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Inside C2

Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

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COVID-19 infections soar in U.S. Congress amid Omicron surge

WASHINGTON, Jan 3 (Reuters) - The U.S. Congress is experiencing an unprecedented rise in COVID-19 cases, with the seven-day positivity rate at a congressional test site surging to 13% from just 1% in late November, the Capitol's attending physician said on Monday.

Most coronavirus infections on Capitol Hill have been occurring among the vaccinated, with the Omicron variant representing about 61% and the Delta variant 38%, based on a limited sample as of Dec. 15. Dr. Brian Monahan told lawmakers and staff in a Jan. 3 letter.

Report ad

The surge comes as the number of new COVID-19 cases in the United States has doubled in the last seven days to an average of 418,000 a day, according to a Reuters tally.

Monahan noted that breakthrough infections among the vaccinated on Capitol Hill have not led to hospitalizations, serious complications or deaths, a fact he said demonstrated the importance of vaccinations.

The U.S. government has been urging vaccinated Americans to get boosters and for the unvaccinated, who are at a much higher risk of getting a severe case of COVID-19 and dying, to be inoculated.

About 65% of COVID-19 cases at the Capitol have been symptomatic, according to the letter. In other cases, people testing positive have not shown symptoms.

The Senate was due to return on Monday after a year-end holiday break but met for only a brief session due to a snow storm that also forced the Capitol testing site to close early.

The attending physician did not call for any change in an existing requirement for masks to be worn in the Capitol whenever others are present, though he advised members and staff to wear medical-grade masks rather than simple cloth ones.

He also urged congressional offices, committees and agencies to immediately review operations and adopt "a maximal telework posture" to reduce in-person meetings and in-office activities.



A bicyclist rides along the East Front Plaza during a snow storm on Capitol Hill in Washington, U.S., January 3, 2022. REUTERS/Tom Brenner

Russia, China, Britain, U.S. and France say no one can win nuclear war

MOSCOW/WASHINGTON, Jan 3 (Reuters) - China, Russia, Britain, the United States and France have agreed that a further spread of nuclear arms and a nuclear war should be avoided, according to a joint statement by the five nuclear powers published by the Kremlin on Monday.

It said that the five countries - which are the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council - consider it their primary responsibility to avoid war between the nuclear states and to reduce strategic risks, while aiming to work with all countries to create an atmosphere of security.

"We affirm that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought," the English-language version of the statement read.

"As nuclear use would have far-reaching consequences, we also affirm that nuclear weapons — for as long as they continue to exist — should serve defensive purposes, deter aggression, and prevent war."

France also released the statement, underscoring that the five powers reiterated their determination for nuclear arms control and disarmament. They would continue bilateral and multilateral approaches to nuclear arms control, it said.

The statement from the so-called P5 group comes as bilateral relations between the United States and Moscow have fallen to their lowest since the end of the Cold War, while relations between Washington and China are also at a low over a range of disagreements.

The Pentagon in November sharply increased its estimate of China's projected nuclear weapons arsenal over the coming years, saying Beijing could have 700 warheads by 2027 and possibly 1,000 by 2030.

Washington has repeatedly urged

China to join it and Russia in a new arms control treaty.

Geopolitical tensions between Moscow and Western countries have increased over concerns about Russia's military buildup near neighbouring Ukraine. Moscow says it can move its army around its own territory as it deems necessary.

Last Thursday U.S. President Joe Biden told his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin that a possible move on Ukraine will draw sanctions and an increased U.S. presence in Europe, where tensions are high after Russia's military buildup at the border.

U.S. and Russian officials will hold security talks on Jan. 10 to discuss concerns about their respective military activity and confront rising tensions over Ukraine, the two countries said.

A conference on a major nuclear treaty that was set to begin on Tuesday at the United Nations has been postponed until August due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES

01/03/2021

Virus Normalization?

In the past two years countries around the world have almost all used the same methods to face the spread of the virus, including blockades, wearing masks, managing social distance, restricting private gatherings and requiring proof of vaccinations.

Today the omicron variant is sweeping the world. Even Israel, the nation most close to successfully preventing the epidemic, now says it could not stop the virus because it spreads too fast. But for more than one month now the variant mainly causes mild disease, especially for those who have been vaccinated which helps greatly to prevent severe illness and death.

Dr. Anthony Fauci estimates that we will



reach a high peak at the end of this month with the omicron virus. He also suggests that Americans should reduce isolation time from ten days to five after they tested positive.

To be honest, compared with last year at this time, we are much better off because of the invention of many vaccines and oral drugs.

Political leaders around the world are facing a dilemma: if they shut down businesses, it will mean a big economic loss, if not, they will have to worry about the spreading of the virus.

As we enter the new year together, everyone is just in the same boat, and to face the challenge, we must help each other.



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Southern DAILY Make Today Different

Editor's Choice



Julia and Danielle Vrasure play with their dog, Archie, during a snowstorm near the U.S. Supreme Court on Capitol Hill, in Washington, U.S., January 3, 2022. REUTERS/Tom Brenner



A jogger makes her way along the National Mall during a snowstorm in Washington, U.S., January 3, 2022. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque



A cross-country skier is seen on the National Mall amidst heavy snow in Washington, January 3, 2022. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque



A couple walk together as the U.S. Capitol is seen in the background amidst heavy snow, in Washington, January 3, 2022. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque



A visitor crosses Independence Avenue behind a fallen tree, amid a snowstorm, on Capitol Hill in Washington, January 3, 2022. REUTERS/Tom Brenner



The sky goes orange behind the Washington Monument and the Smithsonian Castle as a couple pose for a sunset selfie in Washington. REUTERS/ Kevin Lamarque

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

BUSINESS

Hispanics Are Dying At The Highest Rate

Deaths Now At 800,000



A portion of a mural, which displays images of people who have died of coronavirus disease (COVID-19), is seen in Joni Zavitsanos' art studio in Houston, Texas, as the country reaches 600,000 deaths. (Photo credit/REUTERS/Callaghan O'Hare.)

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Jerry Ramos spent his final days in a California hospital, hooked to an oxygen machine with blood clots in his lungs from COVID-19, his 3-year-old daughter in his thoughts.

"I have to be here to watch my princess grow up," the Mexican American restaurant worker wrote on Facebook. "My heart feels broken into pieces."

Ramos didn't live to see it. He died Feb. 15 at age 32, becoming not just one of the nearly 824,000 Americans who have now perished in the coronavirus outbreak but another example of the outbreak's strikingly uneven and ever-shifting toll on the nation's racial and ethnic groups.

The New 800,000 mark, as tracked by Johns Hopkins University, is greater than the population of Baltimore or Milwaukee. It is about equal to the number of Americans who died of cancer in 2019. And as bad as that is, the true toll is believed to be significantly higher. Last summer, during a second surge, Hispanics were hit the hardest, suffering an outside share of deaths, driven by infections in Texas and Florida. By winter, during the third and most lethal stage, the virus had gripped the entire nation, and racial gaps in weekly death rates had

narrowed so much that whites were the worst off, followed closely by Hispanics.

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FILE - In this July 11, 2020, file photo, mourners carry out the remains of loved ones following the blessing of the ashes of Mexicans who died from COVID-19 at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. Government health officials say Native Americans, Latinos and Black people are two to three times more likely than whites to die of COVID-19. (AP Photo/Eduardo Munoz Alvarez, File)

President Joe Biden acknowledged the milestone Monday during his visit to Europe, saying that while

new cases and deaths are dropping dramatically in the U.S., "there's still too many lives being lost," and "now is not the time to let our guard down."

On the way to the latest round-number milestone, the virus has proved adept at exploiting inequalities in the U.S., according to an Associated Press data analysis.

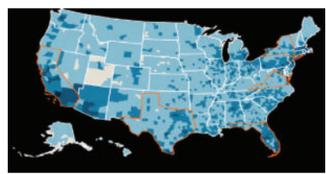
In the first wave of fatalities, in April 2020, Black people were slammed, dying at rates higher than those of other ethnic or racial groups as the virus rampaged through the urban Northeast and heavily African American cities like Detroit and New Orleans.

Now, even as the outbreak ebbs and more people get vaccinated, a racial gap appears to be emerging again, with Black Americans dying at higher rates than other groups.

Overall, Black and Hispanic Americans have less access to medical care and are in poorer health, with higher rates of conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure. They are also more likely to have jobs deemed essential, less able to work from home and more likely to live in crowded, multigenerational households, where working family members are apt to expose others to the virus.

Milestones Crossed In U.S. COVID-19 Deaths

Cumulative deaths in the U.S. through the week ending: June 13, 2021 100,000200,000300,000400,000500,000



NOTE: Weekly counts end on Sunday. The count for the most recent week will not be complete until Sunday. In Utah only the larger-population counties are reporting confirmed deaths; smaller counties are banded together into county groups; Those counties are not shown in this map. Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE (AP Photo Credit: NICKY FORSTER AND PHIL HOLM)

Black people account for 15% of all COVID-19 deaths where race is known, while Hispanics represent 19%, whites 61% and Asian Americans 4%. Those figures are close to the groups' share of the U.S. population — Black people at 12%, Hispanics 18%, whites 60% and Asians 6% — but adjusting for age yields a clearer picture of the unequal burden.

Because Blacks and Hispanics are younger on average than whites, it would stand to reason that they would be less likely to die from a disease that has been brutal to the elderly.



In this April 22, 2020, file photo, pallbearers, who were among only 10 allowed mourners, walk the casket for interment at the funeral for Larry Hammond, who died from the coronavirus, at Mount Olivet Cemetery in New Orleans. Government health officials say Native Americans, Latinos and Black people are two to three times more likely than whites to die of COVID-19. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)

But that's not what is happening. Instead, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, adjusting for population age differences, estimates that Native Americans, Latinos and Blacks are two to three times more likely than white people to die of COVID-19. Also, the AP analysis found that Latinos are dying at much younger ages than other groups. Thirty-seven percent of Hispanic deaths were of those under 65, versus 12% for white Americans and 30% for Black people. Hispanic people between 30 and 39 — like Ramos — have died at five times the rate of white people in the same age group. Public health experts see these disparities as a loud message that the nation needs to address deep-rooted inequities.

"If we want to respect the dear price that 600,000 people have paid, don't return to normal. Return to something that is better than what was," said Dr. Clyde Yancy, vice dean for diversity and inclusion at Northwestern University's medical school in Chicago.

He added: "It will be an epic fail if we simply go back to whatever we call normal."



Yolanda Ogbolu, a nurse researcher at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, who advocated for two relatives during their COVID-19 hospital stays, looks out a window at the university's nursing school on Friday, June 11, 2021, in Baltimore. (AP Photo/Steve Ruark)

Yolanda Ogbolu, who is Black, made herself an advocate for two relatives during their COVID-19 hospital

stays: her 50-year-old police officer brother — she persuaded his doctors to treat him with the drug remdesivir — and her 59-year-old repairman uncle. She called the hospital daily during his 100-day stay. Both survived. But Ogbolu wonders whether they would have lived if they hadn't had a nurse in the family.

"What happens when people don't have that person to push for them? What happens when you don't even speak the language?" Ogbolu said. "What happens when they don't know how to navigate the health system or what questions to ask?"

Ramos had asthma and diabetes and had quit his job as a chef at Red Lobster before the pandemic because of diabetes-related trouble with his feet.

He died during the devastating winter surge that hit Latinos hard, and the rest of his household of seven in Watsonville, an agricultural city of around 54,000 people about 90 miles south of San Francisco, also got sick.



Laura Ramos holds a photo of her brother Jerry Ramos at her home in Watsonville, Calif., Sunday, June 6, 2021. He died Feb. 15 at age 32, becoming not just one of the roughly 600,000 Americans who have now perished in the outbreak but another example of the virus's strikingly uneven and ever-shifting toll on the nation's racial and ethnic groups. (AP Photo/Nic Coury)

That included his toddler daughter; the family matriarch, 70-year-old Mercedes Ramos; and his girlfriend, who was the only one in the household working and the first to get infected,

bringing home the virus from her job managing a marijuana dispensary, according to family members. Mother and son were admitted to the same hospital, their rooms nearby. They would video chat or call each other every day.

"He would tell me he loved me very much and that he wanted me to get better and that he was doing fine, but he was telling me that so I wouldn't worry," Mercedes Ramos said in Spanish, her voice breaking. She has since returned to her job picking strawberries.

Gaps in vaccination rates in the U.S. also persist, with Blacks and Hispanics lagging behind, said Samantha Artiga of the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonpartisan health-policy research organization.

(Continued On Page C7-2)

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

COMMUNITY

Continued from page C7-1 Hispanics Are Dying At The Highest Rate

Deaths Now At 800,000



A memorial for Jerry Ramos sits at his home in Watsonville, Calif., Sunday, June 6, 2021. (AP Photo/Nic Coury)

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Experts say several factors could be at work, including deep distrust of the medical establishment among Black Americans because of a history of discriminatory treatment, and fears of deportation among Latinos, as well as a language barrier in many cases.

The U.S. was averaging about 870,000 injections per day in early June, down sharply from a high of about 3.3 million a day on average in mid-April, according to the CDC.

Initial vaccine eligibility policies, set by states, favored older Americans, a group more likely to be white. Now, everyone over 12 is eligible, but obstacles remain, such as concerns about missing work because of side effects from the shot.

"Eligibility certainly does not equal access," Artiga said. "Losing a day or two of wages can have real consequences for your family. People are facing tough decisions like that."

The AP's analysis of the outbreak's racial and ethnic patterns was based on National Center for Health Statistics data on COVID-19 deaths and 2019 Census Bu-

reau population estimates.



It's less clear who is dying now, but the still-incomplete data suggests a gap has emerged again. In Michigan, Black people are 14% of the population but accounted for 25% of the 1,064 deaths reported in the past four weeks, according to the most recent available state data. Similar gaps were seen in Florida and Pennsylvania.

"For people of color like myself, we've had deep personal experiences during the pandemic" of caring for loved ones and sometimes losing them, said Yolanda Ogbolu, a nurse researcher at the University of Maryland, Baltimore. (Courtesy https://apnews.com/)

Related 600,000 Painful U.S. COVID-19 deaths Leave a Swath Of Misery

Across The Country

The United States has now lost over 600,000 mothers, fathers, children, siblings and friends to COVID-19, a painful reminder that death, sickness and grief continue even as the country begins to return to something resembling pre-pandemic normal.

A bride forced by the pandemic to have a Zoom wedding is planning a lavish in-person anniversary celebration this summer, but all of the guests must attest they are vaccinated.

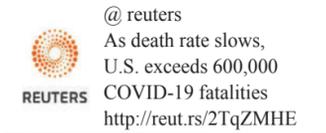
A Houston artist, still deep in grief, is working on a collage of images of people who died in her community. Others crowd theaters and bars, saying it is time to move on.

"There will be no tears - not even happy tears," said Ali Whitman, who will celebrate her first wedding anniversary in August by donning her gown and partying with 240 vaccinated friends and family members in New Hampshire.

COVID-19 nearly killed her mother. She spent her wedding day last year with 13 people in person while an aunt conducted the ceremony via Zoom.

"I would be remiss not to address how awful and how terrible the past year has been, but also the gratitude that I can be in a singular place with all the people in my life who mean so much to me," said Whitman, 30.

The United States passed 600,000 COVID-19 deaths on Monday, about 15% of the world's total coronavirus fatalities of around 4 million, a Reuters tally shows.



The rate of severe illness and death has dropped dramatically as more Americans have become vaccinated, creating something of a psychological whiplash that

plagues the millions whose lives have been touched by the disease. Many are eager to emerge from more than a year of sickness and lockdown, yet they still suffer - from grief, lingering symptoms, economic trauma or the isolation of lockdown.

"We've all lived through this awful time, and all of us have been affected one way or another," said Erika Stein, who has suffered from migraines, fatigue and cognitive issues since contracting COVID-19 last fall. "My world flipped upside down in the last year and a half - and that's been hard."

Stein, 34, was active and fit, working as a marketing executive and fitness instructor in Virginia outside Washington, D.C., before the initial illness and related syndrome known as long-COVID ravaged her life.

Like many, she has mixed feelings about how quickly cities and states have moved to lift pandemic restrictions and re-open.



'FOR MY FAMILY, THERE IS NO NORMAL'

In New York, social worker Shyvonne Noboa still cries talking about the disease that ravaged her family, infecting 14 out of 17 relatives and killing her beloved grandfather.

She breaks down when she goes to Target and sees the well-stocked aisles, recalling the pandemic's depths, when she could not find hand sanitizer to protect her family.

"New York City is going back to quote-unquote 'normal' and opening up, but I can assure you that for my family there is no normal," said Noboa, who lives in Queens, an early epicenter of the U.S. outbreak. She is vaccinated but still wears a mask when she is out, and plans to continue doing so in the near future.

In Houston, artist Joni Zavitsanos started looking up obituaries of people in Southeast Texas who had died in the pandem-

ic's early days, reading their stories and creating mixed-media memorials displaying their names and photographs. Around each person she painted a halo using gold leaf, an homage to the Byzantine art of the Greek Orthodox church she attends.

Zavitsanos has now created about 575 images, and plans to keep going, making as many as she can, each portrait on an eight-by-eight-inch piece of wood to be mounted together to form an installation. Her brother and three adult children contracted COVID-19 and recovered. A very close friend nearly died and is still struggling with rehabilitation.



Chris Kocher, who founded the support and advocacy group COVID Survivors for Change, urged sympathy and support for people who are still grieving.

"We're being given this false choice where you can open up and celebrate, or you need to be locked down in grief," he said. "Let's be thankful that people are getting vaccinated, but let's also acknowledge that going back to normal is not an option for millions of Americans." One way to acknowledge the toll that COVID-19 has taken is to incorporate the color yellow into celebrations and gatherings, or display a yellow heart, which for some has become a symbol of those lost to the disease, he said.

The bittersweet mix of grief at the pandemic's toll with relief brought by its ebb was clear at Chicago's O'Hare airport on Thursday, where Stephanie Aviles and her family waited for a cousin to arrive from Puerto Rico.

Aviles, 23, lost two close friends to the virus, and her father nearly died. And yet, here she was, greeting family she had not been able to see for 15 months as the pandemic raged.

"I'm grateful, but it's a lot," she said. "It's a strange feeling to be normal again." (Courtesy https://www.reuters.com/world)