

# All 72 Wisconsin counties at “critically high” rate of COVID-19 transmission for record fourth week in a row

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In a grim milestone in the pandemic, last week all 72 counties in the state of Wisconsin reported “critically high” levels of transmission of COVID-19 for a record fourth week in a row. Almost all new confirmed cases are from the Omicron variant, which had surged in the state for weeks until peaking in late January. Almost 2 percent of the entire state’s population has tested positive for COVID-19 in the previous two weeks, or over 1,900 confirmed cases for every 100,000 Wisconsinites, according to the Wisconsin Hospital Association (WHA).

According to the *New York Times* tracker, more than 1.5 million infections have been confirmed since the beginning of the pandemic, equivalent to one quarter of the state’s population. In Menominee County, which is majority Native American and more than 22 percent of the population lives below the official poverty line, approximately half of all residents have contracted the virus.

There have been 12,600 COVID-19 deaths across the state, accounting for more than 2 out of every 1,000 residents. There continues to be an average of 44 COVID-19 deaths per day, not far off from the all-time high of 68 recorded in December 2020.

Despite attempts by local media to portray the pandemic crisis as subsiding, there is still a consistent rate of over 4,500 confirmed positive cases a day with over 18 percent of all COVID-19 tests in the state coming back positive.

The strain on the state’s health care system can be seen in the rates of hospitalizations due to the disease: the WHA reported on Wednesday 578 new hospital admissions of patients in critical need of care, the highest one-day total since the start of the pandemic.

On Thursday, 371 people were admitted, the second highest total in one day. Of the over 1,500 ICU beds in Wisconsin, only 8.5 percent remain available to the public. More than 1,000 people in the state have been hospitalized in the last three days.

All of this is occurring as vaccination rates in the state continue to stagnate. Only 59 percent of Wisconsinites are reported as fully vaccinated, with 63 percent of the population having received at least one dose. According to WBAY, the average number of doses being given per day in the last week is around 8,200, the lowest since November of last year. While there is some overlap due to the one-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine, the numbers still reveal a bleak situation.

The surge of cases and deaths is hardly over, despite the number of cases themselves declining in the past two weeks. Still, the recommendations for stopping the spread remain tentative at best. Since a statewide mask mandate was struck down last year by the state Supreme Court, Dr. Ryan Westergaard of the Department of Health Service’s Bureau of Communicable Diseases has asked everyone to voluntarily wear masks in order to stop the spread, hoping to curb the infection rate to “less than 400, 500 cases a day,” according to Fox 6 Milwaukee.

This limited guidance comes as the state hurries to convert Wisconsin National Guard troops into Certified Nursing Assistants (CNAs) in order to help with severe medical staff shortages. No less than 70 National Guard members are already working in 17 skilled nursing facilities, with more being trained this month.

As newly confirmed cases decline and more resources are being used to tend to staffing shortages in medical

facilities, a new development has the potential to bring the state's health care system even closer to the brink of collapse: the first confirmed case of the new BA.2 subvariant of the Omicron variant was detected in Dane County this week. The subvariant is still mysterious in its transmission rate and lethality, but UW-Health infectious disease physician Dr. Nasia Safdar told WBAY, "it seems to be a little even more transmissible than Omicron." Westergaard also offered his analysis, saying that while the new subvariant does not appear to cause any new types of illness, he could not yet predict the its effect on case numbers and hospitalizations.

The BA.2 variant, also known as "stealth" Omicron due to the difficulty of tests to identify this particular strain, being found in Dane County only underscores the seriousness of the situation in the state. Dane County not only contains the state's capital in Madison, but also the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which has continued its reckless policy of completely opening up the school to in-person learning despite the massive surge of cases in the state.

Wisconsin's low vaccination rate and the complete lack of an elimination strategy is setting up the state for a renewed surge of COVID-19, led by BA.2, which has been identified in at least 50 countries. A study from the Statens Serum Institute in Denmark has found the new subvariant to be 1.5 times more transmissible than the original Omicron variant. The World Health Organization (WHO) has not designated the subvariant to be one of concern yet, but said it should be "prioritized independently."

Westergaard, following the lead of the Biden administration, is participating in the charge to downplay the threat posed by new variants and a pandemic which continues to kill thousands of Americans every day. As reported in *The Hill*, Westergaard went on the record Thursday to explain how the virus will become endemic by the end of 2022, despite the fact that he did not elaborate how or when this endemic phase would occur.

World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus issued a stern warning against this blasé attitude to Omicron, and the pandemic in general, as deaths continue to rise worldwide: "We're concerned that a narrative has taken hold in some countries that because of vaccines, and because of Omicron's high transmissibility and lower

severity, preventing transmission is no longer possible, and no longer necessary. Nothing could be further from the truth."

Maria van Kerkhove of the WHO took to Twitter to express her concerns regarding certain countries' dangerous plan of getting back to "normal," saying, "I know everyone wants to get back to 'normal,' but this level of intense circulation and death is not 'normal.' It's not a global situation that should be accepted nor tolerated when we have the tools to change the course of this pandemic." While the WHO refrained from promoting more lockdowns and other measures necessary to eliminate COVID-19 altogether, these voices of deep concern underscore the severity the pandemic still holds, especially for students, teachers, and other front-line personnel being forced to work in person.

This normalization of mass death must be stopped! Neither 5,000 cases a day nor 500 cases a day are acceptable for workers risking their lives every day, especially as new and unknown variants circulate wildly with no measures take to stamp them out. It is only the working class, the objectively revolutionary class, under the banner of international socialism with a Marxist program, which can put a stop to the homicidal policies of the ruling class.

As government officials and even health care officials attempt to declare the pandemic over, brazenly defying the advice and analysis from the WHO, it is the working class who will primarily fall victim to these policies. Enough is enough! The Socialist Equality Party encourages all workers who oppose mass death and the victimization of the working class to join us in the fight to end the pandemic once and for all.



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