

# Brazil's return to classrooms fills pediatric ICUs

Eduardo Parati  
20 February 2022

While the media and the Brazilian government have highlighted the decrease in occupancy rates for adult ICU beds, pediatric intensive care units are receiving an explosive number of new admissions. Children are being terribly impacted by the spread of the Omicron variant of COVID-19.

In Santa Catarina, the occupancy rate of pediatric ICU beds for COVID-19 treatment increased 433 percent in the first 15 days of February; and between December and January, hospitalizations for children under the age of 15 rose nearly 12-fold. The state of Rio de Janeiro registered an 850 percent increase in the occupancy of pediatric ICU beds between December and January, with the number of children between 6 and 12 years old hospitalized jumping from 6 to 57.

A *CNN Brazil* report revealed that on February 8, only 8 pediatric ICU beds were available for the entire state of Rio de Janeiro, all concentrated in only two hospitals in the capital. Similar situations are reported throughout the country.

Reports from health care workers show that the new variant, promoted as “mild” by governments around the world, is driving child hospitalizations to unprecedented levels.

At a pediatric hospital in Goiânia, the capital of the state of Goiás, the intensivist physician Fernanda Peixoto reported earlier this month that there has never been such a large number of children hospitalized. Children with COVID-19 can remain hospitalized for more than a month.

In the state of Ceará, pediatric intensivist physician Manuela Monte, who works at a children's hospital in the capital, Fortaleza, told the BBC, “We are a hospital of reference, and our pediatric COVID ICUs were full in January, while adult care was relatively under control.” She added, “Children of all age groups have been admitted with COVID. And we have had severe cases in children who had no health problems at all. Because of the immune system being compromised by COVID, they ended up getting a bacterial infection, pneumonia, or meningitis before they got to the hospital.”

According to the epidemiological bulletin of the Health Secretariat of the capital of Rio de Janeiro, the number of hospitalizations of children in January was about five times higher than during the second wave caused by the Gamma and Delta variants last year.

The surge in hospitalizations is occurring while millions of children remain unvaccinated, with states registering disparities in vaccination rates, delays and missed doses. In February 16, while

Paraná, São Paulo and the Federal District have respectively, 28.1 percent, 28.6 percent and 34.6 percent of children between 5 and 11 years old vaccinated with the first dose, most of the states that provided data have less than 20 percent coverage. This is the case of Amapá, Mato Grosso do Sul and Pernambuco, which vaccinated 5.4 percent, 12.9 percent and 12.5 percent, respectively. On Thursday, the health secretary of the state of Rio de Janeiro announced the interruption of vaccinations for a week due to lack of pediatric doses.

Although hospitals are already overloaded, the beginning of classes in state school networks across the country since February 7 has yet to have its full potential impact on health care systems. With the reopening of schools, millions of unvaccinated students and education workers are being placed in crowded schools and on public transportation, which will directly drive new outbreaks of the pandemic.

In Manaus, capital of Amazonas, a world epicenter of the coronavirus in 2020 and 2021, and where school reopenings were a decisive factor in the generation of the Gamma variant, Fiocruz epidemiologist Jessem Orellana warned on local radio *18 Horas*: “The return to face-to-face classes on February 14, 2022 for 5- to 11-year-olds can be considered premature and puts at risk the well-being and even the life of the students, and also of an extensive chain of possible contacts, inside (education workers, in general) and outside of school (collective transport, cafeterias, LAN houses, for example), as there are still tens of thousands of unvaccinated or incompletely vaccinated people in Amazonas.”

On Thursday, three days after school reopenings in the state network and in the capital, the Amazonas government announced the demobilization of the Nilton Lins hospital, focused on COVID-19 treatment, which was activated in January 2021 during the Gamma variant outbreak.

School reopenings are happening at the same time as it is declared in the media, on the one hand, that Omicron has reached a plateau, and, on the other, that the abrupt surge in the number of cases would imply a subsequent equally abrupt drop.

Contrary to what the government and the media are stating, the situation remains ominous, and the risk of new outbreaks is not over. On February 15, the Fiocruz Observatory released a note pointing out that in 4 states and 7 state capitals, ICU occupancy rates remained above 80 percent, with the Federal District registering 99 percent occupancy. Another 14 states and 12 state capitals remained above 60 percent occupancy.

In February, the first cases of the Omicron subvariant BA.2 were reported in Brazil. A study conducted by four Japanese universities, not yet peer-reviewed, indicated that this version is more aggressive than the original, highly resistant to vaccines and able to reinfect people already affected by the BA.1.

In an interview with *Globo*, Salmo Raskin, a geneticist and director of the Genetika Laboratory in Curitiba, Parana state, declared: “This study serves as a warning. Much has been said about the risk of BA.2 overtaking BA.1 as the dominant strain, as has already occurred in Denmark, India, the Philippines, and Singapore. A possible spread of this subvariant in Brazil could interrupt our beginning of decline in cases, generating new peaks and deaths.”

The outbreaks of cases, the admission of large numbers of patients to hospitals and the abandonment of any policy to control the spread of the disease by the state and federal governments mark the open adoption by all sections of the Brazilian political establishment of the fraudulent “herd immunity” policy through mass infection of the population. With the recurring record of over 1,000 deaths daily since the beginning of the month, the response of the ruling class is to promote the “new normal” of large-scale infections and deaths.

Late last year, Brazil’s fascistic President Jair Bolsonaro began a campaign of attacks on childhood vaccination, declaring it to be an individual choice by parents, adding that he would force them to obtain a prescription to vaccinate their children. Meanwhile, his Health Minister Marcelo Queiroga delayed the start of vaccinations for children between the ages of 5 and 11, holding a “public hearing” that gave voice to fascistic antivax figures promoted by the government. This campaign continues, with Bolsonaro’s ministers in recent weeks attacking the vaccination of children as a human rights violation.

Meanwhile, the response to the pandemic by state governments, including in states ruled by the Workers Party (PT) and its allies, is becoming indistinguishable from that promoted by the fascistic president.

Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo had announced in October the end of mandatory masking, and only backed off in the face of the new outbreak of infections. The states are aggressively promoting school reopenings, discarding any vaccination goal and declaring that the schools are “prepared” to receive the students.

The governor of Bahia, Rui Costa of the PT, promised in January not to implement any more COVID-19 restrictions that would affect the economy. “At this moment, we will not interfere with any other economic structure.” He added: “Schools will return on the 7th, face to face; it will not be hybrid or virtual.” Meanwhile, the governor of Ceará, Camilo Santana, also from the PT, limited himself to the “recommendation” of postponing classes for 15 days, limiting the public in stadiums to 30 percent of capacity, and the mandatory use of N95 masks in pharmacies, schools and supermarkets.

The president of the Brazilian Society of Immunizations (SBIm), Renato Kfour, took on the sordid role of promoting in-person learning in several newspapers and on television. In an interview with CNN, after stating that the risk of children developing severe illness and even death from COVID-19 is “much higher than

pneumonia, influenza, measles, infantile paralysis,” Kfour advocated the return to classes, stating: “I think we shouldn’t fear the return to classes without vaccine. In fact, if one should wait for the vaccines to begin to work ... we are talking about a return to school in May for children over five years old, because below we won’t have the opportunity yet. There is no justification today for us to keep children out of in-person schools waiting for the vaccines.”

The response of the federal and state governments to the pandemic reveals that there is no concern for the “mental health” and “education” of children, as was propagated in the corporate media throughout the pandemic to justify the deadly reopenings.

During the periods of remote and hybrid education, everything was planned not to ensure the learning and health of the students but to enrich the large corporations, with several states making deals with mass education platforms setting up contracts of hundreds of millions of reais with mobile phone operators, while most children did not even have access to digital equipment and adequate learning environments. Since the beginning of the pandemic, hundreds of thousands of young people have been forced to abandon their education to guarantee income for their families, a reflection of the massive growth of poverty in Brazil and the criminal neglect of its ruling class.

The main concern of the ruling elite has always been to ensure that parents return to the workplace to guarantee the profits for the large corporations.

The ruling class in Brazil is attacking the public health measures necessary to eliminate the virus, the only viable strategy to preserve millions of lives in the coming months and years and promoting instead the mass infection of the population ever more openly. This deadly policy, aimed at ensuring the profits of big business and the obscene enrichment of billionaires, must be answered by the Brazilian and international working class with a strategy to eliminate the virus and save lives.

The vaccine is a decisive component of a set of measures to combat the pandemic and must be combined with temporary lockdowns, testing and contact tracing, the mandatory wearing of masks, the control of travel and the guarantee of full income for all affected workers.

In opposition to the endless slaughter being imposed by capitalist governments around the world, such measures can end the pandemic in a matter of months. The Rank-and-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil (CBES-BR) is organizing the fight against the government’s criminal response to the pandemic and calls on all those who agree with the need for the elimination of the coronavirus to get in touch with us immediately.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**