

China's lockdown in Xi'an suppressing COVID-19 outbreak

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The lockdown underway in the Chinese city of Xi'an demonstrates again that public health measures combined with vaccination can suppress COVID-19 outbreaks as part of a strategy aimed at the elimination of the virus. It stands in stark contrast to the disastrous policies of other governments around the world that have allowed the virus, particularly the latest Omicron variant, to run rampant through their populations.

The outbreak, which has been identified as the Delta variant, has reportedly been traced to a flight to Xi'an from Pakistan on December 4. The first local confirmed case was discovered on December 9. Since then, three possible chains of transmission have been discovered, and the confirmed cases have been tracked and reported. After daily infection totals reached between 150 and 200 and the cumulative number of cases exceeded 1,600, it was decided to close down the city of 13 million on December 23.

Xi'an has now been in lockdown for two weeks and the daily tally has fallen to less than 100. For the 24 hours on January 2, a total of 90 new local cases were identified, 80 of which were found in the quarantine area for close contacts. While it is too soon to declare the outbreak over, the figures continue to fall with yesterday's report of just 35 new infections and a cumulative total of less than 1,800 locally acquired cases.

In line with the national policy of "zero COVID," authorities in Xi'an, who have come under fire for allowing the virus to spread to other cities, have stated that the lockdown will only be lifted when there are no cases of community transmission.

The lockdown and associated public health measures, including mass testing and contact tracing, the establishment of quarantine centres and the provision of food and supplies, have required a huge mobilisation of resources.

Multiple rounds of testing of large sections of the city's

population have been conducted to identify new cases. As of December 28, 5,077 testing points have been set up, with more than 30,000 testing personnel and 132,900 related service personnel. Those who are deemed close contacts are required to quarantine in designated areas.

When the lockdown was initially imposed, one person from a household was permitted to go out to buy food and supplies once every two days. However, that policy was further tightened last week to prohibit all trips except for testing for COVID-19. To provide food and other daily necessities to the city of 13 million, Xi'an has mobilized 64,000 grassroots officials and 45,000 volunteers, many of whom are young students, ordinary workers and community residents.

The purchase of food and other supplies is mainly done by residents placing orders from businesses, and delivery by volunteers and community workers. In addition, food and daily necessities purchased by the government or donated by people from all walks of life are also distributed by volunteers and community workers.

There has also been an expansion of medical services throughout the city. A couple of reports indicate that Xi'an has built new hospitals in the course of the pandemic with another under construction with a capacity of 3,000 beds.

Beginning in mid-December, medical institutions from other parts of Shaanxi Province have sent more than 1,000 medical workers to Xi'an to support quarantine and large-scale PCR testing in the city. On December 27, 150 medical workers from the Air Force Military Medical University went to Xi'an to provide support. Donations of medicines and medical equipment have come from elsewhere in China.

The outbreak in Xi'an is the largest for 2021 and by some accounts the largest since the initial eruption of the virus in Wuhan in 2020. The lockdown has undoubtedly been a disruption to the daily lives of its 13 million

residents. There have been reported delays in the housing of non-residents caught in the city, confusion over changing regulations, shortages of food and other necessities and in the worst cases, bureaucratic excesses, which have understandably led to complaints and criticism on social media.

The *Washington Post* reported last week that many people were short on food and had to subsist on vegetables. It noted: “People complained online of price gouging by delivery services. The hashtag ‘It’s hard to buy groceries in Xi’an’ had accumulated 300 million views on the Chinese social media platform Weibo.”

Not noted in the article was that the greatest difficulties confront migrant workers from outside Xi’an who stay in the densely packed urban villages in the city and have a disproportionately high number of infections. Most are stranded without access to kitchens and cooking utensils and are forced to survive on instant noodles. Unlike in other neighbourhoods where residents are asked about their needs for meat and vegetables, local officials simply ask migrant workers how many more packs of instant ramen they need.

In its article yesterday, “Tales of anguish emerge from China’s locked-down Xian, as hospitals demand patients be covid-free,” the *Washington Post* reported that a pregnant woman had miscarried after being denied treatment until she received a new negative result from a COVID test. While the article was compelled to acknowledge that China’s zero-COVID policy had been “largely successful,” it again played up food shortages.

Another case highlighted on China’s Xiaohongshu social media platform as yet unreported in the American media involves the death of a woman’s father who had not been admitted to hospital despite a negative COVID test because he came from a “medium risk” area that had had positive cases. He was eventually admitted, surgery was conducted on blockages in his heart, but he died. His daughter’s posts were widely viewed and commented on.

The opposition of the WSWS to the politics and authoritarian methods of the Chinese regime are well established. However, its response to the pandemic, whatever the flaws, is a scientifically-based strategy aimed at eliminating the disease and thus minimising deaths and damage to the health of the population. Moreover, as the US and international press has also been compelled to acknowledge, the policy is widely supported and reflects the broad sentiment stemming from the 1949 Revolution that social needs should prevail over private profit.

Most social media criticisms and complaints are written from the standpoint that the zero-COVID policy should be improved, not done away with. “We criticize government officials for their slow response and bureaucracy, but fortunately, we don’t have to face the increase of millions in a day,” one commented. “Just complaining is not enough—we need more volunteers to solve the current problems!” another said. “Why can’t the officials in Xi’an learn the effective experience of the past two years?” a third person wrote.

The standpoint of the *Washington Post* and the Western media generally is the opposite. They grossly inflate the shortcomings of “zero-COVID” to justify the criminal policies of their own governments and to encourage opposition within China to push for its abolition. While a largely upper-middle class layer is critical of their “loss of freedom” and argues on social media that China should also learn to “live with the virus,” that sentiment has become significantly muted amid the current COVID wave swamping the US and Europe.

The very same US and international media remains silent about the tragedies occurring every day throughout the rest of the world as a result of the “herd immunity” policy that is producing millions of daily infections, the breakdown of hospital systems and a rising toll of deaths and chronic health problems known broadly as long-COVID.

The figures speak for themselves. In Xi’an, less than 1,800 symptomatic infections have been identified since the beginning of the outbreak in early December, accounting for most of the cases recorded in China as a whole (population: 1.4 billion). The daily count in the United States (population: 330 million) for Tuesday exceeded one million for the first time in any country as Omicron surges.

The daily death toll in the US has averaged around 1,300 in December and early January bringing the overall death toll to well over 800,000. The total death toll in China since the COVID outbreak is less than 5,000—all but two occurred during the Wuhan outbreak in 2020. No deaths have been reported in Xi’an.



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