

A second coronavirus Christmas

Latest excess deaths estimate places worldwide toll of pandemic above 18 million

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For the second year in a row, the Christmas holiday is blighted by the continued onslaught of the coronavirus pandemic. Worldwide, there have been nearly 280 million recorded cases and just over 5.4 million officially confirmed deaths. And the real toll is far higher. Excess death projections from the *Economist* estimate that 18.4 million men, women and children have died in the past two years from COVID-19.

Accepting the higher figure, the coronavirus pandemic has been as deadly in two years as World War I was over four years. Moreover, the rate of death has increased: About twice as many people died from the virus in 2021 than in 2020. As World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus noted on Wednesday, there were more coronavirus deaths in 2021 “than from HIV, malaria and tuberculosis combined.”

Now, the emergence of the Omicron variant of the virus, first reported to the World Health Organization exactly one month ago, threatens to eclipse even these heart-stopping figures. The Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington predicts that there will be as many as 3 billion cases over the next three months. As the IHME noted, “that’s as many infections as we’ve seen in the entire pandemic so far.”

More starkly, such a spike in infections would cause a truly staggering number of deaths. If Omicron is even a fifth as lethal as Delta, the IHME figures imply 3 million additional deaths by the end of March. And contrary to the claim that Omicron is “mild” presented in the corporate media, there is ample evidence to suggest that this variant is about as deadly as its predecessors, in which case the tally of the dead would

skyrocket even higher.

The collapse of hospital systems under the impact of such a surge in cases would drive the death toll even higher. A September study in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* found that nearly 1 in 4 deaths during the first 10 months of the pandemic took place because hospitals were overwhelmed. An October paper from the *Journal of Hospital Medicine* found that mortality from other acute and chronic illnesses surged during times of high COVID-19 hospitalizations.

In the United States, where the IHME predicts 140 million new cases by April, there are already signs of such appalling conditions returning. Reports have emerged on Twitter, for example, that a major hospital system in Phoenix, Arizona, has enacted crisis standards of care. Patients 75 and older will reportedly have to meet certain criteria to be eligible for life-saving care, and those 85 and older will not be eligible at all for some treatments.

No doubt such policies will become more common in the near future. There are currently more than 70,000 patients hospitalized with COVID-19 in the US, the majority of those as a result of a fall surge of the Delta variant. The full impact of the Omicron variant, which was only detected in the US on December 1 and is now the cause of an estimated 73 percent of cases nationwide, has yet to be felt.

“If we wait for signals in increasing hospitalizations, we’re probably too late by a substantial amount,” said Marm Kilpatrick, an infectious disease researcher at University of California, Santa Cruz, to NPR. She continued, “I’m quite concerned” that hospitals across the country will be overwhelmed by the sheer number of cases.

New York City, the current epicenter of the pandemic in the US, is likely a precursor for the rest of the country. Hospitalizations have gone up 50 percent since the beginning of the month, while new cases have more than tripled from 7,000 a day to more than 22,000 a day, higher than even last winter's peak. Deaths have also begun to trend upward, from 38 a day to 59 a day.

Pediatric hospitalizations have risen particularly sharply in the state, doubling over the past week. The data tracks that of South Africa, which has made clear that children, who remain largely unvaccinated, are particularly susceptible to the new variant of COVID-19.

The situation continues to worsen elsewhere in the US. An outbreak in Florida has caused the state's 7-day average case count to jump from 2,700 to nearly 11,000 in just a week. In Illinois, daily average cases have risen to more than 11,500, just under the state record set last winter. Similarly in Ohio, daily cases have exceeded 10,000. New England states such as Rhode Island and Connecticut also have daily case counts at or exceeding their previous highs and, on a per capita basis, are facing a number of infections second only to New York.

Nationally, there is an average of more than 173,000 new cases each day and just under 1,300 deaths. The test positivity rate has also begun to climb, reaching 9.1 percent, indicating that many more cases are going undetected as Omicron rips across the country.

Thousands of these cases, moreover, are among those who were previously considered to be fully vaccinated. Data from the Philadelphia Department of Public Health shows that among its more than 11,200 COVID-19 cases since the beginning of December, 3,300 were among vaccinated patients, further evidence of Omicron's increased ability to evade immunity.

Breakthrough cases are a particular concern for the elderly. National data from the CDC shows that among the 27 states reporting, there have so far been 1.5 million cases among those vaccinated and 16,727 deaths. Of those deaths, 6,258 were among people between the ages of 65-79 (2.26 percent of the 277,000 breakthrough cases in that age group), and 8,011 were aged 80 and older (8.56 percent of the 93,000 cases in that age group).

Extrapolating such numbers based on the IHME predictions suggests there will be millions of

breakthrough cases among the elderly from Omicron and tens of thousands of deaths over the next three months.



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