administration. Last week saw an average of only 2.95 million doses per day, a decline of 12 percent. Scientists have estimated that upwards of 70 to 90 percent of the population will need to be inoculated if meaningful herd immunity is to be achieved.

Amid news of the sudden slowdown in vaccination rates, President Biden took to the media on Wednesday to proclaim that the US would reach the milestone of 200 million jabs this week, exceeding the target set for the end of April. He then made his pitch to the nation, stating, “I’m calling on every employer large and small in every state to give employees the time off they need, with pay, to get vaccinated. No working American should lose a single dollar from their paycheck because they chose to fulfill their patriotic duty of getting vaccinated.”

The vaccines are critical to the defeat of the pandemic, but the cynical attempt by the government to use this necessary and life-saving tool to justify the reopening of unsafe factories and offices as well as schools while the pandemic continues to rage only helps the far-right promote vaccine skepticism among

sections of the middle class and working class.

A recent report in *US News & World Report* noted that “states that are having a difficult time disbursing to school districts hundreds of billions of dollars in federal aid from the most recent coronavirus relief package are running up against a Friday deadline to explain to the Education Department why that’s the case.”

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, seeking to speed up the reopening of the schools, said, “Every child deserves an opportunity to hear their name being spoken in the classroom this year. As our nation heals and recovers from the pandemic, our decisions and actions will impact generations of learners. Our inaction will too.”

Meanwhile, Michigan’s recent surge of COVID-19 cases was preceded by hundreds of school outbreaks throughout the state. Michigan has seen a record-breaking number of children hospitalized with severe infections. Michigan Health & Hospital Association data shows that the number of children hospitalized statewide has reached 70, double the number seen during the worst of the wave that swept through in November.

The push by Democrats no less than Republicans to lift whatever COVID-19-related restrictions remain, especially among the vaccinated, has the potential to fuel more contagious strains of the coronavirus. In 1918, public health officials understood little of the virus that plagued their communities, relying on basic measures to control the death and mayhem it created. The blame for the disaster during the current pandemic lies entirely with the bourgeoisie.



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