

Masking recommendations lifted as COVID-19 continues to ravage Arkansas

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The state of Arkansas has recorded more than 824,000 cases and 10,760 deaths, according to OurWorldInData.org, placing it in the top ten of US state for per capita infections and deaths. With 258 deaths for every 100,000 residents, only seven other states have seen a worse fatality rate than Arkansas.

As of Wednesday, March 9, an average of 462 Arkansans were confirmed positive for COVID-19 every day. The state's hospitals reported 429 COVID patients, of which 117 were in ICUs.

Despite the continued spread of COVID-19 and an average of 27 deaths per day, mask-wearing recommendations have been lifted in 32 of the 75 counties in the state, where schools have witnessed a particularly sharp increase in COVID-19 cases amongst students and educators. BA.2, the more infectious subvariant of the Omicron variant, is spreading in the state, with the first case identified in mid-February.

Across the United States, with nearly 80 million cases of COVID-19 and more than 962,000 deaths, more than half of all counties, approximately 70 percent, no longer require mask-wearing, including more the 40 percent of Arkansas' state counties. This is in accordance with new guidelines issued two weeks ago by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Prior to its change in guidelines, the CDC had recommended wearing masks in areas with "high" levels of transmission, which included more than 95 percent of US counties and all of Arkansas. The justification for this about-face, which factors in hospital admissions and capacity with new confirmed cases, is reliant upon a purposeful skewing of the data and suppression of testing.

Amongst the counties hardest hit is Pulaski County, which encompasses the state capital and largest city,

Little Rock. On January 10, 2021, 228 new cases were reported with a 7-day average of 355. However, a year later, with the spread of Omicron and the Biden administration's embrace of "herd immunity" and re-opening policies of the Trump administration, cases have more than quadrupled.

On January 10, 2022, 1,975 new cases were reported with a 7-day average of 1,419. Pulaski County has had more than 102,000 infections and 1,140 deaths, followed by Washington County reporting 67,588 cases and 594 deaths, and Benton County, the headquarters of Walmart, the world's largest retailer, with 66,058 cases and 793 deaths.

Regarding infection rates in counties across the country, the CDC notes on its website that the labelling of counties as either "low, medium, or high ... are determined by looking at hospital beds being used, hospital admissions, and the total number of new COVID-19 cases." However, with hospitals exceeding maximum occupancy in Arkansas and across the country, the lifting of mask-mandates will only contribute to accelerating the deterioration of the already-crumbling infrastructure of the United States.

During a teleconference with reporters, CDC Director Rochelle Walensky revealed the pro-business intentions of the policy shift: "This updated approach focuses on directing our prevention efforts towards protecting people at high risk of severe illness and preventing hospitals and healthcare systems from being overwhelmed." In other words, the CDC has embraced the false claim that COVID-19 is "endemic" and therefore the only suitable course of action is to treat the sick, not to prevent infections from occurring.

In downplaying the significance of the Omicron variant, Walensky also mentioned in the midst of the Omicron wave, "many, many of our infections did not

result in severe disease.” And what of the unknown, long-term implications of having contracted the disease? Walensky went onto say the risk of severe illness from the virus has been reduced due to the American populace gaining immunity through vaccination or infection.

“We recognize that we need to be flexible,” she said, “ *by relaxing prevention measures* when things are looking up.” (Emphasis added.) In other words, prevention, in any capacity, is no longer an option for the ruling corporate and financial oligarchy. She went on to say that some people, particularly those in a counties labelled “high risk,” may choose to take extra precautions. “Anybody is certainly welcome to wear a mask at any time if they *feel* safer wearing a mask,” Walensky said. (Emphasis added.)

Moreover, Chief Medical Officer Dr. Jennifer Dillaha at the Arkansas Department of Health called the new CDC masking guidelines “very helpful,” elaborating, “If it’s in the low[-risk] area, I would say masks are not needed at this point in time.”

Just before the CDC’s new masking guidelines were announced, speaking at his weekly news conference at the state Capitol, Republican Governor Asa Hutchinson said he spoke with Walensky on February 25, mentioning he was gleefully looking forward to seeing the agency’s stripped-down recommendations, saying, “We do need to move from the pandemic to a more normal state, and I think that’s true across the board whether you’re looking at a Democrat governor saying that or whether you’re looking at a Republican governor – that’s where we are in America.”



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