

An early winter storm of COVID-19 hits Michigan

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Michigan is confronting perhaps the worst and most prolonged surge of COVID-19 infections since the beginning of the pandemic. The eighth-largest US state has become the epicenter of the pandemic in America, with the highest per capita infections and hospitalizations, and a death rate that is approaching the worst figures of last winter's spike.

Admissions into Michigan hospitals for COVID-19 have jumped almost 50 percent in the last two weeks, having reached 3,724 as of November 21, 2021, which is 15 percent shy of the numbers of the late April 2021 peaks. Dozens of hospitals are at or near 100 percent occupancy in their ICUs. This is compounded by the growing shortage of qualified staff and an influx of people who are seeking medical attention for issues unrelated to COVID-19 and have delayed treatment too long.

Michigan is only the canary in the coal mine for the United States as a whole. The US has endured five previous deadly waves of infection which have taken nearly 800,000 lives and infected 48.6 million people. Both figures are the worst in the world, in a country with the greatest material wealth and the most technically advanced health care capabilities. A sixth wave is now gathering force, under conditions where more Americans have already died this year than in all of 2020.

Yesterday, there were more than 120,000 COVID-19 cases and the seven-day moving average of cases has surpassed 90,000, a 29 percent rise from two weeks ago. COVID-19 hospitalizations have risen above 50,000. Deaths continue to decline but remain high at more than 1,100 each day. This is a lagging indicator, reflecting the lows of October. The surge in infections and hospitalizations will inevitably produce another surge in deaths as well.

It is hard to adequately describe the conditions in health systems flooded with patients who are coming in gasping for breath and begging for help. The staff in emergency departments and the ICUs have become inundated and paralyzed by the demands to tend to each person while all need immediate attention.

Dr. Darryl Elmouchi, the president of Spectrum Health West Michigan, told the *New York Times*, "We're all scared to death because this is now so hard to predict what will happen. We're preparing for the worst." With 14 hospitals in the state, he explained they were seeing more patients than at any point during the pandemic. Resources are being stretched and ICU capacity is being increased to accommodate the sick who are predominately unvaccinated.

These repeated waves are also taking a terrible toll on health care staff. Shortages mean that they are being asked to take on extra shifts indefinitely, which has a significant impact on their morale and attitudes. As one nurse from Kalamazoo, Michigan, noted, "I've seen more death in the last 18 months than my [entire] 18 years in nursing." Another explained, "People feel like they're in a rut when they're in the same unit and seeing the same death after death after death. It just gets overwhelming."

Combining staff shortages with high patient volume is a recipe for even worse disasters. Centers for Infectious Disease Research and Policy (CIDRAP) in their weekly COVID updates wrote, "A modeling study today in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* estimates that 12,000 more people die two weeks after US hospitals reach 75 percent adult intensive care unit (ICU) occupancy amid COVID-19 pandemic surges, a figure that rises to 80,000 when ICUs are full—which is the case now in many hospitals in multiple US states." The impact of the strain on health care and a rise in excess deaths were felt even six weeks after the surges.

The authors of the study wrote, "During 2020, the impact of these effects [emergency room crowding, high ICU occupancy, and ambulance diversion], which included potentially avoidable excess deaths, fell more heavily on working-aged adults from marginalized communities who experience poor access to health care outside pandemic conditions."

These study findings are not surprising. They are a byproduct of decades of underfunding of health care systems built on a for-profit basis. This includes emergency medical

services. Angela Madden, executive director of the Michigan Association of Ambulance Services, warned, “We have come to a boiling point.”

Christopher Watts, a paramedic from St. Clair, told the *Detroit Free Press* that the staffing crisis among paramedics is so dire that he expects soon a situation would develop where people call 911, but either help would arrive too late or not at all. Emergency medical services (EMS) is a safety net for millions, particularly those who lack regular access to the health care system.

“We do more calls now than ever before and doesn’t matter how many days a week I work, there’s always an open shift and never enough people to pull the calls or cover the schedule,” he told the newspaper. Watts said he had worked over 130 hours over the last two weeks. There are roughly 1,000 open positions at EMS companies statewide, according to the *Free Press*.

The arc of the pandemic in Michigan is quite dramatic, and ominous. On July 8, 2021, the seven-day average of new cases in the state hit a low of only 97 daily COVID infections. No one died on that day and average weekly rate of COVID deaths had reached the astounding figure of only three. Some officials even suggested they were on the verge of eliminating COVID.

However, due in large part to lifting all mitigation measures and opening schools in the face of the highly virulent Delta strain, over the course of the rest of the summer and into the autumn season, COVID cases steadily climbed to around 4,000 daily infections, a forty-fold increase by the end of October.

The duration of the upswing is unprecedented. As Laura Appel, senior vice president with the Michigan Health and Hospital Association, noted, “Our previous surges generally went from trough to peak in about two months. In this current surge, we have been moving from the previous trough since about July 1 and we are still headed upwards.”

In November, cases catapulted, inundating the state’s health care infrastructure. The seven-day average in cases jumped to 8,780, or a rate twice that just three weeks prior and the highest recorded since the beginning of the COVID pandemic. The reported death toll has also climbed to over 70 fatalities per day matching the peak of the horrific winter–spring surge. In short, Michigan has assumed its current status as the epicenter of the pandemic in the US.

Colder weather plays a definite role, since it forces people indoors where they will be in closer contact with others who may spread the infection, and where ventilation is frequently poor or nonexistent. Added to this is the looming threat of a severe flu season that will bring to bear further pressure on health systems. December through March are periods for peak flu activity and will coincide with the peaks of

COVID-19 cases in all the northern states.

Infections among children have fueled the current surge across Michigan. According to the state government webpage, there were 236 new outbreaks last week, with 140 occurring in K-12 schools, and 726 ongoing outbreaks, of which K-12 account for 470.

In a gesture to the concerns raised by the students and teachers protesting at Martin Luther King High School on November 17, Detroit public schools in the city have now shifted to remote learning on Fridays starting in December. This is completely useless in fighting the pandemic and was done primarily for show. Renaissance High School has opted to keep classrooms empty for the next ten days to conduct deep cleaning.

While there is mounting concern among working people and young people over the gathering force of the pandemic, the state’s Democratic governor, Gretchen Whitmer, has virtually disappeared from view.

In the course of 2020, Whitmer was one of the more prominent officials claiming to take the pandemic seriously in contrast to the Trump administration. She was targeted for denunciation by Trump, and for kidnapping and assassination by a group of fascists who were arrested by the FBI and Michigan state police on the eve of launching the attack.

In the course of 2021, Whitmer dropped any statewide mandates, ended all restrictions on schools and business activity and abandoned any pretense of leading the fight against COVID-19. She announced that all decisions on masking and in-person instruction would be made by counties or school boards, which have themselves become the targets of violent right-wing protests. Her top two health officials left the administration in evident disagreement with this pullback.

In the current surge, there have been no daily press briefings and no emergency actions, only half-hearted appeals to wear masks indoors and to get vaccinated, while any suggestion of a renewed shutdown of schools or workplaces has been rejected out of hand.

This typifies the posture of the Democratic Party, from the Biden White House on down, which demands that the American people “live with the virus,” in other words, accept that COVID-19 will become an endemic, open-ended infection to be fought only with vaccination, a course of action that insures death on a mass scale continues.



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