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By Josh Varlin
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New York records worst death toll in pandemic, as 731 die in one day

New York state marked a grim milestone Monday, with 731 deaths from COVID-19 recorded. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo told reporters the next day that this made Monday the deadliest day yet in the coronavirus pandemic for the state, coming after two days of fewer than 500 deaths.

By the time Cuomo made his announcement, deaths in New York City alone had surpassed the 2,977 killed on 9/11, and as of this writing 4,009 have died in America's largest city from the pandemic. Tuesday saw 727 deaths in New York City alone, the worst day so far for the largest city in the US.

As of this writing, New York state has 138,836 confirmed cases, more than any country except Spain and the United States as a whole. Of these cases, 76,876 are in New York City, with substantial cases in the surrounding counties, including Long Island's Nassau (16,610) and Suffolk (14,517) counties and Westchester County (14,804), just north of the city.

Rockland, Orange, Dutchess and Erie counties all have over 1,000 cases, and Monroe County, which includes the economically devastated city of Rochester, has a major cluster of 596 cases.

The neighboring states of New Jersey and Connecticut have 44,416 cases and 7,781 cases, respectively. More than 1,000 people died in the three states combined on Monday.

All of these figures, both the cases as well as the fatalities, must be considered substantial underestimates. In particular, people dying in their homes, rather than in a hospital, has seen a huge surge from the same time last year.

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner has said that 200 New York City residents are dying at home each day, comparable to the daily average in hospitals last week, whereas only 20-25 people would die at home on a typical day before the pandemic.

While a huge portion of these deaths are reported to the city's health department as "probable" COVID-19 deaths, those who have died at home are not tested and, if there was not a pending test from before they died that comes back positive, are not reported as official COVID-19 deaths. Even New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio admits that "the vast majority" of these deaths are likely due to the coronavirus.

While Cuomo and de Blasio have sounded cautiously optimistic notes about a slight decrease in hospitalization rates over a couple days, the sudden spike in deaths at home and in hospitals makes clear that the apex has not been reached in New York.

The working-class boroughs of Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx have the highest numbers of known cases, with Queens and the Bronx having the highest rates of infection. Bronx residents, however, had a disproportionate fatality rate, likely due to significant higher rates of asthma and other preexisting conditions associated with poverty that make it much harder to survive COVID-19.

In particular, air pollution appears to play a significant role in lowering individuals' ability to fight off the coronavirus, with a Harvard study recently submitted to the *New England Journal of Medicine* for review finding that long-term exposure to just one microgram per cubic meter of particulate matter in air pollution increased the chance of dying from coronavirus by 15 percent.

While some city council members, the presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders and pseudo-left organizations have portrayed the high fatality rate in the Bronx and elsewhere as principally a racial issue, poverty is at the root of disproportionate death tolls among minority groups.

The situation has deteriorated to the point that the US military is sending hundreds of medical personnel to New York City, after both Cuomo and de Blasio pleaded with the federal government to send troops.

In addition to the approximately 600 personnel already in New York, Defense Secretary Mark Esper told the press on April 5 that the military would send 1,100 more doctors, nurses and medical aides, with hundreds working in understaffed hospitals and the majority taking over the Javits Convention Center, which has been repurposed into a makeshift hospital for COVID-19 patients.

Esper proclaimed: “We will soon be taking over the Javits Center—a 2,500-bed capacity—to show you how all-in we are. The United States military will soon be running the largest hospital in the United States.”

The other much-touted military effort, the deployment of the US Navy hospital ship USNS Comfort, has proven to be a cruel farce. When originally announced, the ship was under repair. After arriving in New York Harbor last week, the ship, with an official capacity of 1,000 beds, treated about 20 non-COVID-19 patients at first. Then, after patients with COVID-19 were unintentionally brought on board, the military announced that the ship would be converted to treat COVID-19 patients, but with a reduced capacity of 500 beds.

A crew member has tested positive for the disease, and likely contracted it in Virginia before the Comfort deployed to New York, according to the Navy.

The turn toward the military, while at least for now ostensibly requesting purely medical assistance, has ominous implications for democratic rights in the epicenter of the pandemic. The New York City Police Department has begun arresting people because they allegedly “failed to maintain social distancing.” For the crime of allegedly gathering in crowds during a pandemic, the NYPD throws violators into a crowded jail cell with dozens of other people and no soap or water.

Cuomo has demanded that the police do more, fuming, “The NYPD has to get more aggressive, period.”

Not to be outdone, the erstwhile “progressive” de Blasio has asked New Yorkers to snitch on each other and call a non-emergency line to summon law enforcement if they see a lack of social distancing, presumably so their neighbors can also be confined to crowded and unsanitary jail cells.

Earlier this week, city officials reported that part of the city’s pandemic plan, if morgues, temporary morgues and mass graves on Hart Island became overwhelmed, was to create temporary graves in a public park. Councilman Mark Levine, who originally tweeted this, noted that it would “be tough for [New Yorkers] to take.”

No doubt concerned about a social explosion, de Blasio was quick to say, “There will never, ever be anything like ‘mass graves’ or ‘mass internment’ in New York City ever.” Levine clarified that the plan was for if New Yorkers continue to die at an increasing rate such that Rikers Island prisoners are unable to bury them quickly enough on Hart Island, traditionally the city’s cite for unclaimed bodies.

Despite the growing number of infections and deaths, Cuomo has sought to reassure the population that, as yet, the capacity of the health care system to treat patients had not been overwhelmed and no one had died for lack of care. Yesterday he claimed: “I don’t believe we’ve lost a single person because we couldn’t provide care. People we lost we couldn’t save despite our best efforts.”

This is, bluntly, false, and Cuomo almost certainly knows it. Despite the heroic efforts of medical workers, the health care system in New York is clearly overwhelmed and people are dying of COVID-19 and other illnesses who would not have died had the system had greater capacity--to say nothing of if containment measures were implemented earlier.

A physician in the Bronx recently relayed to the *World Socialist Web Site* that the emergency department at his hospital “is full of patients. Sometimes we can’t get to them, and they die there. I don’t know how many have died.”

Non-COVID-19 patients are also dying due to the pandemic. Paramedics and EMTs are no longer bringing to the hospital patients who have suffered cardiac arrest if their heartbeat can’t be restored in the field, because hospitals and medical personnel are working beyond capacity.

Dr. Irwin Redlener, director of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University said that deaths “because of reduced care for other non-COVID diseases,” including chronic conditions, “should be somehow tallied as we’re looking at the death toll of COVID.”

With little end in sight to the pandemic, Cuomo has extended until the end of April statewide measures to shutter nonessential businesses and enforce social distancing. No less than US President Donald Trump, however, Cuomo is anxious to restart the economy. Cuomo, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy and Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont, all Democrats, have announced that they are looking to restart the tristate region’s economy as soon as possible.

“You’re not going to end the infection, end the virus, before you start restarting life. I don’t think we have that luxury,” Cuomo has said. While the governors are more cautious than Trump, they are clearly motivated by economic concerns, not public health. Cuomo has repeatedly raised letting young people back to work early, or relying on an antibody test which will soon be implemented, even though it is not yet clear if antibodies will provide immunity or, if so, for how long.

Politico, reporting on the governors’ plan, noted: “Some public health experts have reservations about that approach, citing the difficulty in separating young people who may be exposed if they return to work from their elderly relatives or those with underlying conditions. Priority for an antibody test should be given to health care and other frontline workers, they suggested.”

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