

December 28, 2020

Summary

The United States has 19,151,651 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 333,326 reported related deaths. Center for Mathematical Modeling of Infectious Diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine released a study indicating that a new coronavirus variant detected in the United Kingdom may be 56% more transmissible than other strains of the virus. The study has not yet been peer-reviewed, but Harvard epidemiologist Bill Hanage said that the results are “consistent with what we’ve been seeing from other sources of information.” Since the new variant was discovered, it has been detected in several other European countries, Japan, and Canada. The new variant has not yet been identified in the United States, but last week, CDC warned that it could be circulating undetected. Novavax announced that it will soon begin Phase 3 clinical trials of its COVID-19 vaccine in the United States; Phase 3 trials of the company’s vaccine are already underway in Britain. President Trump signed a \$900 billion COVID-19 relief bill.

National case numbers remain as high as they have ever been, but the United States is no longer seeing explosive growth in new cases, and many states are improving. California’s worsening outbreak has cancelled out progress in other parts of the country, as the state became the first to pass 2 million total cases, and added more than 300,000 cases in the week ending December 22. Florida added about 11,000 new cases per day that week, near its summer peak, as cases in Miami remain persistently high and cases have ticked up around Jacksonville, Tampa, and Pensacola. Millions of Americans travelled by air for the holidays despite official pleas to stay home; TSA reported screening more than 7 million passengers during the week ending December 25. Public health experts fear that a post-Christmas surge will result in the coming weeks.

New York reported 114 deaths, 7,559 hospitalizations, and 1,222 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, December 27. Approximately 10,407, or 8.33% of the 124,866 tests administered in New York on December 27 were positive for COVID-19. As of December 27, New York has administered 140,000 doses of the vaccine. The New York State government is investigating ParCare Community Health for violating state laws regarding COVID-19 vaccine administration. State Health Commissioner Zucker said that ParCare “may have fraudulently obtained COVID-19 vaccine, transferred it to facilities in other parts of the state in violation of state guidelines and diverted it to [individuals not included in the state’s initial prioritization groups].” Governor Cuomo [announced](#) that he plans to sign an executive order extending the State’s moratorium on evictions and his office is working with the legislature on a housing bill to protect homeowners against foreclosure.

Presidential updates

- [*President Trump Signs Coronavirus Relief Bill*](#), December 27
 - Last week, Congress passed a \$900 billion stimulus package, providing for \$600 direct payments for most Americans and extending several CARES Act programs expanding unemployment benefits.
 - Congress passed the stimulus package together with routine spending provisions necessary to avert a government shutdown.
 - President Trump initially criticized the combined bill, calling it a “disgrace” and urging Congress to make a series of changes, including increasing the direct payments to \$2000 and cutting various items that Trump characterized as “wasteful.”
 - In response, Democrats in Congress tried to increase the direct payments via unanimous consent, but the measure failed.
 - After President Trump refused to sign the package, two CARES Act programs expanding unemployment expired on December 26, temporarily depriving many Americans of benefits.
 - President Trump signed the bill on December 27 but continued to insist that Congress make revisions. The House will vote today on a standalone bill increasing the direct payments, but lawmakers have [signaled](#) that they have no other plans to revise the legislation.

World Health Organization (WHO)

- [*WHO COVID-19 Updates*](#), December 28
 - WHO will [conduct](#) systematic reviews of the scientific literature on the effectiveness, safety, and potential harms of various public health mitigation measures for SARS-CoV-2 transmission related to air travel. WHO outlined the process it will undertake to assess the key factors related to health equity and human rights in the industry.
 - WHO Director-General Tedros [warned](#) that COVID-19 will not be the world’s last pandemic, and encouraged countries to invest in public health through an “all-of-government, all-of-society one health approach.”

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

- [*CDC Interpretation of Forecasts of New Deaths and Hospitalizations*](#), December 23
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 36 models projecting the COVID-19 death rate. Predicted rates of increase differ among the forecasts, depending on assumptions about the prevalence and rigor of social distancing behaviors.
 - CDC’s national ensemble forecast indicates that COVID-19 deaths will likely increase over the next four weeks. CDC predicts that the number of cumulative COVID-19 deaths will be between 378,000 and 419,000 by January 16.
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from seven models projecting the number of daily COVID-19 hospitalizations. The forecasts estimate 9,200 to 23,000 new COVID-19 hospitalizations per day by January 18.

New York State

- [*New York State COVID-19 Updates*](#), December 28
 - New York reported 114 deaths, 7,559 hospitalizations, and 1,222 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, December 27.

- New York’s COVID-19 hospitalizations are the highest [level](#) since May. However, no New York hospital has notified the state government that it will exceed 85% capacity within the next 21 days.
 - Approximately 10,407, or 8.33% of the 124,866 tests administered in New York on December 27 were positive for COVID-19.
 - As of December 22, New York has administered 140,000 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.
 - Governor Cuomo [announced](#) that he plans to sign an executive order extending the State’s moratorium on evictions and his office is working with the legislature on a housing bill to protect homeowners against foreclosure.
- [State Government Investigating COVID-19 Vaccine Diversion](#), December 27
 - The New York state government is investigating whether a network of health clinics violated rules regarding vaccine prioritization.
 - State Health Commissioner Zucker announced the investigation of ParCare Community Health Network, which has clinics in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Kiryas Joel, a village northwest of the city.
 - Zucker [said](#) that ParCare “may have fraudulently obtained COVID-19 vaccine, transferred it to facilities in other parts of the state in violation of state guidelines and diverted it to members of the public.”
 - ParCare’s own social media posts suggested that it may have administered COVID-19 vaccines to individuals who are not part of the state’s initial priority groups – health care workers and residents and employees of long-term care facilities.
 - Two days after New York began administering Pfizer’s vaccine, ParCare posted an advertisement indicating that it would make vaccines available on a first come first serve basis.
 - Governor Cuomo [signed](#) an executive order imposing heavy penalties for health care providers that intentionally disregard the State’s vaccine prioritization protocols. Under the executive order, providers can be fined up to \$1 million and/or have their license to practice revoked.
- [New York Legislature to Enact Eviction Protections Law](#), December 28
 - The State legislature is [expected](#) to pass a comprehensive anti-eviction law in a special session convened between Christmas and New Years, protecting tenants when the Governor’s executive order barring evictions runs out on December 31.
 - The new law will bar landlords from evicting most tenants for at least 60 days after December 31, and allows tenants in danger of eviction to submit a document stating financial hardship related to the pandemic to postpone an eviction.
 - Throughout New York, eviction proceedings have continued, but landlords have largely been barred from physically removing tenants from their homes.
 - The legislation includes provisions to protect small landlords who are struggling to pay bills from foreclosure by banks, but landlords argue the bill oversteps by allowing tenants to escape eviction merely by stating, rather than proving, financial hardship.
 - Tenants will continue to owe back rent to landlords after the moratorium ends.

New York City

- [*New York City COVID-19 Updates*](#), December 28
 - New York City Fire Department EMTs and [paramedics](#) became the first City first responders to get the COVID-19 vaccine on December 23. Firefighters and NYPD officers will begin receiving the vaccine on December 29.

Other Related Updates

- [*Study Indicates UK Coronavirus Variant More Transmissible*](#), December 23
 - Earlier this month, experts identified a new coronavirus variant in the UK. The variant had spread widely within the UK, sparking fears that it is more transmissible than previously-identified strains of the virus.
 - On December 23, Center for Mathematical Modeling of Infectious Diseases at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine released a [study](#) indicating that the new variant is indeed more transmissible. The study estimated that the new strain may be 56 % more transmissible, but the researchers that conducted the study cautioned the figure is only an estimate.
 - The study results have not yet been peer-reviewed, but Harvard epidemiologist Bill Hanage said that the results are “consistent with what we’ve been seeing from other sources of information.”
 - The researchers that conducted the study modeled the effect the new variant will have on COVID-19 cases in the United Kingdom with different levels of restrictions. The researchers warned that, even with increased restrictions, without a more substantial vaccine rollout, “cases, hospitalizations, I.C.U. admissions and deaths in 2021 may exceed those in 2020.”
 - The new variant initially identified in the United Kingdom has since been detected in several other European countries, Japan, and Canada. The new variant has not yet been detected in the United States, but last week CDC warned that it could be circulating undetected.
 - Experts [say](#) COVID-19 vaccines should work against the new variant and even if the virus were to mutate further, vaccines can be altered to remain effective against new variants.
- [*Latin America, European Union Begin Vaccinations*](#), December 24
 - Mexico [began](#) its coronavirus vaccination campaign on December 24, the first country in Latin America to do so. Latin America is one of the epicenters of the pandemic, as Brazil and Mexico have sustained some of the world’s highest death tolls.
 - Mexico plans to distribute the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to health care workers in December, January, and February before shifting focus to older citizens considered most at risk.
 - The first doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine also arrived in Costa Rica and Chile on December 24, and the first 300,000 doses of Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine landed in Buenos Aires, Argentina the same day.
 - The European Union officially [began](#) its vaccine campaign on December 27, but each member nation is setting its own timeline. Germany, Greece, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland were among the first to offer inoculations.

- Some nations, including Germany, Hungary, and Slovakia, began vaccinations as soon as doses arrived on December 26, [ahead](#) of the official E.U. timeline.
- Other nations will follow early this week, with the Netherlands likely to begin last on January 8.
- [Vaccine Skepticism Shrinking in U.S.](#), December 26
 - After months of polls showed a concerning number of [Americans](#) would refuse vaccinations against COVID-19, polls show a growing number of people are likely or certain to take the vaccine.
 - Polls by [Gallup](#), [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), and [Pew Research Center](#) show the portion of people likely or certain to take the vaccine is above 60%, and in one poll as high as 73% - up from about 50% of those polled over the summer.
 - Resistance to the vaccine is not vanishing. Misinformation is [rising](#) across social media, though the sentiment has shifted somewhat from targeting the vaccine itself to debate over who has access to it.
 - The overall rise in vaccine acceptance appears to be the result of multiple factors, including the uncoupling of the vaccine from election day, high effectiveness reported in Phase 3 studies, and high-profile news coverage of health officials and political leaders receiving the vaccine.
 - The most pronounced pockets of resistance remain in rural residents and people between the ages of 30 and 49.
- [FDA COVID-19 Updates](#), December 28
 - A Food and Drug Administration (FDA) advisory committee reviewing the Moderna vaccine [warned](#) that people with cosmetic facial fillers could experience swelling and inflammation at the site of the filler following vaccine injection. Patients who experienced the reaction were treated with steroids and anti-histamines, and their reactions were resolved.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [Coronavirus Relief Legislation Creates Substantial Changes to Copyright and Trademark Law](#), December 28
- [Bipartisan Legislation for COVID Relief Package – Summary of Key Provisions](#), December 23
- [Phase 4 Stimulus Package – Highlight of Certain Key Tax-Related Provisions in the Phase 4 Stimulus Package](#), December 22

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