

Florida sees alarming growth of COVID-19 infections fueled by Omicron variant

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27 December 2021

Florida has become a major flash point in the pandemic surge that is ravaging the entire nation, sparked by the more infectious and dangerous Omicron variant of the virus that causes COVID-19.

Coronavirus cases in the state rose astronomically in a matter of days, reaching record-breaking heights within just a month of the first Omicron case being detected in the US. Last week, new cases jumped 332.9 percent as more than 125,000 cases were reported in the week ending December 26, compared to just 28,841 cases the week prior. According to Johns Hopkins University data, Florida is ranked ninth among the states where the now-dominant Omicron variant is spreading the quickest.

The data in the Johns Hopkins analysis confirmed that Florida is far from the only state that is seeing a spike in cases in the US. In the latest week, US cases increased 47 percent from the week prior, with more than 1.38 million cases reported. Nationwide there are at least 26 states that had more cases in the latest week than they did the week before. Although Florida has just 6.54 percent of the country's population, it accounted for 8.99 percent of the country's confirmed cases last week.

In the face of the current surge, significant efforts are being made by Republican Governor Ron DeSantis to recklessly downplay the deadly consequences from Omicron while rejecting scientific public health measures. Opposing all restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, above all shutting down non-essential businesses and schools, DeSantis declared at a news conference last Friday that "we are not going to indulge in any of the insanity that you see starting to happen again."

Like virtually every governor in the US, there is little difference between policy pursued by DeSantis and the line being dictated by Democratic President Joe Biden, who reiterated in the lead-up to the Christmas festivities that there would be no departure from the "vaccine-only" approach to Omicron. Governor DeSantis sought to present sickness and death from Omicron as the fault of individuals not taking proper health precautions instead of the criminal indifference of the government, which has allowed the virus to spread. DeSantis said residents "should make sure you're doing things to keep yourself healthy and improve your health" during the latest wave.

On Christmas Day, Florida health officials reported the largest single-day increase in COVID-19 cases since the pandemic began. Approximately 32,850 new coronavirus cases were reported on December 25.

This shattered the previous record, which was set just a day before, of 31,758 cases. The previous single-day record was 27,802 cases in August, during the height of the Delta wave in Florida and as children and teachers were being sent back into schools for in-person learning, fueling the growth of community transmission.

The rapid spread of the virus has also begun to significantly disrupt the tourist industry in the state. The Florida-based cruise ship Carnival Freedom became the third ship this week to be hit with a COVID outbreak after two Royal Caribbean cruise ships got struck with outbreaks earlier last week. The Carnival Freedom vessel, carrying nearly 4,000 passengers and crew members, was scheduled to return to Miami Sunday following an 8-day journey but was denied entry into Bonaire and Aruba, Carnival said in a statement.

In contrast to the soporifics being offered by the capitalist parties and corporate media to chloroform the masses to the danger of Omicron, the increase in testing for the coronavirus points to widespread alarm and fear over the surge in infections. Demand for COVID-19 tests in Florida swelled in the latter half of last week leading up to Christmas as hundreds flooded testing sites.

Just hours before a testing site was scheduled to open in Tropical Park in Miami, dozens of cars could be seen lined up along a road leading to its entrance. The testing site was open from mid-morning to mid-afternoon, with two other sites in Miami-Dade County open on Christmas Day. County workers distributed some 12,500 at-home COVID tests kits on Friday to help alleviate demand as supplies had begun to run out. Aside from Tropical Park, long lines were reported on Monday morning at sites in Zoo Miami, Mills Pond Park and C. B. Smith Park.

Regions in Southern Florida are seeing the highest test positivity rates in the state. The positivity rate in Broward County, the home of Fort Lauderdale, was a staggering 19.1 percent, while Palm Beach County registered 17.1 percent, Miami-Dade 16.6 percent and Monroe 15.3 percent.

According to the Florida Department of Health's weekly COVID-19 data report, released Friday evening, the statewide new-case positivity rate rose to 13.8 percent last week, up from 5.3 percent a week prior and 2.6 percent the week before that. With 6,472 deaths and 702,309 cases, Miami-Dade County is ninth in the country for counties with the highest number of deaths associated with COVID-19 since the pandemic began, an analysis at Johns Hopkins University found.

There is also a glaring shortage of tests in the most populous areas of the state in the face of rising demand. One resident from Tampa, Melody Engle, told WFLA News Channel 8 she spent six hours on Sunday trying to find a testing site or an at-home test. "Everywhere I go they're out. I spent three hours on the phone. I tried to register on websites that failed," she said.

She drove nearly an hour from Tarpon Springs to stand in a long line at a Community Resource Center after several attempts to find tests near her. Reflecting the sentiments of the broad masses, Engle was scornful about the astounding lack of preparedness for the health crisis. She acknowledged: "For the country with allegedly the best health care in the world, here you are and you can't even find out if you have COVID. It's tragic."

Press reports and health experts have highlighted the fact that hospitalizations in the state remain low despite the dramatic spike in infections, adding to the illusion that Omicron causes "relatively mild" cases of COVID-19 and is supposedly less harmful than the wild version and the Delta variant. The data that is emerging from other states, particularly those in the Midwest and Northeast which have seen a tsunami of cases over the past month, has refuted these claims.

The reality is that a soaring number of cases will inevitably result in a significant number of the population with severe illness and symptoms, which will lead to hospitals being inundated statewide.

New York state COVID hospitalizations skyrocketed over the Christmas holiday, topping 5,500 for the first time since the last winter surge in late February. As of Monday, statewide hospitalizations stand at 5,526, the highest total since February 23 and a near 190 percent increase since November 1. More troubling than the overall hospitalization spike is the rise in severe pediatric infections. According to data from New York Governor Kathy Hochul, COVID admissions for children are now up to 184 statewide, 109 of them in New York City. Two weeks ago, there were 70.

After a temporary plateau, admissions of COVID-19 patients in hospitals near Louisville, Kentucky, are also climbing. At hospital conglomerate Norton Healthcare, COVID-19 admissions have more than doubled from 87 on December 1 to 176 patients on Monday, 12 of whom are children.

Nothing will be done on the part of capitalist politicians to even stem the disaster that is now unfolding, with the more fascistic layers doubling down on the policy of "herd immunity," that is, allowing the virus to spread uninterrupted.

Rather than embarking on the approach of preventing mass death, something the vast majority of epidemiologists and public health experts say are necessary to curb transmission, Governor DeSantis is promoting inadequate monoclonal antibody treatments and has encouraged vaccine skepticism.

After spending several days ignoring the Omicron variant even while cases began piling up in South Florida, DeSantis said in his Friday news conference, "Fortunately, we have the ability to combat it with a variety of these tools," referring to his insistence on relying on insufficient antibody treatments.

Stressing his contempt for public health restrictions, DeSantis complained of universities outside Florida that force students "to do vax, force them to mask, probably force them to booster, and they're still shutting down." Two weeks ago, DeSantis denounced Biden's chief medical advisor Dr. Anthony Fauci for supporting mask mandates for air travel, deriding such measures as "Faucism" and the outlook of "COVID authoritarians."

In an interview with Maria Bartiromo on Fox News on Sunday, DeSantis refused to clearly answer whether he had received a booster shot for COVID, saying, "At the end of the day it is people's individual decision about what they want to do." He then pointed out that Florida has banned vaccine mandates. Such a declaration is criminally irresponsible given the nature of Omicron in contrast to Delta and previous variants, as it is proven to be far more infectious for individuals who have received just one or two doses of the vaccines.

Florida's Democrats have seized on the health crisis to criticize DeSantis for aligning himself with anti-vaccination backwardness but have gone no further than promoting mitigation measures like mask mandates.

Representative Charlie Crist, a Democratic frontrunner for the governor's race next year, posted a comment on Twitter writing: "What @GovRonDeSantis won't tell you is that the booster shot is effective against the omicron variant. Ron is once again SOFT on COVID and it's costing lives." Not one Democrat, however, has called for lockdowns, closing non-essential production and schools, in addition to other stringent health precautions like contact tracing and mass testing to stop the transmission of COVID-19, end the pandemic and eliminate the virus.



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