The Omicron COVID-19 variant and the reckless endangerment of children

Evan Blake
6 December 2021

The highly transmissible Omicron variant of COVID-19 has now spread to 49 countries throughout the world, with many already experiencing community spread of the new variant. In the United Kingdom, which combines high rates of DNA sequencing with the "herd immunity" strategy of letting the virus rip throughout society, there are now 246 detected cases of the Omicron variant, a 54 percent increase in one day.

The situation is increasingly dire in South Africa, where daily new infections and hospitalizations have surged far faster than any previous wave. The seven-day moving average of daily new cases is now 10,628, while the test positivity rate stands at 26.4 percent, indicating that the real number of daily new cases is likely far higher than the official figure.

Hospitalizations and deaths are a lagging indicator, but the number of new admissions to hospitals and intensive care units increased by just under 10 percent over the weekend, and another nine South Africans succumbed to the virus over the weekend.

One of the most concerning initial trends of the Omicron surge in South Africa is the disproportionate impact of the virus on infants and toddlers under the age of five. At a press conference Friday, Dr. Waasila Jassat of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) stated, "We've seen quite a sharp increase [in hospital admissions] across all age groups but particularly in the under 5s." She added, "The incidence in those under 5 is now second highest, second only to those over 60."

In the city of Tshwane, over 100 children less than five years old were admitted to hospitals with COVID-19 between November 14-27, far more than any previous wave of the pandemic. The NICD noted Friday that children under the age of two accounted for roughly 10 percent of the total hospital admissions in Tshwane.

In an interview with SABC News, Professor Rudo Mathivha at the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg commented, "If we were to get children, toddlers, coming in great numbers, with significant severity of disease, this is going to be a major problem for us. Our hospitals were not built to house a lot of children, because naturally children do not get that sick in multitude. We will not be able to accommodate them."

Experts have commented that infants and toddlers are most susceptible because they are not yet eligible for the vaccine, and there is also concern that the heavily mutated virus could affect children differently than previous variants. Already, the Delta variant has caused greater harm to children in the US and internationally, with thousands killed globally.

The growing spread of the Omicron variant takes place under conditions in which the Delta variant is fueling the sixth global surge of the pandemic, with Europe and North America the present epicenters. In response to this catastrophic surge, in which an average of roughly 600,000 people are officially infected and 7,000 people are dying from COVID-19 each day, capitalist governments adamantly refuse to close schools in order to protect children, their parents and communities.

In the United Kingdom, an average of over 45,000 people are now officially infected with COVID-19 each day. While the Omicron variant spreads rapidly and schools are forced to remain open, the Johnson administration is targeting British parent and anti-COVID activist Lisa Diaz with legal actions to try to quell the growing opposition among parents to the sacrifice of their children.

In Germany, an average of more than 55,000 people are officially infected each day. The incidence rate among children aged 5-14 has been above 1,000 per 100,000 people for over a week, the highest of any age group. Over the past month, there have officially been more than 1,540 school outbreaks throughout the country. In response to this crisis, no officials have supported the growing calls for school closures among parents, students and educators.

In France, daily new cases have more than quadrupled in the past month, reaching a current average of more than 40,000. The highest increase is taking place among children aged 6-10, driven primarily by outbreaks in schools. In response, officials are further lifting restrictions and limiting the ability of schools to close in the event of an outbreak.

In the United States, 18 states have detected the Omicron variant while an average of nearly 110,000 people are infected with COVID-19 each day. The entire fall semester has seen a sustained mass infection of children. According to this week's report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), which is highly limited due to efforts by state governments to cover up

© World Socialist Web Site

COVID-19 data on children, another 133,022 children were officially infected with COVID-19 across the US last week, the 17th straight week of over 100,000 infections.

The report notes that eight more children died from COVID-19 last week, bringing their total count to 651. However, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that 974 children under 18 years old have succumbed to the virus, including an extraordinary 306 children under the age of five.

Despite the deepening catastrophe of infections, hospitalizations and deaths among children, which Omicron threatens to intensify even further, the entire political establishment, corporate media and the teachers unions insist that schools must stay open.

At a press conference Thursday on the Omicron variant, US President Joe Biden outlined a new "Test to Stay" program, whereby whenever a student tests positive for COVID-19, his or her peers will no longer be sent home to safely quarantine. Instead, they will continue learning in-person if they test negative.

This program, designed to keep kids at school so their parents can stay at work producing profits, was immediately endorsed by American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten. On a day when nearly 20,000 children in the US were officially infected with COVID-19, she cynically wrote, "Testing and tracing has always been our best way of getting an accurate picture of our public health landscape during this pandemic."

The position of Weingarten, along with the Biden administration, ever more closely resembles that of the "herd immunity" advocates on the far right. In September, Weingarten chaired an AFT town hall at which Great Barrington Declaration (GBD) author Jay Bhattacharya was the featured "scientist."

The central tenet of the GBD is the pseudoscientific notion that children should actively be infected with COVID-19 to serve as a "human shield" protecting their elders. In reality, this criminal policy has led to the deaths of nearly 1,000 US children and the potential long-term debilitation of millions, with the still incompletely understood effects of "Long COVID." Before the ongoing Delta surge, more than 140,000 children had already lost a parent or grandparent caregiver to COVID-19, a figure that has likely now surpassed 200,000.

The role of the corporate media is equally criminal. In almost all the print and broadcast news, there is a concerted effort to disarm the population and prematurely declare the Omicron variant "milder" than previous variants of the virus. While the precise virulence and lethality of this latest Frankenstein monster will be determined in time, the rapid surge of hospitalizations and warnings from scientists on the ground in South Africa indicate that Omicron will likely be just as severe as previous variants, if not more so due to its higher transmissibility.

Instead of warning about these possible dangers and advancing the precautionary principle at the heart of public health, the *New York Times* is opposing lockdowns and ramping up its denunciations of China. In an article Monday, the *Times* decries China's "unrelenting march toward herd immunity, the point at which enough people are immune to the virus that it cannot spread through the population." They denounce China for being "the world's last zero-Covid holdout" and absurdly present as "authoritarian" the country's efforts to inoculate children aged 3-11, even as New York City announced the same day a vaccine mandate for private companies.

The truth is that tens of millions of parents were coerced to send their children back into unsafe schools across the US and every advanced capitalist country, with no remote option provided for the vast majority of working and middle class families. A criminal policy aimed at deliberately infecting masses of youth and their families has killed millions worldwide, with young people now increasingly threatened by the Omicron variant, all of which the *Times* has continuously supported.

These ongoing crimes will be comprehensively exposed by the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, which has been initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site* and will involve workers in every industry bringing forward their experiences during the pandemic.

The Inquest will entail a dynamic analysis of the crimes that have been committed and those continuing each day. It will be intimately connected to the fight for the global elimination and eradication of COVID-19, which is the only way to stop new and more dangerous variants from evolving.

The emergency measures taken at the start of the pandemic in China and other Asia-Pacific countries must be advanced by the international working class today in order to stop the spread of the Delta and Omicron variants and save millions of lives. These include the temporary closure of schools and nonessential workplaces with full income protection for affected workers, combined with comprehensive testing, contact tracing, the isolation of infected patients, mask wearing and more.

Workers in every industry and country must fight to implement this program by building rank-and-file committees, independent of the corporatist unions and capitalist political parties. Only the global elimination of COVID-19 will protect children and all of society from further needless infections and deaths.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site