

US sees a rise in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations as the Delta variant becomes the dominant strain

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8 July 2021

“Vaccine nationalism, where a handful of nations have taken the lion’s share, is morally indefensible.”
Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, World Health Organization

The Director-General’s comments this week, without naming names, are directed against the deleterious response of the US, along with other wealthy nations, to the current iteration of the pandemic. No other country has so emphasized vaccine nationalism in its response to the pandemic, at the detriment of the rest of the poorer nations facing their catastrophes with the coronavirus.

Nonetheless, as the Delta variant dominates all previous versions across the US, in conjunction with a vaccination campaign that has slowed to a crawl, the US itself is in a precarious position despite Biden’s professed optimism.

“Today we’re closer than ever to declaring our independence from a deadly virus ... we can live our lives, our kids can go back to school, our economy is roaring back,” President Joe Biden brazenly remarked during the Independence Day celebration on the South Lawn of the White House, which ushered in the complete abandonment of all public health measures to stem the rising tide of COVID-19 infections. [emphasis added]

Meanwhile, the seven-day average of vaccinations has tapered off below 733,000 jabs a day. Yesterday, only 437,117 doses of the COVID-19 vaccines were administered. Only 47.6 percent of the population has been fully vaccinated.

Across the country, there are trends showing a rise in new cases. According to *The New York Times* tracker, the two-week change has seen a 35 percent rise to an

average of 15,259 daily COVID-19 cases. These dire statistics are compounded by the report released this week by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that the highly contagious variant is now dominant in the United States, accounting for 51.7 percent of all cases that were genetically sequenced, up from 30 percent just two weeks ago.

Despite these worrisome trends, White House press secretary Jen Psaki remarked that the administration would not impose new national mitigation measures, nor has the CDC changed its guidelines.

While Biden and his more than 1,000 guests were rejoicing over the return to normalcy, staff at Mercy hospital in Springfield, Missouri announced on July 4 that they had run out of ventilators for their patients. The chief administrative officer at the hospital, Erik Frederick, tweeted that his employees “spent the night looking for ventilators because we ran out.”

Of the 47 patients on the ventilators, “a lot of those” were due to COVID-19 infections. With a second COVID-19 ICU unit opened, there are calls for more respiratory therapists to relieve those working grueling long shifts caring for extremely ill patients.

Considering the rapid spread of the Delta strain, Mercy’s network of hospitals across Missouri has mandated all employees will be required to be vaccinated by the end of September. The seven-day average of cases has now climbed above 1,000 infections per day after lows of 400 per day in the first week of June, a 150 percent increase.

The state was leading the US in the grim category of new coronavirus cases per capita (17.1 per 100,000) in the last week. Yesterday, they reported over 1,660 COVID-19 cases. The Delta variant caused 96 percent

of all recent cases. Meanwhile, Missouri ranks 43rd nationwide on vaccinations, with barely 40 percent fully inoculated. The seven-day positivity rate on COVID-19 testing has exceeded ten percent. Neighboring Arkansas now has the highest per capita rate at 18 per 100,000.

The current surge in cases is attributed to recent clusters of unvaccinated people, mainly across Southern states with low vaccination rates. An analysis conducted by researchers at Georgetown University identified 30 clusters of counties, of which five of the most significant stretch across the Southeast and lower portions of the Midwest, spreading from Georgia to Texas, throughout Missouri, and parts of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Tennessee.

CNN's medical analyst, Dr. Jonathan Reiner, explained that the current vaccines had prevented serious illnesses and hospitalization though data recently published has public health authorities concerned about the Delta variant's ability to evade the immune system. Reiner added, "We've been lucky with the variants so far that they've been relatively susceptible to our vaccine, but the more you roll the dice, the more opportunities there will be for a resistant variant." These growing clusters are ideal for such developments.

Though across many states the actual number of cases remains small compared to previous surges, the 14-day rate of change is alarming. South Carolina has seen a 135 percent increase. Kansas is running at a 120 percent rise in numbers. Nebraska, Louisiana, and Tennessee are all over 100 percent. Arkansas is at 94 percent, and Mississippi, with the lowest vaccination rate in the nation, has seen the 14-day rate of cases rise at 86 percent. In fact, 32 states are seeing their COVID-19 infections climb, including highly vaccinated states like California, New York, and Illinois. Even hospitalizations have turned upwards again.

Nevada, where almost 40 percent of the state's adult population remains unvaccinated, has the third-highest per capita rate of infections at 14 per 100,000. However, it has seen the sharpest rise in hospitalizations, more than 60 percent compared to two weeks ago. There are currently more than 440 COVID-19 patients admitted to hospitals in the state. Dr. Fermin Leguen, the district health officer in Clark

County (Las Vegas), reported that 95 percent of all patients hospitalized in the last three months had not taken a vaccine.

On "Meet the Press" on Sunday, Dr. Anthony Fauci, White House chief medical adviser, told host Chuck Todd, "In some places, some states, some cities, some areas, where the level of vaccination is low, and the level of virus dissemination is high, that's where you're going to see the spikes." He had earlier noted that the inconsistency in vaccination rates across the country would see "two Americas."

Dr. Mike Ryan of the WHO said it most bluntly: "The Delta variant, which is faster, it is fitter [and] will pick off the more vulnerable more efficiently than previous variants." It should be added, as real-life experience with the Delta strain and the COVID-19 vaccines have grown, even fully vaccinated individuals carry a higher risk of breakthrough infections and becoming unknowing vectors of the coronavirus, further fueling the surges that are being predicted.

The US should only look to the UK to see what happens when the Delta variant becomes totally dominant. The average daily COVID-19 hospital admissions have increased by 47 percent in the last week. Even with more fully vaccinated people than in the US, these statistics should send shudders through state and federal officials. The UK has yet to end mandates for masks and social distancing, which will end on July 19. As the newly installed Health Secretary Sajid Javid told BBC Radio 4's Today program, daily new cases could reach as high as 100,000 by August.

As Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding had remarked in one of his tweets, the US is only a month behind the UK. This means that when the Delta variant completely dominates all regions of the country, school children, numbering 50 million under 12 who are unvaccinated, will re-enter fully occupied classrooms for in-person instruction.



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