

Florida COVID-19 infections continue to hit record levels as officials abandon testing measures

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The latest wave of COVID-19 in the US is wreaking havoc across the state of Florida with the Omicron variant of the virus fueling a record-shattering spike in cases, which is pushing the state's hospital system to its breaking point and risks causing a massive death toll.

Like every region nationwide, Florida saw an explosive growth in infections amid the Christmas and New Year's holidays, as political figures encouraged millions to travel across the country and gather together despite the threat of the Omicron variant, which was first identified in November. The current wave is also occurring as Florida's school districts press forward with the reopening of schools this week, a move that will lead to classrooms becoming super spreaders for the more transmissible variant and threaten the lives of millions of educators, students, and their families.

On Monday, Florida reported a record 85,707 new infections from a backlog of case totals, according to data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Although the CDC reported multiple days of cases instead of a single-day increase, it was the largest multi-day increase of newly reported cases since the pandemic began in March 2020. The CDC reported 254,814 new cases in Florida last week, with a positivity rate of more than 20 percent.

The last multi-day record was set during the height of the Delta wave in August when 56,036 cases were reported. This was the same month Florida began reporting cases by the "case date" rather than the date the case was logged into the health system, resulting in a number of cases back-filling over several days. This was a crucial factor in greenlighting the resumption of in-person learning in schools and a significant maneuver on the part of Republican Governor Ron DeSantis, who has worked to cover-up the health crisis engulfing the state from the outset.

Monday's CDC calculations also added 61 deaths to Florida's toll. The state has recorded 22 deaths and 53,195 cases per day on average in the past seven days. The state now stands at 4,308,534 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 62,541 deaths, the third largest totals in the nation, and the seven-day case average is the highest it's ever been. COVID-19 cases in

Florida have risen by 948 percent in just the past two weeks.

Thousands of people across the state, fearful over the rapid rate of transmission, are desperately seeking to get tested for the virus, but even this is proving tremendously difficult. In Tallahassee, the state's capital, images in the local press showed long lines and traffic jams in COVID-19 testing sites. Lines of cars were seen backed up for blocks in both directions at a location outside Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University's (FAMU) testing site Monday as dozens of people waited to get tested.

Tanya Tatum, director of FAMU's student health services, told the *Tallahassee Democrat*: "We are extremely busy and backed up." Tatum noted that last week the number of people tested at that site and another drive-through site nearby doubled in just a week. This prompted both locations to move to an appointment-only system instead of accepting walk-ins.

The lack of accessible testing sites is forcing many to inundate hospitals just to get tested. Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare and Capital Regional Medical Center saw an influx of people trying to get tested in their emergency rooms. That prompted both hospitals to ask the public to get tested elsewhere to avoid stretching their resources.

In the face of the alarming numbers, the DeSantis administration and its hand-picked public health "experts" remain committed to the policy of "herd immunity," which means allowing the virus to rip through the population unchecked, no matter the costs in human life, to maintain the flow of profits for the corporations and financial elite. Under this doctrine, workers are being told their lives and those of their children should be sacrificed so that the population can learn to "live with the virus" and that they should not expect any public health measures be taken to stop the spread of the disease.

This ideology found a sinister expression on Monday at a press conference where DeSantis and Florida's Surgeon General Dr. Joseph Ladapo rejected the fears surrounding COVID-19 as exaggerated and denounced Floridians for demanding testing. Ladapo said the Florida Department of Health (FDH) was now "working to unwind the testing

psychology that our federal leadership has managed to, unfortunately, get most of the country in over the last two years.”

Instead of ramping up testing to deal with the Omicron surge, the FDH will instead issue guidance that prioritizes so-called “high-value” COVID testing that is “likely to change outcomes,” which means only testing those who are at risk of complications from the virus or already displaying symptoms. This is a signal from the highest public health authority in the state that the government is dropping any pretense of taking preemptive action to detect, let alone suppress, the growth of infections and inform the public of the dangers posed by the virus. Ladapo went on to trivialize what he saw as “low-value” testing—i.e., testing for asymptomatic individuals who can still transmit the virus.

Combining anti-vaccination skepticism with a fascistic opposition to public health measures, the surgeon general said: “It’s really time for people to be living, to make the decisions they want regarding vaccination, to enjoy the fact that many people have natural immunity, and to unwind this preoccupation that only COVID is determining the boundaries and constraints and possibilities of life.”

The surgeon general, who is also a proponent of the reactionary Great Barrington Declaration manifesto, voiced the type of homicidal arguments that have been used to justify the mass infection of children, whom he falsely presented as less vulnerable to COVID-19 than older adults. “High-value testing is testing that is likely to change outcomes, right? So if your grandmother gets a test, that’s a much more valuable test than the 8-year-old third graders that Los Angeles County is sending in to get weekly testing,” said Ladapo.

This was declared while pediatric hospitalizations for COVID-19 have jumped five-fold this month in both New York and Washington, D.C., while countries throughout Europe are seeing record numbers of children hospitalized from the virus. According to data from the CDC, 1,040 children have now died from COVID-19 in the US, with the majority of these deaths, 540, having occurred in the past four months as students were herded back into overcrowded and COVID-infested classrooms.

Many epidemiologists and other scientists greeted Ladapo’s announcement with condemnation over its unscientific character. Florida International University’s infectious disease specialist, Dr. Aileen Marty, responded: “Some percentage of those individuals will get severely ill. Number two: they’ll continue to spread it to individuals who are more sensitive to severe disease and number three: you’ll have more possibility of forming another worse variant.”

For months the DeSantis administration has put in effect policies aimed at reducing testing across the state. DeSantis and Ladapo greenlighted the closures of several mass state-testing sites earlier in the pandemic when cases began to decline. Rather than operating state-run mass testing sites, counties and

private organizations are supplied with their own materials to run their own sites, a measure that has proven highly inefficient given the onslaught of cases.

Now with access to testing virtually unavailable for masses of people and with sites that are open being crushed with rising demand, the surgeon general and the administration are exploiting the shortage of tests to abandon testing altogether, under the pretext that the revised testing guidelines will help relieve the pressure placed on crippled testing sites.

The policy shift outlined by the surgeon general is to require that people who’ve contracted the virus wait until they are showing symptoms and be hospitalized after they have fallen gravely ill. Such a position is guaranteed to lead to ever-higher rates of transmission, as workers who are unaware of being COVID-positive will continue to go to work and spread the disease to others, while also bringing the virus home to their families and surrounding communities. Moreover, the infection of large swaths of people will place greater strain on the state’s unprepared health care system, with hospitals already reaching a breaking point.

A harbinger of what’s in store came on Tuesday, when Cross Health Hospital in Fort Lauderdale was forced to temporarily close its maternity ward due to staff shortages related to recent outbreaks of COVID-19. A Walmart in Hialeah, a city in Miami-Dade County, temporarily closed its doors to allow cleaning crews time to sanitize the building after a COVID outbreak had exposed countless workers.

The move to downplay and cover-up the exponential increase of COVID-19 infections is not limited to pseudoscientists like Ladapo and the Republican Party. The administration of Democratic President Joe Biden has directed the CDC to implement protocols that “would direct states to limit daily case reporting” through discussions with the Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists. The move is a part of the government’s strategy to shut down reporting of individual cases and is a rehash of former President Donald Trump’s demand that federal and state governments reduce testing to reduce confirmed cases.



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