

December 21, 2020

### Summary

The United States has 76,975,940 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 317,729 reported related deaths. FDA granted emergency use authorization (EUA) for Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine, which the federal government began shipping to the states on December 20. Officials in fourteen states were surprised to learn that they will receive fewer vaccine doses than they were promised this week. Operation Warp Speed official General Perna apologized for the smaller-than-expected vaccine shipments, citing an unspecified "planning error." A CDC advisory panel recommended that, after health care workers and residents of long-term care facilities are vaccinated, states administer the vaccine to frontline workers and individuals aged 75 years and older. Officials in the United Kingdom detected a new coronavirus variant; experts think this new strain may be more transmissible than other variants but there is no indication that it is more dangerous. Congress reached a deal on a \$900 billion stimulus package.

California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Texas each announced more than 1,000 deaths during the weekend ending December 20. Cases appear to be spiking across the southern United States as Georgia, Arkansas, and South Carolina each set state records for weekly cases, and Tennessee is identifying cases at the highest per capita rate in the country. Tennessee Governor Bill Lee issued an order restricting indoor gatherings to 10 people until January 19 but declined to issue a mask mandate. One in every five state and federal prisoners in the United States has tested positive for SARS-CoV-2, a rate more than four times higher than the general population. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced the state would lift some restrictions, allowing in-person classes to resume at high schools and indoor venues like movie theaters and gyms to re-open with capacity restrictions, as new cases continue to decline sharply in the Midwest.

New York reported 109 deaths, 6,331 hospitalizations, and 1,095 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, December 20, 2020. Approximately 9,007, or 5.75% of the 156,510 tests administered in New York on December 20 were positive for COVID-19. New York has administered 38,000 doses of the vaccine, and expects shipments of 346,000 Moderna vaccines and 120,000 Pfizer vaccines this week. At Governor Cuomo's request, British Airways and Delta Airlines agreed to require pre-boarding testing for planes departing from the United Kingdom due to new UK variant of COVID-19. Meanwhile, the governor has called on the federal government to impose restrictions on travel from the UK. On December 19, Governor Cuomo signed an executive order designed to help vulnerable homeowners and restaurateurs. New York City will remove academic criteria from consideration for admission to the City's selective middle schools. The Port Authority cut its FY2021 budget \$1.3 billion compared to last year. Traffic deaths in New York City have increased 69% this year compared to last.

## Presidential updates

- [White House Apologizes to States for Vaccine Distribution Mix Up](#), December 20
  - Fourteen states – including California and New Jersey – will receive fewer vaccine doses than they were promised this week.
  - Officials from those states [expressed](#) frustration about the mix up, noting that they need reliable information regarding the federal government’s vaccine distribution in order to plan.
  - Operation Warp Speed official General Perna accepted responsibility and apologized to the states. Perna said that the smaller-than-expected vaccine shipments were the result of a “planning error,” though he did not provide a clear explanation regarding what went wrong.
  - Perna reassured the states that the government remains on track to allocate 20 million vaccine doses across the country by the end of December.
  - Perna said that there is no problem with the distribution process or the vaccines and the federal government “will have the agility to correct ourselves and get things right, so that the next time it will go flawlessly.”

## World Health Organization (WHO)

- [WHO COVID-19 Updates](#), December 21
  - WHO officials [announced](#) the COVAX program, which pools purchasing power and funding to provide vaccines to lower-income nations, has reached an agreement securing nearly two billion doses of vaccine. COVAX organizers secured the doses through deals with AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson, but the program remains \$6.8 billion short of funding for 2021.
  - WHO published [guidance](#) on ethical considerations for placebo controls and potential unblinding of trial participants in current and future COVID-19 vaccine trials.
  - WHO officials said the coronavirus is mutating, “at a much [slower](#) rate” than seasonal influenza, even as officials in the U.K. and South Africa reported a new mutation is allowing the virus to spread more easily.

## U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- [CDC Advisory Panel Issues Recommendation Regarding COVID-19 Vaccine Prioritization](#), December 20
  - Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), which makes recommendations regarding vaccine use in the United States, issued another recommendation regarding COVID-19 vaccine prioritization.
  - Previously, ACIP recommended that health care workers and residents of long-term care facilities receive COVID-19 vaccines first.
  - Now, ACIP is recommending that frontline workers and individuals aged 75 and older receive the vaccine second.
  - CDC Director Redfield is expected to adopt ACIP’s recommendation as his agency’s formal guidance to the state officials, who make the final determinations regarding vaccine prioritization.
  - Front-line workers include first responders, teachers, corrections officers, postal workers, public transit workers, farmers, and grocery store employees, among others.
  - The United States has approximately 49 million front-line workers.

- [COVIDView Weekly Surveillance Summary of U.S. COVID-19 Activity](#), December 18
  - CDC summarized key COVID-19 disease indicators for the week ending December 12.
  - The overall percentage of respiratory specimens testing positive for COVID-19 decreased from 13.4% to 12.2% from December 5 to December 12.
  - The percentage of respiratory specimens testing positive for COVID-19 increased in just one region.
  - The overall cumulative hospitalization rate was 295.8 per 100,000, up from 278.7 per 100,000 during the previous week. While overall weekly hospitalization rates reached their highest point since the beginning of the pandemic within the past month, rates for the most recent weeks appear to be declining.
  - Based on death certificate data, the percentage of total deaths attributed to pneumonia, influenza, or COVID-19 was 13.3% and remains above the pandemic threshold. The weekly percentages of deaths due to pneumonia, influenza, or COVID-19 increased throughout October and November and is expected to increase for the most recent weeks as additional data are reported.

### **New York State**

- [New York State COVID-19 Updates](#), December 21
  - New York reported 109 deaths, 6,331 hospitalizations, and 1,095 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, December 20, 2020.
  - Approximately 9,007, or 5.75% of the 156,510 tests administered in New York on December 20 were positive for COVID-19.
  - New York has [administered](#) 38,000 vaccines, as of Monday morning, the highest in the nation according to Governor Cuomo's office. New York expects to receive 346,000 doses of Moderna's vaccine and 120,000 additional doses of Pfizer's vaccine this week.
  - Following reports of a new, fast-spreading strain of COVID-19, on December 20, Governor Cuomo [called](#) on the federal government to restrict travel to the United Kingdom, noting that 120 countries had required pre-boarding testing on flights leaving the UK. On December 21, British Airways and Delta Airlines [agreed](#) to add New York to the list of destinations that would require a negative test prior to boarding. Governor Cuomo plans to speak with representatives Virgin Atlantic, which also runs flights from the UK.
  - On December 19, Governor Cuomo [signed](#) an executive order that would provide financial support to vulnerable homeowners and the restaurant industry. Executive Order 202.83 permits local government to continue property tax exemptions for low-income senior citizens and disabled individuals through 2021. Additionally, the executive order moved the sales tax deadline until March 2021 for restaurants in orange zones that have been required to suspend indoor dining.

### **New York City**

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), December 21
  - New York City officials [said](#) it would drop academic criteria for selective middle-school admissions in favor of lotteries. Selective high schools must phase out geographic priorities but may continue to assess student's performance in their decision

to admit a student. Officials removed the admissions criteria after schools relaxed grading standards and attendance requirements during the pandemic.

- On December 17, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey [approved](#) a 15% (\$1.3 billion) reduction in spending for FY2021 due to budget cuts and delays caused by the coronavirus pandemic. Libby McCarthy, the Port Authority's Chief Financial Officer, said that the agency has lost \$1.5 billion in revenue since the beginning of the pandemic, and could lose \$3 billion through March 2022.
- Traffic deaths from January 1, 2020 to December 16, 2020 [increased](#) 69% compared to the same time period in 2019. 234 total road deaths occurred, including motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians. Officials and researchers hypothesize that the increase in fatalities occurred as younger, less risk-averse drivers made up a larger share of drivers on the road, increase drug and alcohol use during the pandemic, and reduced police enforcement.

### **Other Related Updates**

- [\*HHS Releases Sweeping New Report on U.S. Covid Outbreak in Move Toward Transparency\*](#), December 18
  - On Friday, December 18, Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) published a new [report](#) on the state of the nation's COVID-19 outbreak including data that was previously available only to government employees.
  - The data shows that 35 states are suffering a severe outbreak. The report identifies "select high burden" areas, like Nashville, Tennessee and Tulsa, Oklahoma that have experienced a rapid rise in positive tests over the last seven days.
  - The data has been compiled from various federal agencies, including CDC.
  - According to CNBC, the report is the "most comprehensive picture" of the outbreak made public by the federal government since the beginning of the pandemic.
- [\*Coronavirus Mutation Detected in United Kingdom\*](#), December 20
  - Officials in the United Kingdom have detected a new coronavirus variant.
  - The variant has sparked concern around the globe because it appears to be highly transmissible. Experts in the United Kingdom estimated that it may spread 70 percent faster than other strains.
  - Despite its increased transmissibility, experts say there is no evidence that the new variant is more dangerous than other strains or that it is resistant to Pfizer and/or Moderna's COVID-19 vaccines.
  - A similar mutation has [appeared](#) in the predominant strain of the virus in South Africa, which is a separate variant than the UK variant. Scientists were quick to note that human behavior was driving the South African epidemic, not necessarily a more easily transmissible virus.
  - Nevertheless, English Prime Minister Boris Johnson scrapped plans to relax restrictions for the December holidays and increased restrictions in regions where the new variant has spread widely.
  - Several countries have banned travel to and from the United Kingdom, including France and the Netherlands.
  - New York Governor Cuomo called on the United States to ban travel as well, noting that it would take only one flight to introduce the variant into the country's population.

- [\*NIH Sponsors Phase 3 Trials for Two Monoclonal Antibody Therapeutics\*](#), December 17
  - Two randomized, controlled Phase 3 clinical trials have begun [evaluating](#) investigational monoclonal antibody therapies for safety and efficacy in treating people hospitalized with moderate COVID-19.
  - One study is evaluating VIR-7831, a monoclonal antibody developed through a partnership between GlaxoSmithKline plc and Vir Biotechnology.
  - The other study is evaluating the combination of BRII-196 and BRII-198, two neutralizing monoclonal antibodies manufactured by Bria Biosciences.
  - The trials are part of the ACTIV-3 master protocol, which is sponsored by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).
  - Participants in the studies will be randomized 1:1:1 to receive one of the treatments or a saline placebo. The ACTIV-3 design allows researchers to evaluate each antibody in a small group of volunteers, and then enroll a larger group if the antibody appears safe and effective.
  
- [\*NIH to Support Radical Approaches to COVID-19 Testing and Surveillance\*](#), December 21
  - NIH has [awarded](#) over \$107 million to support new, non-traditional approaches and reimagined uses of existing tools to address gaps in COVID-19 testing and surveillance.
  - Part of the Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics ([RADx](#)) initiative, the awards come from the RADx Radical ([RADx-rad](#)) program to support 49 research projects focused on non-traditional viral screening approaches.
  - The grants will support projects such as development of biosensing technologies to spot signatures of COVID-19 from human skin or mouth, a diagnostic breathalyzer for instant detection of SARS-CoV-2, a test to assess smell and taste function, and development of biomarkers for an algorithm using artificial intelligence to predict long-term risk of disease severity after a child is exposed to SARS-CoV-2.
  
- [\*FDA COVID-19 Updates\*](#), December 21
  - Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [issued](#) an emergency use authorization (EUA) for Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine on December 18, the second vaccine authorized by United States regulators.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [\*Fourth Time's the Charm? Amended HHS Declaration Expands Application of PREP Act Immunity and Preemption for COVID-19 Response\*](#), December 16
- [\*Navigating Inability-To-Pay Claims With DOJ Amid COVID-19\*](#), November 20

Send questions to:

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