

COVID-19 infections in South Korea hit record high following implementation of “with COVID” policy

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The number of new COVID-19 infections continues to rise in South Korea, with the number of critically ill patients as well as deaths reaching new highs. In total throughout the pandemic, more than half a million people have been infected and close to 5,000 have died.

Since Seoul initiated its so-called “with COVID” era on November 1, approximately 2,000 people have died, or 41 percent of total deaths during the entire pandemic.

Thousands of new COVID cases are being reported on a daily basis, including a record number of 7,850 infections on December 15. On Wednesday, the number of patients in critical condition hit a record high of 1,063, topping the previous high on Sunday of 1,025. In addition to the skyrocketing infection and death rates, three children under the age of 10 have died from COVID, all within the past month.

The hospital system is being overwhelmed. Across the country, nearly 80 percent of intensive care unit (ICU) beds are occupied. In the Seoul metropolitan area, ICU capacity is over 85 percent full. ICU beds in other cities and provinces are fully occupied.

President Moon Jae-in’s government enacted new social distancing measures on Saturday, supposedly designed to stop the spread of COVID-19, while appearing to backtrack from its “with COVID” scheme. The new measures are toothless and intended to limit the impact on big business as much as possible. They restrict public gatherings to four people and require businesses to close at 9 or 10 p.m., depending on the type.

Moon admitted his government had failed to properly prepare, saying through his spokeswoman Park Gyeong-mi last week: “I am sorry that we have had to once again strengthen antivirus measures. Over the course of

the phased return to normal, we failed to suppress the increase in critically ill patients and failed to prepare sufficiently, including in terms of securing hospital beds.”

The crisis is the predictable outcome of the Moon Jae-in administration’s agenda, under which the population was told that it must “live with the virus” and vaccines were sufficient for stopping COVID’s spread. None of this stood up to scientific scrutiny, as health experts have repeatedly warned that vaccines are just one aspect of many measures, including masks and social distancing, needed to stop COVID.

Schools also returned to a mixture of in-person and online classes on Monday following their full re-opening on November 22. However, the Education Ministry is actively discouraging schools from returning to full online classes despite the growing danger, falsely claiming that transmissions in schools are not high.

In elementary schools, all first and second grade students will continue to attend class in-person. All children in kindergarten and special education schools will also attend in person. In other words, the youngest children are being kept in school to ensure that their parents remain at work, pumping out profit for big business. For older students in elementary school, class sizes will be reduced to two-thirds normal size while the Education Ministry merely suggests a similar number for classes in middle and high schools. Schools where students are being vaccinated are being excluded from even these minimal measures.

These new restrictions do not apply to after-school academies. Dr. Lee Jae-gap of the Hallym University Medical Center pointed out the even greater danger in

these facilities. “Cram schools and study rooms are not as well-ventilated as schools. Students stay in the facilities for more than a couple of hours during exam seasons.”

Contrary to the claims of the Education Ministry, schools and after-school private study academies have emerged as the new hotbed for COVID transmissions. In fact, according to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA), the number of infections among those 18 and younger have surpassed those of adults over 19. The KDCA reported on December 16 that from the third week of November until the second week of December, children and adolescents accounted for 276.9 cases per 100,000 people, compared to 217.4 for adults. In addition, 16.1 percent of 31,174 COVID patients between 12 and 17 were hospitalized, including 14 who were in serious condition.

Vaccination rates among youth also remain low. At present, 69 percent of adolescents between 16 and 17 have received two vaccine doses while only 31.5 percent of those between 12 and 15 have received both doses. Children 11 and under are not yet eligible to receive the vaccine. Only those over 18 are currently eligible to receive a third dose.

While vaccines give some protection, it does not take into account the spread of the Omicron variant, of which nearly 200 cases have been identified in South Korea. Two vaccine doses have been found ineffective at stopping Omicron’s spread. Even with boosters, it is possible to contract the virus. The KDCA reported Sunday that four patients who had received their third shots had tested positive for the Omicron variant.

Despite their very limited character, the government’s measures are being criticized by the ruling establishment. The right-wing *Joongang Ilbo* denounced them as “draconian.” When it became clear that Seoul intended to implement new measures, the paper wrote in a December 14 piece: “Of course, it is difficult to return to the draconian distancing rules as in the past given the hardship and fatigue of the self-employed and the public.”

Despite such media agitation, there is widespread support for halting the spread of the virus. Mask wearing is widespread, without the right-wing and fascistic campaign against the practice that has been seen in other countries. A poll on Monday found that 71.3 percent of people support stronger social

distancing measures. The same poll found that only 49.6 percent of people approved of the government’s handling of the pandemic.



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