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Inside C2

Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

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U.S. reports nearly 1 million COVID-19 cases in a day, setting global record

Jan 4 (Reuters) - The United States set a global record of almost 1 million new coronavirus infections reported on Monday, according to a Reuters tally, nearly double the country's peak of 505,109 hit just a week ago as the highly contagious Omicron variant shows no sign of slowing.

The number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients has risen nearly 50% in the last week and now exceeds 100,000, a Reuters analysis showed, the first time that threshold has been reached since the winter surge a year ago. Overall, the United States has seen a daily average of 486,000 cases over the last week, a rate that has doubled in seven days and far outstrips that of any other country. The 978,856 new infections on Monday includes some cases from Saturday and Sunday, when many states do not report.

The average number of U.S. deaths per day has remained fairly steady throughout December and into early January at about 1,300, according to a Reuters tally, though deaths typically lag behind cases and hospitalizations.

Omicron appears to be far more easily transmitted than previous iterations of the virus. The variant was estimated to account for 95.4% of the coronavirus cases identified in the United States as of Jan. 1, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said on Tuesday.

The World Health Organization said on Tuesday that evidence thus far suggests Omicron is causing less severe illness. Nevertheless, public health officials have warned that the sheer volume of Omicron cases threatens to overwhelm hospitals, some of which are already struggling to handle a wave of COVID-19 patients, primarily among the unvaccinated.

Maryland Governor Larry Hogan declared a 30-day state of emergency on Tuesday and mobilized 1,000 National Guard members to pandemic response operations as COVID-19 hospitalizations in the state hit a record high of more than 3,000. That is an increase of more than 500% in the last seven weeks, Hogan said.

"The truth is that the next four to six weeks will be the most challenging time of the entire pandemic," Hogan told reporters. "Our newest projections as of today show that COVID hospitalizations could reach more than 5,000, which would be more than 250% higher than our previous peak of 1,952 last year."

Delaware, Illinois, Ohio and Washington, D.C., also have reported record numbers of hospitalized COVID patients in recent days.



People line up in cold winter temperatures to be tested for the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Everett, Massachusetts, U.S., January 4, 2022. Picture taken with a drone. REUTERS/Brian Snyder

Record 4.5 million Americans quit jobs in November

WASHINGTON, Jan 4 (Reuters) - The number of Americans voluntarily quitting their jobs surged to a record 4.5 million in November, a show of confidence in the labor market and an indication that higher wages could prevail for a while.

The 370,000 increase in quits reported in the Labor Department's monthly Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey, or JOLTS report, on Tuesday was led by the accommodation and food services industry.

There were also big increases in the health care and social assistance fields as well as the transportation, warehousing and utilities sectors. All four U.S. regions reported a rise



A hiring sign is posted near an Ellume building that is under construction in Frederick, Maryland, U.S., November 18, 2021. Picture taken November 18, 2021. REUTERS/Leah Millis

in the number of people quitting their jobs.

Job openings, a measure of labor demand, dropped by 529,000 to a still-high 10.6 million on the last day of November. Economists

polled by Reuters had forecast 11.075 million vacancies. There were large declines in job openings in the accommodation and food services, construction and nondurable goods manufacturing industries.

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WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES

01/04/2021



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We Launched The "Good People Good Deeds and Good Society" Campaign

The Covid-19 epidemic has changed people's social relationships and lifestyles in the last two years and is also showing great change for our future. The only thing that remains unchanged is that we need more good people and good deeds to support a broken society.

People who live in the Houston area always have watched Mattress Mack holding hundred dollar bills in his hand and shouting the slogan, "save you money!!" on television. The picture has been rooted in my heart for many years.

Recently, because the tornados hit mid-America, many people lost their homes. We were able to team up with the Chinese Civic Center and sent toys for Christmas to Kentucky through Mack's trucks.



Mack opened a furniture store when he was young in Houston, Texas. He went to work in the store everyday and greeted customers. He made people feel at home to select their furniture. Every time there has been a natural disaster, he always lent a helping hand, even opening the store to let people stay overnight for those people without homes. And he even served hot meals.

After many visits, Mack knew me and he always welcomed me and said Mr. Lee you are always welcome back.

On the way back, I was deeply

"ashamed" by what I saw. There are too few opportunities when we can really give back to our community.

On the year 2022's calendar, Southern News Group is determined to launch the "Good People Good Deeds Good Society" campaign. We will find more philanthropists and entrepreneurs in our community and stimulate them to contribute more to the community.

In order to begin this project we have invited leaders from different communities to form a preparatory committee. This is our #1 priority for the new year.



Southern DAILY Make Today Different

Editor's Choice



A man skis near the Washington Monument amidst heavy snow in Washington, January 3, 2022. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque



Zookeeper Mick Tiley poses for a photograph with Bactrian camels during the annual stocktake at ZSL London Zoo in London, Britain, January 4. REUTERS/John Sibley



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



A Shinto priest wearing a protective face mask presides a ceremony as visitors offer prayers on the first business day of the New Year at the Kanda Myojin shrine, frequented by worshippers seeking good fortune and prosperous business in Tokyo, Japan, January 4. REUTERS/Kim Kyung-Hoon



Theranos founder Elizabeth Holmes and her family leave the federal court after a U.S. jury found Holmes guilty in her fraud trial, in San Jose, California, January 3. REUTERS/Brittany Hosea-Small



A family rides a rickshaw in a crowded market amidst the spread of the coronavirus in the old quarters of Delhi, India, January 4. REUTERS/Adnan Abidi

What Does Omicron's Fast Spread Mean For The U.S. – And The World?

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

Omicron variant detected around world

The World Health Organization classified Omicron as a "variant of concern" due to the number of mutations that might have spread or evade antibodies from prior infection or vaccination. The variant was first identified in South Africa and has since been reported across Europe and Asia.



Omicron spurred a rapid rise in positive coronavirus tests in South Africa. Compared with three previous coronavirus variants, the newly identified omicron variant is sparking a faster surge in the percentage of positive tests in South Africa. Classified as a "variant of concern" by the World Health Organization on Nov. 26, omicron has now been reported in more than 30 countries — and at least 19 states in the U.S.

The first country to really get hit by omicron was South Africa. Before the new variant took off last month, coronavirus cases there were low — only several hundred per day in mid-November. But by early December, the tally of daily infections had shot up to more than 4,500 — and genomic sequencing shows that omicron is to blame. What's more, the variant quickly swept through all regions of South Africa — and has now shown up in about 60 additional countries. Omicron hasn't yet triggered a global wave, but many scientists who are tracking its rapid spread believe it's only a matter of time.

The reason for their concern? Omicron is starting to gain traction in countries where the pandemic looks very different from South Africa — places where the highly transmissible delta variant is currently dominant and where vaccination levels are relatively high.

Worrisome signs from Europe

The clearest signs of trouble come from how quickly omicron is growing in Europe and the U.K., says Matt Ferrari, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Dynamics and a professor of biology at Penn State University. "Everybody in my industry is hopeful that we're being alarmist, but more than at any other point in the course of the whole pandemic, we know how bad it could be," he says.

A man is vaccinated against COVID-19 at a clinic in Johannesburg, South Africa. The omicron variant appears to be driving a surge in South Africa. New studies suggest that vaccines might not be as effective

against this variant but that a booster shot can be helpful. (Photo/Shiraz Mohamed/AP)

Early data show that one person who catches omicron is currently going on to infect two to four other people — that's at least twice as many as someone who gets the delta variant. The statistics come from countries like the U.K., Denmark and South Africa — all of which have robust surveillance systems in place for tracking coronavirus variants. Some experts believe omicron is spreading even faster than that. The alarming pace of new infections is on par with how quickly the first, wild-type strain of the coronavirus spread at the beginning of the pandemic — back when there were no vaccines and everyone was susceptible.

"Now we're in a world where lots of people have immunity, either from previous infection or from vaccination, and we're seeing a pretty rapid growth rate over and above delta," says Ferrari. Indeed, the spread of omicron in the U.K., where about 70% of people are vaccinated compared to about 25% in South Africa, is a key reason scientists are worried. Although omicron infections only make up a small portion of the overall cases in the U.K., the forecasts are sobering. The country's health agency is warning that omicron infections are doubling every few days — and could make up half of all cases there by mid-December.

And the U.S. should take note: What the virus does in Europe, says Barrett, often foreshadows where the pandemic is headed on the other side of the Atlantic. "By next week, we will see clear evidence of an omicron wave in European countries, and I suspect the U.S. is at most a week behind that," he predicts.

Exactly why omicron is spreading so quickly comes down to two key questions. Is this strain of the virus intrinsically more contagious — in the way that delta was compared to the variant that dominated before it arrived? And second: is omicron also just better at escaping immune defenses — antibodies resulting either from prior infection or vaccines — which means there are more people who it can infect? It's possible the answer to both questions could be yes, although there's not enough data to say just yet.

"Looking at these early omicron cases, what we've anticipated from immune escape is turning out to be true and the [intrinsic] transmissibility seems to be at least that of delta," says Matt Grubaugh, associate professor of epidemiology at Yale School of Public Health. "I think we're going to see the vaccine's effectiveness against infection drop a lot," he says. This concern is not only based on how the variant is spreading in well-vaccinated places like

Europe and re-infecting people who previously had COVID in South Africa, but also the many mutations on the spike protein. Scientists believe those mutations could make omicron's spike protein more adept at evading the body's antibody defenses that prevent the coronavirus from infecting cells. This week, several preliminary lab studies seemed to confirm this fear. Researchers took blood from people who had received two shots of the Pfizer vaccine to see whether their antibodies could neutralize omicron as effectively as it could other strains of the virus. They found the antibodies had a lot more trouble disarming omicron. It's still too early to know just how much these findings translate into lower overall protection from the vaccine.

Grubaugh is one of many scientists who say it's likely the vaccines will still help ward off severe disease because the immune system relies on other defenses like T-cells. But if omicron can more easily infect those with prior immunity, that will give it a distinct competitive advantage over delta because it will gain a foothold in populations where delta has trouble getting past the protection afforded by the vaccines.

"It will probably end up replacing Delta — it's a little too early to tell how fast, but probably fairly quickly," he says. Assessing the risk in the U.S. Some experts caution against early predictions about what may happen in a place like the U.S. based on the situation in other countries. John Moore, a professor of microbiology and immunology at Weill Cornell Medical School, says it's not at all certain that omicron will take over. "It's not just the transmissibility that matters, it's the ability to outcompete," he says. "Earlier variants like beta and gamma created short term angst, but they just fizzled away."

In some countries, omicron could have more trouble competing because of higher immunity levels and the increasing push to get booster shots — which early data show may help stop omicron infections, says Wafaa El-Sadr, a professor of epidemiology and medicine at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. "This in and of itself may very much influence the trajectory of omicron in a country like the United States versus in a country like South Africa," she says. "But ultimately it's the more transmissible variants that takes over and circulates more widely, so that's what can be anticipated."

So how worried should we be? Early reports from health officials and doctors in South Africa suggest the omicron wave of infection

— while breathtaking in its speed — isn't yet causing the same level of severe disease as delta did when it hit the country. For example, ICU admissions are much lower. But many experts caution it's far too early to draw any firm conclusions. South Africa has a relatively young population, and many people had already caught the virus prior to omicron's emergence. "The silver lining right now is we do not have any evidence that omicron is more severe," says Penn State's Matt Ferrari. Then again, he notes: "Everybody wants me to say it's milder, and we really just don't have convincing evidence that it is."

Even if omicron does end up being less severe than delta and not as many people get very ill, Barrett of the Wellcome Sanger Institute says there's plenty of reason for concern given just how contagious it appears to be: "A small proportion of a huge number all at once can still overwhelm health care systems." This is especially true in a country like the U.S. where many hospitals are already filled with COVID-19 patients who are sick — not from omicron — but from delta. (Courtesy npr.org)

Related Studies Suggest Sharp Drop In Vaccine Protection Against Omicron — Yet Still Cause For Optimism

With the omicron variant continuing to spread in a number of countries, including the U.S., scientists have been anxiously awaiting data to answer this question: How well will the vaccines work against this new variant? On last Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, scientists in South Africa and Germany released preliminary results from two small studies that begin to provide answers. The studies haven't been peer-reviewed. But together, their data strongly suggest the vaccines will be much less effective at stopping infections from the omicron variant, but will still likely offer protection against severe disease. The study in Germany also indicates that a third shot, or a booster, will partially recover the effectiveness of the vaccines, at least for a few months.

In the South African study, researchers at the Africa Health Research Institute took blood from about a dozen people who had been vaccinated with two shots of the Pfizer vaccine and looked to see how well their antibodies kill the virus. In the experiment, everyone's antibodies were able to neutralize an earlier version of the virus quite well. But against omicron, that ability dropped dramatically. On average, the antibodies were 40 times less potent against omicron than against the variant circulating in the summer of 2020. And that's a lot. "It's astonishing ... in terms of



The vaccine manufacturer Pfizer also released a press statement Wednesday supporting these new findings. "Preliminary neutralisation studies indicate that 2 doses of vaccines may not be sufficient to prevent *infection* w/ omicron (not severe disease), but regular boosters will help restore this decline to an extent," wrote Dr. Muge Cevik on Twitter. Cevik is an infectious disease researcher at the University of St. Andrews. (Courtesy npr.org)

the reduction," says Pei-Yong Shi, a virologist at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston who has been doing similar experiments to determine the effectiveness of the Pfizer vaccine against the coronavirus.

UTMB researcher Pei-Yong Shi's work puts Galveston lab in front lines of COVID battle. (Photo/The Daily News)

"We seem to see a drastic reduction in neutralizing activity, far more than with previous variants," virologist Florian Krammer, who's at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, wrote on Twitter. "Little activity was left in vaccinated individuals." These findings confirm what scientists have been predicting since omicron was first detected several weeks ago. The virus contains many mutations already known to weaken the power of the antibodies made by the immune system. Based on the results of this preliminary study, scientists say it's likely we'll see a lot more breakthrough infections with the omicron variant. And South Africa is reporting a lot of reinfections. But the news isn't all dire. The vaccine isn't just about protecting against infections. It's also about protecting against severe disease and death. And there's reason to believe the vaccines will still do that, even with the omicron variant. Most of the people in the South African experiment did retain some ability to kill the virus. And scientists say even just a little bit of antibody activity can be enough to prevent someone from ending up in the hospital. Also the immune system has other tools besides antibodies that can ward off severe disease. In particular, the T cells can clear out the virus after an infection. And scientists think those may hold up better against omicron than antibodies will.

On top of all that, the study from Germany shows that a third booster shot, with either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, increases the neutralizing ability of the antibodies to levels seen with the delta variant, at least for several weeks after the booster. In that study, researchers at the Goethe University in Frankfurt looked at antibody potency against omicron and delta a half-month and three months after a third booster. In the short term, the antibody potency jumped up to the levels seen with delta in about half of the people. But after three months, most people's an



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COMMUNITY

Majority Of COVID-19 Cases And Deaths In State Are Unvaccinated Texans, New State Data Reveals



A pharmacist prepares the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine at Houston Independent School District's Hattie Mae White Educational Support Center. HISD partnered with Kroger to administer the COVID-19 vaccine to educators, police officers and school nurses as part of Phase 1A and 1B of the vaccine rollout. Jan. 9, 2021. Credit: May-Ying Lam for The Texas Tribune

Key Point The new state survey is the first time Texas health officials have been able to statistically measure the vaccine's true impact on the pandemic.

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

New data from the Texas health department released Monday proves what health officials have been trying to tell vaccine-hesitant Texans for months: The COVID-19 vaccine dramatically prevents death and is the best tool to prevent transmission of the deadly virus. Out of nearly 29,000 Texans who have died from COVID-related illnesses since mid-January, only 8% of them were fully vaccinated against the virus, according to a report detailing the Texas Department of State Health Services' findings. COVID-19 cases and deaths by vaccination status From mid-January to October, unvaccinated people made up the vast majority of reported COVID-19 cases and deaths. Unvaccinated Partially vaccinated Fully vaccinated

Note: Data only includes people age 12 and older. Most people became eligible for COVID-19 vaccines in late March. (Source: Texas Department of State Health Services Credit: Mandi Cai) And more than half of those deaths among vac-

inated people were among Texans older than 75, the age group that is most vulnerable to the virus, the study shows.

COVID-19 was deadlier for unvaccinated Texans across age groups Reported deaths from mid-January to October show that most COVID-19 deaths occurred among unvaccinated younger and older Texans.

Age group	Unvaccinated	Vaccinated
18-29 years	330	10
30-39	1,618	31
40-49	2,332	42
50-59	6,780	107
60-69	6,333	100
70+	7,830	1,240

Note: Most people became eligible for COVID-19 vaccines in late March. (Source: Texas Department of State Health Services Credit: Mandi Cai)

"We've known for a while that vaccines were going to have a protective effect on a large segment of our population," said Dr. Jennifer A. Shuford, state epidemiologist. "By looking at our own population and seeing what the impact of the vaccines have been on that population, we're hoping just to be able to reach people here

in Texas and show them the difference that being fully vaccinated can make in their lives and for their communities."

The state health department study covers most of the positive cases and COVID-19 deaths reported in Texas among residents from Jan. 15 to Oct. 1. It's the first time state officials have been able to statistically measure the true impact of the vaccine on the pandemic in Texas — which has one of the highest death tolls in the nation. The majority of Texans ages 16 and up didn't become eligible for the vaccine until late March. State health officials also found the vaccine greatly reduced the risk of virus transmission, including the highly contagious delta variant that ravaged the state over the summer. Only 3% of 1.5 million positive COVID-19 tests examined since mid-January occurred in people who were already vaccinated. State researchers matched electronic lab reports and death certificates with state immunization records, and measured cases and deaths since mid-January, a month after the first shots were administered in Texas.

The study was done using data similar to those used by other states that conducted similar studies and methods recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Shuford said. And while the outcome was not particularly surprising, Shuford said, officials hope that the new data will increase trust in the benefits of the shot. "Texas is a unique place; it's got a lot of diversity, geographic and population-wise," Shuford said. "We know that some people want to see actual numbers and that they want to see it for their own community. And so we are hoping that this reaches some of those people who have been hesitant and really just questioning the benefits of the vaccines."

In Texas, it literally requires a disaster — like a pandemic — before the state records precise information about vaccinations. As a result, there is a record for every single COVID-19 vaccine dose of the name and age of the person who received it plus the date it was administered. Normally, vaccination records are shown to schools by parents, but details of all vaccinations are not regularly kept by a state registry in Texas, unlike nearly every other state, because it's a voluntary system. However, state officials still don't have official numbers on how many vaccinated people were hospitalized with COVID-19 because hospitals are not required to report that level of data under state law. But the state's largest hospital districts and counties have reported that at least 90% of the hospitalized Texans with the virus were unvaccinated.

The state's new health data comes as Republican state leaders grapple with local cities and school districts about masking, which has been proven to reduce transmission of the virus, and with federal officials over vaccine mandates. About 53% of the Texas population is fully vaccinated. More than 70,000 Texans have died from COVID-19

since the pandemic began. Percentage of Texans fully vaccinated As of Nov. 14, about 53.9% of Texas' 29.1 million people have been fully vaccinated. According to the Census Bureau's 2019 Vintage population estimates, 93% of Texans are age 5 and older and thus eligible for a vaccine.

Sources: Vaccination data from the Texas Department of State Health Services, statewide population from the 2020 U.S. census, population by age from Census Vintage 2019 estimates. (Photo Credit: The Texas Tribune) Immunity heading into the holidays The new report is particularly well-timed, officials say, because gatherings throughout the holiday season could touch off another surge as families get together — many of them for the first time since last year — and around 9 million Texans remain unvaccinated. Texas saw its deadliest surge of the pandemic in January, when more than 400 deaths were reported daily at its peak, a trend health officials said was likely a direct result of the holidays.

The recent Texas Coronavirus Antibody Response Survey, commissioned by the state health department in partnership with the University of Texas System, estimated that about 75% of Texans — roughly 22 million people — likely have some level of protection against the virus, either by natural immunity from being infected or through vaccination. But that doesn't mean infected people are immune indefinitely or that they shouldn't get the vaccine, health experts say. In fact, doctors, scientists and health officials urge those who have been infected to get vaccinated anyway, saying the vaccine provides a strong boost in immunity even to those who have some level of natural protection. The Texas CARES study found that fully vaccinated participants showed significantly higher antibody levels than those who were unvaccinated but had been infected. A week ago, the CDC found that while both vaccination and natural infection provide about six months of protection from infection by the virus, the vaccine provides a "higher, more robust, and more consistent level of immunity" than natural infection does. And while the fact that a solid majority of Texans are estimated to have some protection from the virus bodes well for the state in its fight against the pandemic, Shuford said, it still means that millions of Texans are vulnerable to severe illness or death from the highly contagious virus, without any vaccine or natural immunity. "Those susceptible populations can still get infected, and the holidays are the perfect time for that," she said. "Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's. These are all times that people gather together, and COVID-19 can easily be transmitted at these gatherings." (Courtesy https://www.texastribune.org)

ted at these gatherings." Vaccine FAQs • Who is eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine? People ages 5-17 are eligible to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. People age 18 and older are eligible to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccines. • Is the COVID-19 vaccine safe and effective?? • Should I still get the vaccine if I've had COVID-19? Yes. Research has not yet shown how long you are protected from getting COVID-19 again after recovering from COVID-19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and vaccination will boost protection. If you were treated for COVID-19 with monoclonal antibodies or convalescent plasma, you should wait 90 days before getting a COVID-19 vaccine. Talk to your doctor if you are unsure what treatments you received or if you have more questions about getting a COVID-19 vaccine.

Where can I get the COVID-19 vaccine in Texas? Most chain pharmacies and many independent ones have a ready supply of the vaccine, and many private doctors' offices also have it. Texas has compiled other options for finding vaccine appointments here, and businesses or civic organizations can set up vaccine clinics to offer it to employees, visitors, customers or members. The vaccine is free, and you don't need health insurance to get it. The Texas CARES study found that fully vaccinated participants showed significantly higher antibody levels than those who were unvaccinated but had been infected. A week ago, the CDC found that while both vaccination and natural infection provide about six months of protection from infection by the virus, the vaccine provides a "higher, more robust, and more consistent level of immunity" than natural infection does. And while the fact that a solid majority of Texans are estimated to have some protection from the virus bodes well for the state in its fight against the pandemic, Shuford said, it still means that millions of Texans are vulnerable to severe illness or death from the highly contagious virus, without any vaccine or natural immunity. "Those susceptible populations can still get infected, and the holidays are the perfect time for that," she said. "Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's. These are all times that people gather together, and COVID-19 can easily be transmitted at these gatherings." (Courtesy https://www.texastribune.org)

99% of new COVID-19 deaths and hospitalizations are people who are unvaccinated.

#TEAMVACCINE

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