

As death toll mounts, US officials, media try to declare the pandemic over

Benjamin Mateus
23 January 2022

As of yesterday, there have been 72 million COVID infections and almost 890,000 deaths in the United States. At the present rate, deaths will reach 900,000 this week, and will top one million before winter is over.

But even as the Omicron surge continues its spread across the country, hosannas are being proclaimed that the end of the pandemic is nigh. Every media report claims to detect a silver lining in even the grimdest figures. Biden administration COVID spokesmen like Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Rochelle Walensky endorse such distortions.

Dr. Ali Mokdad, a professor at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) and chief strategy officer for population health at the University of Washington, told Bloomberg News, “We are going to go through a couple more weeks that are very difficult on our hospitals but come mid-February, March, we should be in a very good position.”

The only real objective evidence on this prognosis is that repeatedly, throughout the pandemic, high-profile scientists and political pundits have declared the latest surge to be the last. And each time a new, more virulent variant appeared, the same health officials quietly discard such claims into their social media wastebaskets as hospitals surge past their capacity and deaths pile higher, only to emerge once the wave recedes and proclaim once again that the last wave has passed.

Such prognoses are entirely in conflict with developments on the ground and lack any scientific merit:

- The daily average number of COVID-19 cases remains over 700,000 per day, nearly five million people each week
- The COVID test positivity rate for the US has surpassed 30 percent, demonstrating that even the current sky-high case metrics are underestimates
- The daily average of patients admitted to hospitals is 159,000, the highest level of the entire pandemic
- The daily average death rate has reached 2,162, above the Delta peak in September, and headed towards the all-time high of last winter
- On Friday alone, there were 3,856 COVID deaths

reported

- Almost a million children (981,858) were infected last week, and, on average, 880 children are being admitted to hospitals each day

- Fifteen children died last week of COVID

The Omicron peaks in regions along the Eastern seaboard, hit first by the new variant, are subsiding, as New York, New Jersey, Washington D.C., Pennsylvania, Florida, and Massachusetts see both cases and hospital admissions declining, though the figures remain near pandemic highs.

However, the Mountain West, South and rural areas generally—states like Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, South Carolina, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kansas—see cases, hospitalizations, and deaths all continue their ascent. And Omicron is now hitting resource-poor regions with the fewest people vaccinated and health systems in shambles.

Meanwhile, public health officials are moving to end daily case counting, and they declare that the Omicron surge will end with the virus entering a state of “endemicity.” This means that the virus remains indefinitely within the community at more or less stable levels. However, such a prognosis is ludicrous for a respiratory pathogen like SARS-CoV-2 that constantly mutates while population immunity achieved either by vaccination or infection is short-lived.

A report published by the Pew Research Center noted, “Months into the pandemic, epidemiologists said COVID-19 ultimately would become endemic, infecting nearly everyone and remaining in the population indefinitely. That endemic era may have started. As a result, many state health officials say they’re preparing to scale back the frequency of case count updates, possibly as soon as the current surge.”

Accurate metrics that include the number of daily infections, the positivity rate, an adequate scale of testing, location of outbreaks, and hospital statistics are a vital part of a functioning public health infrastructure. The essence of abandoning such metrics is the public health establishment embracing the principle of the ignoramus Donald Trump, that if you don’t test, there is no disease.

This policy is being adopted wholesale even as the

pandemic continues to kill thousands of Americans every day. It is an affront to the memory of the nearly one million or more that have perished in less than two years since the first US COVID death was officially reported at the end of February 2020.

In particular, the CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky's role in this regard is a nefarious one.

Her one-year tenure has seen the mismanagement of the COVID vaccine rollout, three massive surges of the pandemic, and the emergence of ever more virulent strains of the coronavirus. More than 450,000 Americans have died under her (and Biden's) watch, even more than under Trump, while hospitals and health care workers are drowning in cases.

As the pandemic enters its third year for the US, she effectively threw up her hands, telling *Politico*, "I actually really think many people have thought [that] this is CDC's responsibility to fix public health [and] the pandemic. The CDC alone can't fix this. Businesses have to help, the government has to help, school systems have to help. This is too big for the CDC alone."

Later in the interview, on the state of the pandemic, she added, "I would love to say I know exactly where we are because I think people really do want to know. But the most important thing that we can say is that we don't know exactly where we're heading."

These statements are an abdication of her responsibilities as a public health leader and would warrant demands that she tender her resignation immediately. However, she receives her instructions not from the public, or the health care community, but from the White House and Wall Street.

When asked about what indicators she and the CDC are using to gauge where the country is headed, she said, "When cases stay down ... or if cases are high, [but] severity will be such that we're in an okay spot in our hospitals ... our masks might be more likely to come off. And then if you get a case of runny nose, you might say, 'Okay, well, I'm going to stay home, because that's what I do when I have a runny nose.' But you don't necessarily have to isolate."

Not once did she raise any genuine concern about the current state of hospitals, infections among children, chronic complications of Long COVID, the issue of anti-vaxxers and the unvaccinated, or the tremendous death toll, especially among the elderly and those with chronic and debilitating conditions.

Meanwhile, states like Alabama are at 143 percent hospitalizations compared to last winter's peaks, with numbers continuing their climb. On a Facebook live event last week, Dr. Scott Harris, health officer for the state, admitted, "It's just mind boggling, and we don't know how much longer it's going to go on."

Dr. David Trasher, a Montgomery-based pulmonologist, said, "Our hospitals are overwhelmed. The morale and the stress on our staff is really unbearable." These are sentiments repeated over and over.

More recently, the Omicron variant is hitting nursing homes again, infecting residents and staff in record numbers. According to the CDC's data, there has been a ten-fold rise in cases since November. Last week more than 40,000 residents tested positive while 67,000 staff were infected. Though this high-risk group has been heavily vaccinated, almost 1,000 deaths were reported among them the previous week.

Katie Smith Sloan, executive director of The Global Aging Network, told NPR, "older adults who live in nursing homes have underlying health conditions. They tend to be frail. They live in a nursing home because they need 24-7 nursing care. And we know from the beginning of this pandemic that that's the population that was most at risk, and that hasn't changed."

Amid these developments in the US, there are reports of the spread of a new subvariant of Omicron, BA.2, which possesses 80 to 90 mutations compared to 60 mutations of the current Omicron variant. It is rapidly growing in northern Europe, specifically in the UK, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway. Professor Yaneer Bar-Yam, a complex systems physicist and head of the World Health Network, which calls for global elimination of COVID, noted, "[They are] not the same thing. [BA.2] It is about as different as Delta started out from the original variant."

Any attempt to declare the pandemic over and implement a policy of living with the virus has disastrous consequences. Experience over the last two years has shown that the ruling elites place no limit on the misery that could befall the working class to ensure the engines of profit are operating at full capacity.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact