

December 30, 2020

### Summary

The United States has 19,575,037 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 340,004 reported related deaths. A coronavirus variant originally discovered in the United Kingdom and believed to be more transmissible than other strains was detected in the United States for the first time. A Colorado man with no recent travel history tested positive for the variant, suggesting that it may be circulating in United States communities. Several states, including Florida and Texas, are departing from CDC guidance that individuals aged 75 years and older and front line workers receive the second round of COVID-19 vaccines. These states are prioritizing individuals in their 60s and early 70s and asking many frontline workers to wait. President-elect Biden warned that the country's vaccine rollout is "not progressing as it should." Earlier this year, the federal government set a goal of administering 20 million COVID-19 vaccine doses by the end of 2020. To date, the country has only administered several million doses. Regulators approved AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine for use in the United Kingdom.

At least seven states – Alabama, California, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas – set record highs for COVID-19 related hospitalizations so far this week. California Governor Gavin Newsome extended Southern California's stay-at-home order through at least January 16, as available ICU capacity in L.A. County hit 0%. North Dakota reported its lowest active COVID-19 case total since August 25, reflecting the steep decline in new cases in the Midwest throughout December. Louisiana's Congressman-elect Luke Letlow died of the virus on December 29.

New York reported 124 deaths, 7,814 hospitalizations, and 1,224 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Monday, December 28. Approximately 11,438, or 7.14% of the 160,164 tests administered in New York on December 28 were positive for COVID-19. New York updated its guidance for quarantining after COVID-19 exposure to align itself with the CDC. Under the new guidance, individuals exposed to the virus can end their quarantine after 10 days without a test, as long as they do not develop any symptoms. In New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced the Open Storefronts program, which allows stores to show merchandise and conduct sales in sidewalk space, will remain in place through September 2021. This was the bloodiest year since 2011 in New York City, the result of a sharp rise in homicides that was likely driven by pandemic-related factors.

## Presidential updates

- [\*President-Elect Biden Criticizes Vaccine Rollout\*](#), December 29
  - President-elect Biden warned the public that the country's vaccine rollout "is not progressing as it should."
  - Earlier this year, the federal government set a goal of administering 20 million COVID-19 vaccine doses by the end of 2020.
  - As of December 28, 11.4 million doses had been distributed to the states but just 2.1 million doses had been administered, according to a CDC report which may reflect a slight reporting lag.
  - In a recent opinion column, Doctor Leana Wang [warned](#) that at the current rate of vaccine administration, it will take the country 10 years to vaccinate 80 to 85% of its population, the percentage needed to reach herd immunity.
  - On December 30, President Trump [urged](#) the states to speed up the vaccine rollout, noting that the federal government had distributed millions of vaccines and "now it is up to the states" to administer them.
  - But FDA advisory panel member and director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia Paul Offit [told](#) the press that states still lack the funding they need to efficiently distribute the vaccines.
  - Operation Warp Speed chief Slaoui [acknowledged](#) that the vaccine rollout is "lower than what we hoped for" but noted that the government is "working hard to make it better."
  - Biden, who will take office in just a few weeks, promised a "much more aggressive" vaccine distribution and administration effort under his administration. Biden has vowed to get at least 100 million vaccine doses administered in his first 100 days in office.

## World Health Organization (WHO)

- [\*WHO COVID-19 Updates\*](#), December 30
  - WHO officials [called](#) for countries to expand genomic sequencing of SARS-CoV-2 samples in order to detect new variants of the virus. Director-General Tedros explained, "only if countries are looking and testing effectively will you be able to pick up variants and adjust strategies to cope."
  - WHO emergencies chief Michael Ryan [warned](#) that despite the disastrous scope of the COVID-19 pandemic, it may not be "the big one," noting the mortality rate of COVID-19 is lower than many emerging diseases. Ryan also said it is likely COVID-19 will become an endemic, low-level threat to humanity for years to come, as vaccines do not guarantee the disease will be eradicated.

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

- [\*Some States Departing from CDC Vaccine Prioritization Guidance\*](#), December 29
  - CDC, together with an independent advisory panel, has been issuing guidelines for prioritizing groups for COVID-19 vaccination. However, the federal government has entrusted the states to make the final determinations regarding vaccine prioritization.
  - States largely adopted CDC's guidance that health care workers and residents and employees of long-term care facilities be vaccinated first. However, some states are

departing from CDC's guidance that individuals aged 75 years and older and frontline workers be vaccinated second.

- Both Florida and Texas are prioritizing a broader segment of their elderly populations and asking many frontline workers to wait. Ohio is adopting a similar approach but is also prioritizing teachers to speed school re-openings.
  - Officials in these states have argued that older people are the most vulnerable to severe disease and death. Director of Florida's Division of Emergency Management Jared Moskowitz also noted that older people are the most likely to be hospitalized with the virus and therefore vaccinating them first will alleviate the burden on the state's health care system.
  - Nationally, 80.7% of COVID-19 related deaths have been among people aged 65 and older, according to the CDC. When CDC's advisory committee voted to advise states to prioritize individuals aged 75 years and older and front line workers, one committee member dissented. Pediatrics professor Henry Bernstein advocated including individuals aged 65 to 74 as well because he was not convinced that individuals in that cohort were any less vulnerable than those 75 years and older.
  - However, front line workers, such as grocery store and transit employees, are at a higher risk of exposure. People of color are also overrepresented in such jobs.
- [\*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 predicts that deaths will increase over the next four weeks. CDC predicts that the number of cumulative COVID-19 deaths will be between 378,000 to 419,000 by January 16.
    - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 11 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 30
  - New York reported 124 deaths, 7,814 hospitalizations, and 1,224 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Monday, December 28. Approximately 11,438, or 7.14% of the 160,164 tests administered in New York on December 28 were positive for COVID-19.
  - New York updated its guidance for quarantining after COVID-19 exposure to align itself with the CDC. Under the new guidance, individuals exposed to the virus can end their quarantine after 10 days without a test, as long as they develop no symptoms.

### **New York City**

- [\*New York City COVID-19 Updates\*](#), December 30
  - New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio [announced](#) the Open Storefronts program, which permits storefront businesses to use a portion of their sidewalk to display merchandise, sell goods, complete transactions, and provide queuing areas, will be extended through September 30, 2021. The program will also allow businesses to sell pre-packaged food on sidewalks, and allow restaurants to use sidewalks for take-out orders.

- [\*2020 Was City's Bloodiest Year in a Decade\*](#), December 29
  - New York City recorded 447 homicides in 2020, the most since 2011, but well below the record highs in the 1980s and 1990s. The COVID-19 pandemic was a major factor in the surge.
  - Possibly a result of economic strain, shootings doubled over the summer months, and most of them were concentrated in the areas hit hardest by COVID-19 and unemployment.
  - Burglaries and car thefts also spiked in the hollowed-out city, and bodegas saw an increase in robberies and shootings.
  - Police officials pointed to gang disputes as a key driver of violence over the summer.
  - The justice system was slow to respond on multiple fronts, as police officers were sickened and killed by COVID-19, diverted to respond to mass protests in May and June, and courts ground to a halt. Police solved only 26.3% of serious crimes in the second quarter, down from 35.8% in 2019.
  - The increase in violence resembled trends in many large U.S. cities, as shootings and homicides have increased throughout the country even as the pandemic drove down incidents of other crimes.

### **Other Related Updates**

- [\*United Kingdom Grants Emergency Authorization to AstraZeneca Vaccine; Will Accelerate Inoculations by Giving Single Doses to Patients\*](#), December 30
  - United Kingdom became the first country to [grant](#) emergency authorization to AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine, which was developed in concert with researchers at University of Oxford.
  - UK's approval of the AstraZeneca vaccine opens the door for a cheap and easy-to-store shot that will likely become the lynchpin of the world's inoculation efforts.
  - The shot costs \$3 to \$4 per dose, a fraction of the price of other vaccines, and can be shipped and stored at normal refrigeration temperatures for six months. Moreover, the company pledged to make its vaccine available at cost around the world until at least July 2021, and in poorer countries in perpetuity.
  - AstraZeneca also set more ambitious manufacturing targets than other Western vaccine makers, hoping to produce up to three billion doses next year.
  - UK regulators approved the vaccine at two full-strength doses. Phase 3 trials showed the vaccine may be significantly more effective in patients who receive a half dose initially, followed by a full dose booster, but regulators said those more promising results were not borne out by a full analysis.
  - UK officials also announced they will begin giving a first vaccine dose to as many people as possible, rather than holding back supplies for quick second doses.
  - The strategy is a significant departure from prevailing strategies around the world, but UK scientists hope the experiment will speed vaccinations and greatly expand the number of people who receive some immunity through inoculation.
  - The aggressive strategy may be a response to the [outbreak](#) of a more infectious variant of the virus that has spread rapidly throughout the country.

- [Positive Vaccine Updates from China and Russia](#), December 30
  - Sinopharm, a Chinese state-controlled pharmaceutical company, said its COVID-19 vaccine candidate had a 79% [efficacy](#) rate in interim late-stage trials. Sinopharm filed an application with Chinese regulators to allow the vaccine to be distributed broadly.
  - Though the interim results show the vaccine is less effective than Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna's vaccines, the results are well above the 50 percent threshold generally accepted as effective by the world medical establishment.
  - For now, the announcement lacked details: it was merely a few sentences long, and Sinopharm did not provide any data about the size of the trial or the numbers behind the results, preventing outside researchers from reviewing the results themselves.
  - Sinopharm's vaccine uses inactivated coronavirus, a vaccination method dating back over 130 years. Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccines use a revolutionary RNA-based approach that reduces biosecurity risk and allows faster manufacturing.
  - China has already begun inoculating its own high-priority citizens, such as health care workers.
  - Russia secured a vote of [confidence](#) in the safety of its Sputnik V vaccine, as Belarus and Argentina became the first countries outside Russia to begin injecting the vaccine on a large scale.
  - Russia had previously announced the vaccine was 91% [effective](#), but critics warned that President Vladimir Putin claimed the vaccine was ready for use before trials were completed.
  
- [Novavax Vaccine Candidate Begins Phase 3 Trial](#), December 28
  - The Phase 3 trial for Novavax's COVID-19 vaccine candidate [began](#) enrolling adult volunteers on December 28 to evaluate the vaccine's safety and efficacy.
  - The randomized, placebo-controlled trial will enroll approximately 30,000 people at 115 sites in the United States and Mexico. The study aims to enroll at least 25% of volunteers that are aged 65 or older.
  - National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID), part of National Institutes of Health (NIH), and Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA), part of Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) are funding the trial.
  - The study is the fifth Phase 3 COVID-19 vaccine trial launched in the United States, and is being conducted in collaboration with Operation Warp Speed.
  - Novavax's vaccine candidate is made from a stabilized form of the coronavirus spike protein using the company's recombinant protein nanoparticle technology. Importantly, the vaccine can be stored and distributed at above-freezing temperatures.
  
- [FDA COVID-19 Updates](#), December 30
  - Food and Drug Administration (FDA) [posted](#) an updated letter of authorization, health care provider fact sheet, and frequently asked questions regarding the number of Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine doses in a vial. The update continued FDA's advice that it is acceptable to use every full dose obtainable from a vial, but not to mix leftover remnants from one vial with another. Vials of Pfizer's vaccine are meant to contain five doses but recently, pharmacists and others reported that some vials contain enough vaccine for six or more doses.

- FDA updated its Device Shortage [List](#), which tracks medical device shortages during the COVID-19 public health emergency. FDA added pipette tips and micropipettes to the shortage list.

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

Send questions to:

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