

# Omicron surge pushing the US health care system over a precipice

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According to the US Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), as of January 5, almost 119,900 people are currently in hospital for COVID-19, accounting for 21.5 percent of all admissions across the country. Of these, 20,639 are in intensive care units. COVID-19 patients make up more than 31 percent of all patients treated in an ICU. Across the country, one in five hospitals reporting to HHS noted that their ICUs were above 95 percent capacity.

Fueled by the rapidly spreading Omicron variant, the unprecedented explosion of COVID-19 cases throughout the country is impacting every sector, including health care workers on the frontline facing the brunt of this tsunami. For example, Patricia Maysent, chief executive officer of UC San Diego Health, told the *San Diego Union-Tribune* that the university system had more than 500 health care workers test positive over the last week, forcing some of their departments to operate at half capacity. “This is the first time,” she said, “from the very beginning of the COVID pandemic, that I’m actually worried that we don’t have enough staff to take care of the patients.”

At Scripps Memorial Hospital in La Jolla, California, on Monday, a backlog of close to 40 patients admitted to the hospital was still waiting in the emergency department, unable to proceed to their rooms due to staffing shortages caused by infected health care workers. When occupancy reaches critical levels, the entire hospital cannot function because the work is so highly integrated and coordinated.

Emily, an ICU nurse in Riverside, told the WSWs, “The situation is worse than ever. Almost everyone is out sick with COVID. The main issue is staffing, which means we are breaking [staffing] ratios every day and in every unit. In turn, this is leading to rationing care. It’s not just nurses—it’s cafeteria workers, EVS [environmental services] workers and lab workers. I’m so consumed with my own job and the PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] of it all coming back, even though it never really left. People are getting neglected, and they don’t deserve all this. Everything is taking longer. The floors are dirty! Ask the patients.”

She added, “But it’s the demoralization of us, the health

care workers, that hits me the hardest. So, many have left, it is hard to find someone invested in making a difference while continuously treated like you are expendable... It is ludicrous to think how many people will die, and not just from COVID. There’s not enough staff for your delivery when you have a baby, have a heart attack, or have a stroke! Why are schools still open? The numbers are worse than ever, and our strategy is still unchanged. Our government has completely let us down time after time.”

The health systems crisis is affecting every region of the country simultaneously. Birmingham, Alabama, hospitals are in the same boat. Don Williamson, president of the Alabama Hospital Association, told CBS 42, “I’m worried now! That’s right now where my main concern lies. You know, we may have beds, but we don’t have anybody to staff the beds.” Hospitalizations have increased 161 percent in the last ten days across the state.

Hospital staff in Atlanta, Georgia, told the local media that the Omicron surge had been the worst they have seen and will only get worse. Despite being vaccinated, many nurses, doctors and technicians are falling ill, leading to sudden staff shortages that cannot be remedied without a reserve pool of health care workers that can be asked to fill in. Dr. Mehrdad Ehteshami, an emergency room doctor, explained to 11 Alive, “I think we’ve seen nothing yet. In about a week, we are going to see the true impact of what Omicron is doing.”

The president and CEO of Hartford Healthcare in Connecticut, Jeffrey Flaks, announced yesterday that around 600 employees in their system were out with COVID. At the same time, 425 patients were hospitalized with the infection, matching the number of patients in their hospitals during the April 2020 peak.

The University of Kansas Hospital has seen more than 500 employees sick or quarantined. Meanwhile, COVID patients have risen to 108, up from 40 on December 1. Dr. Steve Stites, the chief medical officer for the university hospital, said to KSHB-TV, “If you want to keep schools open and you want to keep businesses open, you’ve got to keep people healthy. You’re either not going to have enough

teachers or enough staff or too many students out in this Omicron wave to think it's going to really have successful schools, or the business is going to be able to work if they don't have enough employees."

The present staffing catastrophe across the country has been compounded by the mass exodus of health care workers that has seen one in five leave the profession due to the turmoil created by the official response to the pandemic. A country's health is measured by the capacity of its health systems and public health infrastructure to function correctly. Its breakdown is an essential indicator of a deep social crisis that is worsening by the day.

Admissions to hospitals are not only up for every age category during the Omicron wave; they are rising more steeply than at any other point in the pandemic and have already surpassed the peaks reached during the Delta wave in the fall of 2021. Patients 70 years and older who are at the highest risk from complications of COVID-19 due to their age and medical comorbidities are seeing the most significant increase in admissions despite being the group with the highest rate of vaccination.

Additionally, children continue to be hospitalized at record numbers for COVID. The *Guardian* reported that, on average, 672 children are being hospitalized every day in the US this week, which is twice the rate from the previous week. Worrisome has been that the hospitalization rates continue to increase in line with the explosion in cases among those under the age of 18. In the last week of December, the American Academy of Pediatrics reported that at least 325,000 children had been infected with COVID.

As President Joe Biden has reiterated, "We can keep our K-through-12 schools open, and that's exactly what we should be doing." However, the current drive to open schools after the holidays is being met with resistance by teachers and parents who are concerned that the guidance offered by public health leaders will only lead to more illness and death.

During a press conference Tuesday, Dr. Elaine Cox, chief medical officer and vice president at Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis, Indiana, said that half of the pediatric patients admitted to their hospital are being placed in the ICU, and 40 percent of those are spending time on a ventilator. "We have about four times as many children admitted currently as we have had in any other wave," Cox said. She added that severity among these children is rising. "So, there are more of them, and they are sicker."

Placing the current rise in hospitalizations into context, during last winter's deadly surge, it took four weeks for hospital admissions to climb by the same numbers as in the previous week or, in other words, admissions are rising at

four times previous rates. Additionally, last winter, admissions peaked at 137,438, and the US is presently at 87 percent of these record numbers. By all indications, this record will be shattered this week.

The average daily confirmed COVID cases have jumped from 187,000 to 548,000, with new cases for January 4 reportedly at 885,541, a 200 percent increase according to the *New York Times'* COVID-19 dashboard. In the same period the daily average in hospitalizations has jumped from 71,000 on Christmas Eve to over 101,000 by January 3, 2022, up 42 percent in just 10 days. It should be noted that the explosion in hospital admissions has been lagging the infection curve by a week, suggesting this trend will possibly continue for the next few weeks. Already inundated hospitals face an impossible situation being made worse each day the government refuses to act.

Omicron is a severe pathogen, its contagiousness has been compared even to measles. However, federal and state officials have repeatedly pushed claims that it is "mild" to delude the public into acquiescing to their demands that schools and workplaces remain open. Yet, despite the massive level of population immunity acquired over two years of infections and one year of mass vaccinations, Omicron has defied these obstacles and swept across the globe largely unimpeded, infecting millions each day.

In their attempt to dismantle all testing capacity, the likes of Drs. Monica Ghandi and Ashish Jha, mouthpieces for the ruling elites, have insisted that the only vital metric worth tracking is hospitalizations, allowing infections to spread largely undetected and keeping the public in the dark about the risks. This is proving catastrophic for them as thousands of patients suddenly seek emergency medical attention, and any attempt to utilize hospitalizations becomes a recipe for disaster. And yet, not even this metric, the saturation of hospitals, is being heeded.

Accurate, reliable and rapid testing, including measures to enact immediate public health measures that can stem infections, are far more critical tools if lives and livelihoods are to be saved. As Gina, a nurse in Southern California, observed, "It's a disaster. We are back to square one, and it's neverending."



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