

Lights off on the pandemic: Johns Hopkins University to retire COVID-19 tracker

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After providing the public in the US and across the world three years of vital day to day information on the status of the COVID pandemic, Johns Hopkins University announced yesterday that they were retiring their highly acclaimed and well-appreciated Coronavirus Resource Center on March 10, 2023. Indeed, the end of this invaluable resource has significant implications for the present and for future pandemics.

The site had been launched on March 3, 2020, by Johns Hopkins engineering professor, Lauren Gardner, precisely because there was a complete lack of any information or infrastructure for reporting such data. In September 2020, Gardner was named one of the “100 most influential people in the world” by *Time* for her efforts to develop the free, open website.

She noted at the time, “I am deeply honored and humbled to have been individually recognized for an effort that has required the hard work and dedication of so many, including the team at the Applied Physics Lab, our students in the Center for Systems Science and engineering, our partners at ESRI, and multiple colleagues from across Johns Hopkins University, who have spent tireless weeks and months collecting, verifying, delivering, and communicating on this critical data, incoordination with officials from around the nation and the world.”

It can't be overstated that in a pandemic, reliable data is of the essence for utilizing resources appropriately and directing plans rationally to contain the spread of disease and save lives and well-being. However, given that “forever COVID” is the stated policy of the Biden administration to the pandemic, reliable data is anathema to ending all pandemic measures.

With the carefully crafted and systematically implemented cover-up of critical COVID metrics led foremost by the White House beginning last year in the wake of the highly contagious and deadly Omicron phase of the pandemic, the public, as well as academic and government institutions across the globe, had no other recourse but to rely even more on the only credible source for data being provided by the Johns Hopkins COVID dashboard. Yesterday's announcement that their tracker was shutting down meant not only had the curtain been drawn on any public health response against the pandemic, but the lights are about to go out altogether.

This comes as no surprise. It was almost one year ago, on March 14, 2022, that the *World Socialist Web Site* remarked that with the US public's attention on the war in Ukraine, the entire state apparatus was shutting down daily reporting of COVID-19 cases

and deaths. As the report noted then, “This nationwide rollback has been carried out with no public awareness, and there has not been a single national news report, in any major US news outlet, on these moves to shut down regular reporting.” This assessment has now been confirmed completely.

But by no means has the pandemic completed its assault on the population in the US (or anywhere else for that matter) despite President Joe Biden's declaration last fall that the pandemic was over and with calls by both Democratic and Republican parties to wind down all public health emergency measures that provide people free, effective and safe vaccines, rapid antigen tests and antivirals that can prevent the development of severe disease and Long COVID. In the wake of these measures, millions will be left without insurance and financial assistance, all the while inflation is rapidly emptying saving accounts across millions of homes.

According to the CDC's wastewater tracking, more than one-third of all sites reporting such data to the national public health agency have seen more than a doubling of levels of SARS-CoV-2, and up to three-fold, from a month ago, despite the decline in official COVID cases reported to authorities. The seven-day average in deaths has been steadily climbing since the beginning of December, having consistently remained over 450 deaths per day since the New Year.

In all, close to 1.14 million Americans have died from COVID, with 20,000 deaths just in 2023. If we tallied all the deaths since the BA.1 surge passed through the country in mid-February 2022, almost 190,000 people have died, an average of around 520 deaths per day. This is the new normal that American families have been asked to swallow. Such figures only confirm that the pandemic is far from over. Calls for the complete dismantling of all public health tracking of infectious diseases are completely contrary to the social functions of state and national public health institutions and an abdication of their stated responsibilities.

Dr. Ellie Murray, epidemiologist at Boston University who spoke eloquently on the issue that COVID was far from becoming endemic, told the WSWs, “I'm really sad to see it ending, as it was a fantastic resource and demonstrated so well how people from all areas of expertise have something to contribute to public health and pandemic response. That said, I certainly don't fault them for not being able to keep this going indefinitely. They were providing a valuable public health service. But public services are supposed to be provided by our governmental agencies and funded via our taxes. We never should have had to be in the position

where JHU [Johns Hopkins University] needed to provide this service, no matter how grateful I and many others are to them for doing so.”

Devabhaktuni “Sri” Srikrishna, a San Francisco-based diagnostic expert and computer/network architect who was drawn into the 2014 unfolding Ebola crisis in Guinea, wrote in an email exchange regarding the JHU COVID tracker, “[I]t was at times the world’s only trusted source of real-time, daily insight into the worldwide growth of the pandemic. It was relied on by people, governments and corporations alike ... I wish such a tracker existed and maintained for all infectious disease worldwide (such as Flu and Ebola) not just COVID.”

Greg Travis, who has carefully tracked COVID data and has been vocal on the need for reliable data and responsible public health response to the pandemic, wrote on Twitter, “And we’re done. I will stop processing Johns Hopkins data on March 10th when they shut down. I will continue to report COVID mortality from death certificates after that data, but be aware that death certificates suffer from undercount and at least a six month lag.”

In a brief telephone interview yesterday afternoon, Travis said, “It’s just so tragic. What I saw, what I thought today about the JHU announcement, the main emotion it arose in me was deep sadness. It’s not unexpected, though. I wasn’t prepared for JHU to do it, but not surprising. I wonder though the timing and phrasing ...”

Though Johns Hopkins never openly explained why they were taking their dashboard down, were there political pressures being brought to bear? Travis noted that JHU is reliant like any other tracker on reliable data. Even back in September of 2022, *Axios* reported that due to lack of real-time data and reliable figures, it had to drop testing numbers and provide less frequent updates.

In an email they wrote, “The changes are being driven by the declining quality and utility of pandemic data reported by state governments.” Data head for JHU’s Coronavirus Resource Center, Beth Blauer, had commented, “We have seen a dramatic shift in the way that state and local governments not only collect this data but share it publicly. That deeply constrains the way that we can actually report.”

Travis made a similar observation with regards to the American Academy of Pediatrics, which had been tracking and publishing cases among children due to lack of reliable statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). “But in July 2022 they announced they would not do it anymore because no one was giving them the information,” he added.

“It wasn’t because it wasn’t important, or they tired of it. They just couldn’t get the information. And this has happened to JHU. Since spring of 2022, case and death ascertainment has completely collapsed. Most of the US only provides, at best, data once a week. And entire states that didn’t report anything throughout the holidays. You have to gather the information from the ground. If that stops happening, you can’t aggregate it up. I’ve been tracking this information every day.”

Travis explained that such information is being deliberately withheld: “Our response to signals is to discontinue following those signals.” He explained that the superintendent of his son’s school informed the parents that in January 2022 they would stop

collecting and sharing data on the number of COVID cases among children. “And that was the deadliest month for them during the pandemic,” he said. Meaning, we aren’t going to look anymore because the numbers were just too horrible. And families are being held responsible for making decisions about sending children to schools but lack any information to make appropriate decisions.”

He continued, “I recently sent an email to my schoolboard asking them what we can do to make schools safe as the world’s most powerful and affluent afford themselves at Davos.” During the highly publicized but secretive meeting between world leaders and billionaires, every pandemic measure was taken to protect the world’s elite.

“They said nothing. Thank you for your interest. That’s it. Nothing about how to increase ventilation. Nothing about CO2 monitors. Nothing about ultraviolet sterilizers or vaccines. These were things they employed at Davos to keep the participants safe. They had a lanyard that attested they were COVID positive or negative and they couldn’t get into the venue if they were positive.”

On the question of Biden and the ending of the pandemic emergency measures which are intimately tied to ending of all statistics on the state of the pandemic, Travis said, “It amazes me that when people talk to me about the Trump administration, and don’t see the same thing happening in the Biden administration. Their response to the pandemic has no ideology. It is only cruelty.”

He continued, “For a person, myself, who once called Biden a national treasure during Obama’s tenure, there is nothing more dispiriting than to realize that a party I belonged to my entire life, a party that my late wife was an elected official in that party, when I heard what Biden said about the public health emergency, I realized that the Democratic Party’s only guiding ideology was an ideology of cruelty for cruelty’s sake.”

He concluded, “I can’t imagine a politician that doesn’t want good news. The fact that they are shutting it down means the news is not good and the way they respond to bad news is to hide it.”



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