



COVID-19 UPDATE

January 4, 2021

Global

Total cases- 85,612,211

Total deaths- 1,853,232

United States

Total cases- 21,115,036

Total deaths- 360,088

U.S. cases have topped 20 million as New York and California entered 2021 having broken their record number of daily cases. Vaccine rollout is beginning in earnest as doses are distributed and priority scheduling for administering the doses is being finalized. The U.S. reported at least 291,000 new COVID cases on Saturday (Jan 2.), although this may be higher due to many states not actively reporting cases over the holidays. TSA reported American airports had their busiest day on Saturday since the beginning of the pandemic, with nearly 1.2 million passengers passing through checkpoints.

Trump Administration

- **President Trump** has extended his ban on new work visas and green cards until March 31st, citing continued weakness in the U.S. labor market due to the pandemic.
 - This ban applies to H-1B and H-4 visas used by technology workers and reflects a continuation of Trump's aggressive campaign to limit immigration of various types.
- **U.S.** claims for unemployment benefits fell unexpectedly to a one-month low, though the recent increases in coronavirus cases and business closures threaten to keep layoffs elevated through early 2021.
 - Initial jobless claims in regular state programs declined by 19,000 to 787,000 in the week that ended Dec. 26, according to a Labor Department report Thursday. That was less than the 835,000-median estimate in a Bloomberg survey of economists. Without adjustments, claims dropped by 31,736.
 - Continuing claims for state programs, which roughly correlates to the total number of people receiving state unemployment benefits, also decreased, to 5.22 million in the week ended Dec. 19. Economists projected an increase to 5.37 million.
- The **U.S.** may boost Covid-19 testing for international passengers who come from destinations in addition to the U.K., in a bid to increase overseas travel.
 - Federal agencies have been in discussions with airlines about how to restore international air travel safely amid the pandemic. The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** said last week that passengers flying to the U.S. from the U.K. must test negative for the coronavirus before departing, following the discovery of a new variant of the disease that spreads more rapidly.

- The **CDC** now recommends that air travelers test negative for the virus one to three days before flying and again three to five days after travel. The agency says testing is critical to make renewed travel safe and to slow spread of the Covid virus.
- The **Internal Revenue Service** began sending \$600 stimulus payments to eligible Americans' bank accounts last Tuesday evening and will continue processing the transfers into next week, according to a statement from the agency.
 - The IRS and Treasury Department will start mailing paper checks on Wednesday. The \$600 payments will go to many low- and middle- income adults. Dependent children ages 16 and under in those households are also eligible for \$600 each.
- The **U.S. Labor Department** has given employers added flexibility to remain in compliance with wage-and-hour laws during the pandemic-induced disruption to workplace norms, including for telemedicine.
 - DOL's Wage and Hour Division published a pair of guidance memos Tuesday, one of which said employees' telemedicine visits are an acceptable means of establishing they are owed time off under the Family and Medical Leave Act. The second outlines conditions under which a business can substitute electronic notices for hard-copy postings when keeping workers informed of their workplace rights.
 - The guidance comes more than nine months after much of the workforce began working from home to avoid Covid-19 exposure, and is the agency's latest effort to address legal ambiguities caused by workplace laws that were written without a lengthy pandemic in mind.

Biden Presidential Transition

- **U.S. President-elect Joe Biden** slammed the slow rollout of the coronavirus vaccine by President Donald Trump's administration, saying the plan was falling "far behind" where it needs to be.
 - "As I long feared and warned, the effort to distribute the vaccine is not progressing as it should," he said. "If it continues to move as it is now, it's going to take years, not months, to vaccinate the American people."
 - Biden listed his plans to speed the project, what he called one of the biggest operational challenges in decades. He said he would invoke the Defense Production Act to help ramp up vaccine production and repeated his vow to distribute 100 million doses of the vaccine in his first 100 days in office.
- **President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris** announce new members of their Covid-19 response team, according to [statement](#).
 - Additions include Sonya Bernstein as COVID Senior Policy Advisor, Tim Manning as Supply Coordinator, Bechara Choucair as Vaccinations Coordinator and Carole Johnson as Testing Coordinator
- **President-elect Biden's** inaugural ceremony will include a tribute to those who have died in the COVID pandemic, with lights ringing the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool.
 - Biden's inaugural committee is asking communities around the country to light up buildings and memorials at 5:30 p.m. on Jan. 19 in a "national moment of unity and remembrance."
- **Biden's inaugural planners** have asked supporters not to travel to Washington for his swearing-in because of health and safety concerns during the pandemic.
 - Congress is only making limited tickets available to members and one guest. The congressional luncheon after the swearing in has also been canceled.

Congress

- **Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell** (R-Ky.) closed off chances of the Senate acting anytime soon on a House measure that would give most Americans \$2,000 stimulus payments.
 - McConnell said the House legislation, approved in a bipartisan vote last Monday, “has no realistic path” to fast passage in the Senate and that it falls short of the demands made by Trump. He again blocked an attempt by Minority Leader [Chuck Schumer](#) (D-N.Y.) to adopt the bill to boost the payments to \$2,000 from \$600 by unanimous consent.
 - The Senate instead will work on combining the stimulus payments with measures on election integrity and rolling back social media liability protections, he said. That responds to all three issues Trump has said he wants, but a bill combining them likely will alienate enough senators in both parties to leave prospects for bigger stimulus payments dead in the Senate.
- **Senator Mitt Romney** criticized the slow roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine in the U.S., blaming the federal government for failing to help states get the shot into more people’s arms.
 - “That comprehensive vaccination plans have not been developed at the federal level and sent to the states as models is as incomprehensible as it is inexcusable,” the Utah Republican said in a statement Friday.
- The **Office of Attending Physician** is “prepared to vaccinate two staff members from each Member’s personal office, and four from each Committee Chair and four from each Ranking Minority Member,” according to memo sent to lawmakers and staff.
 - National Security Council gave Congress a “limited number of COVID19 vaccine doses to meet long-standing requirements for continuity of government operations” memo says

Vaccines and Treatment

- The U.S. vaccination program -- **Operation Warp Speed** -- has distributed millions of doses to states but is failing to meet projections for how quickly people will be inoculated. About 3.2 million doses have been given, according to the Bloomberg News vaccine tracker, far short of the Trump administration’s goal of administering 20 million vaccinations by the end of 2020.
- **Pfizer Inc.** said the [second dose](#) of its Covid-19 vaccine should be delivered to individuals within the recommended 21-day period, calling into question a decision by the U.K. to space out the dosing regimen.
 - The U.K. decision not to hold back any of its vaccine supply is aimed at quickly reaching as many high-risk people as possible. Under the government plan, second doses could be administered as many as 12 weeks later, longer than the three-week timing determined as optimal by Pfizer’s late-stage studies and the four weeks suggested for the shot developed by Moderna Inc.
 - Pfizer said Thursday that people should get their shots on the recommended schedule, warning that “there is no data to demonstrate that protection after the first dose is sustained after 21 days.”
- Officials from **Operation Warp Speed**, the U.S. government’s vaccine drive, are asking **Moderna Inc.** and the **U.S. Food and Drug Administration** to cut in half the dose of the company’s Covid-19 vaccination for people ages 18 to 55 after finding that it induces the same immune response,
 - Chief Scientific Adviser Moncef Slaoui has advised that this “would double the amount of vaccine available for the age group, while providing the same level of protection” he said on CBS’s “Face the Nation.”

- **Dr. Anthony Fauci**, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said the rollout of Covid-19 vaccines is picking up speed and could be fully on track within a week or so. Dr. Fauci said that in the past 72 hours, about 1.5 million vaccine doses have been administered, or about 500,000 per day, a substantial pickup in pace.
- A member of the **Oxford-AstraZeneca** vaccine team expects 2 million doses will be ready each week from about the middle of January, the Times of London reported.
 - Health Secretary Matt Hancock said earlier this week that only 530,000 doses of the vaccine would be ready on Monday. The Oxford team is frustrated that the poor state of the country's manufacturing capacity has affected the pace of production, the newspaper said.
- **BioNTech** will increase production capacity of the vaccine it developed with Pfizer, CEO Ugur Sahin tells Der Spiegel. Germany has a gap in supply because some other shots haven't been approved yet, he said. BioNTech's plant in Marburg, Germany may be operational in February and produce as many as 250 million doses in the first half of the year, the magazine cited Sahin as saying.
- The **World Health Organization** issued its first emergency-use designation for a Covid-19 vaccine, making the **Pfizer/BioNTech** the first immunization to receive a green light from the Geneva-based body. The move could allow more countries to import and distribute the vaccine, which has already been cleared for use in the U.S., U.K. and Europe.

Other

- **Colorado Governor Jared Polis** announced the country's first case of the Covid-19 variant that was discovered in the U.K. last Tuesday. Since then, cases have also been identified in Florida and California.
- **New York Governor Andrew Cuomo** shortened the state's quarantine guidelines to 10 days from 14 to align with recommendations from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
 - The rule applies to people exposed to Covid-19 who have not tested positive. Those individuals can end their quarantine after 10 days without a testing requirement as long as they have no symptoms, Cuomo said Tuesday.
- Health-care providers in **New York** that violate vaccine laws could be fined as much as \$1 million and have their licenses revoked, Governor Andrew Cuomo said on Monday.
 - Cuomo said he'll sign an executive order increasing penalties for those engaging in fraud with the Covid-19 vaccine. The move comes as the state investigates reports that ParCare Community Health Network in Orange County improperly distributed Covid-19 vaccines to people not on the state's priority list. There is enough evidence that the case is being referred to the Attorney General's Office, Cuomo said.
- **New York City** has set a goal to vaccinate 1 million residents in January. The city plans to put up pop-up sites and use schools to help reach that goal, Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday on CNN. He called for help from the federal and state government.
 - New York City intends to double the number of vaccine access points, to at least 250 sites. As of today, the city has administered 88,410 doses, 25% of those delivered.
- **U.S. hospitalizations** climbed to a new high, with 125,379 people admitted, according to data compiled by the Covid Tracking Project. That compares with the two previous waves of the virus - in April and in July -- that peaked at about 60,000.

- The data show the Midwest as the only region where hospitalizations are declining, with the most in the South, at just under 50,000. The Northeast, hit hardest by the pandemic's first wave, has recorded the fewest hospitalizations in the recent surge.
- **The N.C.A.A.**, in an attempt to limit the threat of coronavirus among teams, announced an agreement Monday to hold its signature men's basketball tournament entirely in Indiana in March and early April.
- **UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson** announced a national lockdown for England Monday night on the heels of a warning from top medical advisers that the country's National Health Service was in danger of being overwhelmed by coronavirus cases within 21 days.
 - The lockdown is expected to remain in place at least through the middle of February.
 - Coronavirus cases are surging in the country due to the new variant, with 30% more Covid-19 patients in hospitals in England on Monday than a week earlier.
 - The announcement for England follows an announcement earlier Monday that Scotland would go into lockdown. Wales and Northern Ireland, the other two nations of the United Kingdom, were already in lockdown.
- **The Philippines** will ban foreign travelers from the U.S. through the middle of January after a third state, Florida, reported a strain of the coronavirus believed to be more infectious, Reuters reported.
 - The ban, which begins on Sunday, doesn't apply to Filipinos traveling from the U.S., though they will have to quarantine in a government facility for 14 days.

