

Brazil faces new COVID-19 wave amid sabotage of child vaccinations

Guilherme Ferreira
21 November 2022

As part of a new global surge driven by the spread of the more infectious and vaccine-resistant Omicron subvariant BQ.1, Brazil is facing its fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the third this year alone. On Saturday, the country recorded an average of 15,000 cases, a 302 percent increase from two weeks ago, and 37 deaths. Although the average number of deaths had a minus 4 percent variation from two weeks ago, there is a clear reversal of this trend, with three of the five Brazilian regions already showing an increase in the average number of deaths.

In total, Brazil has recorded almost 35 million cases and 689,000 deaths from COVID-19, the second highest number in the world, trailing only the US.

These figures, however, are major underestimates. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government of the fascist President Jair Bolsonaro, together with the entire Brazilian political establishment, has made every possible effort to hide the actual scale of the pandemic in Brazil in order to continue guaranteeing private profits.

In June 2020, at the height of the first wave and amid the Brazilian ruling elite's efforts to reopen the economy after limited lockdowns, the Bolsonaro government tried to censor cumulative case and death figures from the health ministry's official COVID-19 website, a measure reversed by the Supreme Court. A month later, it ended funding the most extensive epidemiological study on the pandemic in Brazil.

Few parameters express so clearly the lack of monitoring of the pandemic in Brazil as testing. According to *Worldometer*, the country ranks 148 in testing per million people, behind war-torn countries like Libya and Iraq. At the same time, tens of millions of expired tests have been thrown away repeatedly.

During the Omicron BA.1 wave in December 2021, the Brazilian ruling elite deepened its efforts to undermine pandemic monitoring in Brazil. After the health

ministry's pandemic monitoring system was offline for a month until mid-January due to an alleged hacker attack, the already insufficient number of tests performed dropped tremendously, from 929,000 in February to 264,000 in March of this year. In October, around 77,000 tests were executed, the lowest figure since March 2020.

Summing up the Brazilian situation, renowned neuroscientist Miguel Nicolelis tweeted on November 18: "There is no doubt: we are surfing a new wave of COVID-19, with no helmsman, no course, no compass, and no short-, medium-, and long-term strategy to fight a pandemic THAT IS NOT OVER YET!" Since the beginning of the pandemic, Nicolelis has been one of the fiercest critics of the "living with the virus" policy not just of the Bolsonaro government but also of the alleged opposition represented by the Workers Party (PT) in the four northeastern states that it rules.

Contrary to Nicolelis' warnings, handpicked experts in the corporate media have stressed that there is nothing to fear from this new wave, suggesting only that some social groups, such as the elderly and people with comorbidities, return to wearing masks and reinforcing the need to get vaccinated.

At the same time, they have placed the full responsibility for this new wave on the spread of BQ.1 and other more infectious subvariants already detected in Brazil, ignoring the complete abandonment of all mitigation measures, including in schools and on public transport. Virtually no Brazilian city has reimplemented mask mandates.

Also entirely ignored by the media was the role of the October 3 general election when many of the 123 million voters spent hours in lines at polling places without adequate ventilation and mandatory masks. In November 2020, the municipal election had already proven to be a super-spreading event, driving the further spread of the Gamma variant that in early 2021 led to the second deadly

wave of the pandemic.

This new wave is taking place amid Bolsonaro's ongoing effort to undermine vaccinations in Brazil. The sabotage of vaccinations has been an integral part of his government's "herd immunity" policy and of his narrative that COVID dangers weren't real, which has been aimed at mobilizing a fascistic movement in Brazil.

The Bolsonaro government's budget proposal for next year includes brutal cuts to health care, the largest aimed at the federal immunization program, responsible for the purchase and distribution of vaccines. With a budget reduction of 37 percent for this area, these cuts threaten the only remaining control measures against the pandemic in Brazil and the return of numerous infectious diseases. Also, bivalent vaccines adapted for use against the Omicron subvariants BA.4 and BA.5, from which BQ.1 emerged, are not expected to be offered anytime soon.

After successful attacks by Bolsonaro and his fascistic allies against the approval of child vaccinations, the level of immunization among Brazilian children remains critically low. Vaccination of children between ages three and five, which began to be offered in August, suffered a series of problems, with at least seven state capitals having to suspend it due to a lack of doses last week. In some of them, the suspension has already lasted three weeks.

Contrary to what had been announced by the Ministry of Health at the end of October, which claimed that 40 percent of three- and four-year-old children had received the first dose of the vaccine, a November 7 report by the daily *Folha de S. Paulo* showed that real figure was 13.9 percent.

Meanwhile, Pfizer's vaccine for babies and children between six months and four years old was approved by the Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (Anvisa) on September 16. The administration of doses began only last Thursday, and exclusively for children with comorbidities.

On November 16, the Brazilian Societies of Pediatrics and Immunization issued an alert requesting "emphatically, to the Ministry of Health, the immediate inclusion in the National Immunization Program of COVID-19 vaccines of all children from six months of age. ... The delay at the beginning of vaccination inexplicably continues, especially in times of increased viral circulation."

Also commenting on the federal government's decision to vaccinate only children with comorbidities, the Fiocruz infectologist Julio Croda told the G1 website: "There is no

logic in this because half of our deaths in this age group occurred in children who had no comorbidity."

In fact, this policy constitutes a vicious crime against children, a vulnerable social group that should be unconditionally protected. In 2021 and 2022, 1,508 children under five died from COVID-19 in Brazil. Almost half of these deaths occurred in infants up to one year old. Up to October this year, 454 children under the age of five died from COVID-19.

Although Bolsonaro represents the cruelest face of the "herd immunity" policy, it has been embraced by the entire Brazilian political establishment, including the PT. During the presidential election campaign, the role of the PT and its candidate, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in relation to the pandemic was fully exposed.

A study published on October 24 by the Solidarity Research Network on Public Policy and Society, formed by researchers from Brazil's main universities, showed that the government plans of both Lula and Bolsonaro "do not inform comprehensive programs for the control of COVID-19 in the Brazilian territory"; do not show how Brazil can "prepare a structure that can be activated in moments of [future] health crises"; show "a complete absence of actions aimed at improving the structure of epidemiological surveillance"; and make no references to "vaccination against COVID-19."

This shows that under the PT government starting next year, the novel coronavirus will continue to spread in an uncontrolled manner throughout Brazil, with the even more serious threat of new variants of concern emerging and extending the pandemic for years on end with devastating consequences for the Brazilian and world population.

This perspective reinforces the call by the Rank-And-File Committee for Safe Education in Brazil, which is part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-And-File Committees, for teachers and the entire Brazilian working class to fight for the implementation of the global elimination strategy of COVID-19 in alliance with workers around the world and put an end once and for all to the suffering caused by the pandemic.



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