

# COVID-19 Lockdown Exit Analysis

## 13th Dec 2021

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### Lockdown Exit

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#### **NHS website hit by technical problems amid rush to book COVID-19 booster doses - The Independent**

The UK's NHS website crashed as people rushed to book COVID-19 booster doses after Prime Minister Boris Johnson said everyone above the age of 18 could get booster shots from Monday, The Independent reported on Sunday. "The NHS website is currently experiencing technical difficulties. We are working to resolve these issues. Thank you for your patience," the report said, citing a statement on the NHS website. The NHS did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/nhs-website-hit-by-technical-problems-amid-rush-book-covid-19-booster-doses-2021-12-12/>

#### **Boris Johnson Warns of 'Tidal Wave' of Omicron Infections, Pushes Boosters**

Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned the U.K. is facing a "tidal wave" of omicron infections and set an end-of-year deadline for the country's booster vaccination program. "Everyone eligible aged 18 and over in England will have the chance to get their booster before the New Year," Johnson told the nation in a hastily-arranged address on Sunday night. Johnson, who has been the subject of scathing headlines over his handling of the pandemic, tried to change the narrative in a somber address. While he is accelerating a plan to deliver booster jabs, in practice he's bringing the deadline forward by a month.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-12/johnson-warns-of-u-k-covid-emergency-sets-new-booster-target>

#### **Australia shortens wait time for COVID-19 booster doses as Omicron cases rise**

Australia said on Sunday it will shorten the wait time for people to receive a COVID-19 booster following a rise in cases of the Omicron variant. Australia had previously said it would offer the booster to everyone over 18 who had had their second dose of the vaccine six months earlier. But with rising cases of the Omicron variant, Health Minister Greg Hunt said the time interval will be shortened to five months after the second dose.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-shortens-wait-time-covid-19-booster-doses-omicron-cases-rise-2021-12-11/>

#### **UK's Johnson warns of Omicron 'tidal wave', says two doses not enough**

Britain faces a "tidal wave" of the Omicron variant of coronavirus and two vaccine doses will not be enough to contain it, Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned on Sunday, as he accelerated the booster rollout programme. Speaking hours after government scientists lifted the COVID alert level to 4 on a 5-point scale, Johnson said the booster programme must go faster because scientists did not yet know if Omicron was less severe than other variants. "A tidal wave of Omicron is coming," Johnson said in a televised statement on Sunday evening. "And I'm afraid it is now clear that two doses of vaccine are simply not enough to give the level of protection we all need."

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-johnson-warns-tidal-wave-omicron-cases-set-hit-2021-12-12/>

#### **Pfizer Booster Shots Are Effective Against Omicron Variant, Israeli Study Says**

Researchers at the Sheba Medical Center and from the Israeli Health Ministry examined the blood samples of 20 Sheba employees who received a booster at least a month ago, and 20 employees

who are five or six months past their second shot and haven't received a third shot. Employees with a booster were much more likely to neutralize the Omicron variant than the two-shot group, the study showed. But the booster shots were still less effective against preventing Omicron than other variants, including Delta, still the most prevalent strain of the virus circulating globally.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/pfizer-booster-shots-are-effective-against-omicron-variant-israeli-study-says-11639317136>

### **US COVID-19 deaths reach 800,000**

The U.S. has reached the grim milestone of 800,000 deaths related to COVID-19, Reuters reported. More than 450,000 people in the United States have died after contracting COVID-19 so far in 2021, according to the news service, which added that the total accounts for 57 percent of all U.S. deaths from the illness since the pandemic started.

<https://thehill.com/policy/healthcare/public-global-health/585470-us-covid-19-deaths-reach-800000>

### **Preparing for Omicron as a covid veteran**

Now I'm disillusioned. I've seen how our medical trends with how to treat covid-19 can change by the hour, with self-declared experts always ready to criticise decisions and cherry pick evidence to follow. I've watched how systematically hospital systems continue to prioritise efficiency, rankings, and profits over patient centred care. I've learnt that I am nothing but one of millions of healthcare workers expected to come to work every day based solely on my own goodwill. The calls for the protection of healthcare workers with life insurance, disability insurance, and student debt forgiveness have been forgotten just as quickly as they were proposed. Lacking these investments in my personhood, it's hard to feel like more than another faceless number in the system. My patients are now jaded too, as politics has entered their hospital bed. Some ask for ivermectin and refuse to have conversations about quarantine for family members they have exposed to the virus. They "other" me, seeing me as part of the healthcare system that mocks the political right, rather than as another human being at their bedside feeling just as vulnerable as they are to the pandemic. My vaccinated patients remind me of their status over and over again, as if trying to clue me in to give them preferential treatment or empathy for having a breakthrough infection. I empathise with both my patients who are vaccinated and unvaccinated, but I still leave each room feeling a sense of defeat, powerlessness, and anger that the pandemic persists.

<https://www.bmj.com/content/375/bmj.n3021>

### **Pfizer Omicron Efficacy at 22.5% in South Africa Lab Experiments**

A two-shot course of Pfizer Inc.'s vaccine has just 22.5% efficacy against symptomatic infection with the omicron variant, but can thwart severe disease, according to laboratory experiments in South Africa. Researchers at the Africa Health Research Institute in Durban issued additional data on a small study released earlier this week. The research considered blood plasma samples from 12 participants. Scientists found omicron resulted in about a 41-fold reduction in levels of neutralizing antibodies produced by people who had received two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech SE shot, compared with the strain detected in China almost two years ago.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-11/pfizer-course-has-23-efficacy-vs-omicron-in-s-african-study>

### **England Deaths Estimated at 75,000 This Winter on Omicron: Study**

The omicron variant has the potential to cause a wave of Covid infections in England and fuel almost 75,000 deaths this winter, if the government doesn't impose additional precautionary control measures, according to a research report by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Under the government's 'Plan B' rules imposed last week in response to omicron, the most optimistic scenario for England indicates about 175,000 hospital admissions and 24,700 deaths for the five-month period from December to April. The worst-case projection is for 74,800 deaths. That is more than half the 127,154 fatalities registered in England since the start of the pandemic.

England accounts for more than two thirds of almost 172,000 deaths in all of the United Kingdom, which includes Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The research is not yet peer reviewed, LSHTM said on its website.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-11/england-could-face-75-000-covid-deaths-this-winter-study>

### **Early U.S. Omicron Cases Caused Mild Illness in Vaccinated**

The first omicron cases in the U.S. were detected mostly in vaccinated people who experienced mild illnesses, with only one hospitalization and no deaths reported so far, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. As of Dec. 8, the U.S. had investigated 43 cases of the Covid-19 variant that set the world on high alert last month because of mutations that may make it spread more easily. About four-fifths of those cases occurred in people who had been fully vaccinated, the CDC said on Friday, including one who was in the hospital for two days. Common symptoms included cough, tiredness and congestion or runny nose, according to the agency's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-10/early-u-s-omicron-cases-caused-mild-illness-in-vaccinated>

### **Brazil health ministry website hit by hackers, vaccination data targeted**

Brazil's health ministry said its website was hit on Friday by a hacker attack that took several systems down, including one with information about the national immunization program and another used to issue digital vaccination certificates. The government put off for a week implementing new health requirements for travelers arriving in Brazil due to the attack. "The health ministry reports that in the early hours of Friday it suffered an incident that temporarily compromised some of its systems ... which are currently unavailable," it said in a statement.

<https://www.reuters.com/technology/brazils-health-ministry-website-hit-by-hacker-attack-systems-down-2021-12-10/>

### **India's top syringe maker asks PM Modi to lift factory shutdown order**

Hindustan Syringes and Medical Devices (HMD) has shuttered its factories on the outskirts of New Delhi following the directive from a state pollution control board, triggering concerns of an acute shortage of syringes and needles in India just as its COVID-19 vaccination programme is in full swing. "The closure of needles and syringes manufacturing factories will create disruption in the supply chain," said Rajiv Nath, managing director of HMD, in a letter to Modi's office which was released to media.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-top-syringe-maker-asks-pm-modi-lift-factory-shutdown-order-2021-12-11/>

### **Global shortage of nurses set to grow as pandemic enters third year - group**

The numbers of nurses around the world are falling further just as the Omicron coronavirus spreads, and there is also an imbalance as Western countries step up recruitment of healthcare workers from African and other poorer countries, the International Council of Nurses said on Friday. Many nurses are burned out from the COVID-19 pandemic and rates of "intention to leave" within a year have doubled to 20-30%, said Howard Catton, CEO of the Geneva-based group that represent 27 million nurses in 130 national associations.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/global-shortage-nurses-set-grow-pandemic-enters-third-year-group-2021-12-10/>

### **England could face Omicron wave without further restrictions- report**

England could face a wave of COVID-19 infections caused by the Omicron variant leading to as many as 75,000 deaths by the end of April if no new control measures are brought in, according to modelling research published on Saturday. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has already brought in new rules for England to slow the spread of Omicron with orders for people to work at home if possible, to wear masks in public and for entertainment venues to use vaccine passports.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/england-could-face-omicron-wave-without-further-restrictions-report-2021-12-11/>

### **China vaccinates over 80% of its people against COVID-19**

China has vaccinated 82.5% of its population of 1.41 billion against COVID-19, a health official said on Saturday. A total of 1.162 billion have received the required number of doses to complete vaccinations, Wu Liangyou, an official of the National Health Commission (NHC) told a news briefing, adding that 120.6 million had received a booster shot. Despite the high national rate, vaccination coverage was patchy among the elderly, a vulnerable group facing a high risk of severe cases and death after infection.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/china-vaccinates-over-80-its-people-against-covid-19-2021-12-11/>

### **Vaccinated, maskless crowds enjoy Christmas markets in Budapest**

Traditional Christmas markets have opened in Budapest's main squares only for people vaccinated against COVID-19, but have drawn many tourists and locals alike even as central Europe battles a renewed surge of the coronavirus. There were no festive outdoor markets in Budapest a year ago as Hungary was in complete lockdown against the virus, before any vaccines were available. "It's great to have the market back. It was very depressing when I visited the square last year - it was decorated but there were no people," said Adrienn, bundled up in a black fur coat against the subzero cold in front of the Hungarian capital's neo-classical St. Stephen's Basilica.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/vaccinated-maskless-crowds-enjoy-christmas-markets-budapest-2021-12-10/>

### **South African Covid Hospitalizations at 5,344, 7.6% in ICU**

South African hospitals have 5,344 Covid-19 patients of which 7.6% are in intensive care units, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases said in a report on Friday. Of the 404 people in ICU, 144 are on ventilators, the institute said. Almost half of the admissions are in Gauteng, the province that includes Johannesburg and Pretoria. The numbers compare with the 4,795 who were in the hospital a day earlier, with 8.3% of those in ICU.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-10/south-african-covid-hospitalizations-at-5-344-7-6-in-icu>

### **Denmark's Omicron Surge Is a Warning to the Rest of World**

Denmark is seeing the number of people infected with the omicron variant of Covid-19 double every second day, offering a glimpse of a development that is probably unfolding throughout Europe. The Nordic country can offer valuable insights into what to expect from omicron, as it has Europe's most rigorous screening program, with a high level of testing, and variant-screening of all positive PCR tests. That explains why Denmark has reported the highest number of omicron cases in the European Union, Troels Lillebaek, chair of the Danish SARS-CoV-2 variant assessment committee, said.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-10/denmark-s-omicron-surge-is-a-warning-to-the-rest-of-world>

## **Exit Strategies**

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### **BioNTech vaccine creators: Covid isn't so scary any more... We have tools to cut deaths dramatically**

BioNTech vaccine creators, Ugur Sahin and Özlem Türeci, the couple behind the BioNTech vaccine, are now back in the lab in the race to beat Omicron, they tell Tom Whipple that the virus is not as scary as it was any more and they have the tools to slash death rates even further.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/biontech-vaccine-creators-covid-isnt-so-scary-any-more-we-have-tools-to-cut-deaths-dramatically-7bd75ntwt?shareToken=eebf3842f88b390fe402fee3deefa32f>

### **New U.K. Omicron Cases Double as Country Plans Daily Tests**

The U.K. confirmed 1,239 new omicron cases on Sunday, almost double the 633 cases reported the day before. Total cases of the latest variant now stand at 3,137, the U.K. Health Security Agency said on Twitter. The spike comes as the country plans to introduce new daily home testing for

people who come into contact with someone who has contracted Covid-19.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-12/new-u-k-omicron-cases-double-as-country-plans-daily-tests>

### **Polarized Austria Ends Lockdown as Vaccine Mandate Looms Large**

Austria ended a nationwide coronavirus lockdown for most people on Sunday, while keeping restrictions for the unvaccinated as it presses ahead with the boldest incentive in Europe to boost inoculations. Starting Sunday, vaccine-rejectors can only leave their homes to go to work, where they'll need to provide a negative coronavirus test every two days, and for essential shopping and daily exercise. Entry to other venues will be barred. Life will slowly return to normal for people who've had a vaccine or have recently recovered from the virus, with regions implementing a patchwork of easing schedules.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-12/polarized-austria-ends-lockdown-as-vaccine-mandate-looms-large>

### **'I think it's coming' Why employers could start requiring boosters as omicron spreads**

With employer vaccination requirements already widespread, workplace experts say it's possible some companies will convert their full vaccination requirement, now two shots, into a three-shot requirement as the omicron variant emerges. Pfizer PFE, +1.34% and BioNTech BNTX, -9.33% said three of its vaccine doses can "neutralize" the omicron variant, while two doses may not be enough to prevent infection, according to very early-stage results released Wednesday. The vaccine makers emphasized the results come from preliminary laboratory studies. That echoes public health officials like Dr. Anthony Fauci, President Joe Biden's medical adviser, who say early news may be encouraging, but it's still very early in the process of understanding omicron's threat

[https://www.marketwatch.com/story/i-think-its-coming-why-employers-could-start-requiring-boosters-as-omicron-spreads-11639018899?link=MW\\_latest\\_news](https://www.marketwatch.com/story/i-think-its-coming-why-employers-could-start-requiring-boosters-as-omicron-spreads-11639018899?link=MW_latest_news)

### **The Big Pivot: Merck Falts on Covid-19 Vaccine, Then Makes One for Rival J&J**

Weeks after Merck scrapped development of its Covid-19 vaccines in January, one of its senior manufacturing officials began phoning his deputies, telling them their work on a pandemic shot wasn't actually over. The twist: Merck would manufacture the vaccine from an arch rival. "We're doing it," John McGrath told his workers at Merck. "And we're doing it with J&J." The Johnson & Johnson -Merck partnership, which the companies announced in March, is now bearing fruit to expand the world's vaccine supply. After a frantic ramp-up that involved scouting for raw materials, buying equipment and upgrading plants all at the same time, the first Merck-made shots shipped Friday..

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/merck-jj-covid-vaccines-ship-11639161192>

### **London's Heathrow says business travellers cancelling over Omicron**

London's Heathrow Airport said it was seeing high levels of business travellers cancelling over concerns they could be trapped overseas by travel restrictions triggered by the new Omicron variant of coronavirus. The airport said demand in November was down 60% on pre-pandemic levels, despite the United States reopening to transatlantic travel earlier in the month. The figures released on Friday show that the start of a gradual recovery seen in October, when demand was down 56%, had petered out. Heathrow CEO John Holland-Kaye called on the British government to reduce restrictions as soon as it was safe to do so, including allowing UK nationals arriving from red list countries to isolate at home.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/londons-heathrow-says-business-travellers-cancelling-over-omicron-2021-12-10/>

### **Covid: Omicron cases rise 50% in 24 hours as experts warn variant could cause 2,400 hospitalisations**

LSHTM modelling suggests Omicron could cause anywhere from between 25,000 to 75,000 deaths. Professor Eleanor Riley says 'a lot of people' could end up in hospital even if Omicron causes milder

disease. Health chiefs are urging people to use testing and social distancing to avoid a spike in cases over Christmas. Raigmore Hospital in Inverness had to shut one of its wards after there was a spike of infections in the unit

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10299101/Covid-19-UK-come-contact-Omicron-unless-youre-hermit-expert-warns.html>

### **Labour demands ‘Christmas vaccine guarantee’ for pupils in England**

Labour has called on the government to give a “Christmas vaccine guarantee” to the hundreds of thousands of eligible children in England who have been unable to receive a Covid vaccination. With recent figures showing that just 44% of children in the 12-15 age group had been vaccinated on 8 December, Bridget Phillipson, the shadow education secretary, said the government needed to make a bigger push to vaccinate the remainder before they returned to school in the new year. “As Omicron cases in the UK are rising, it’s essential that ministers use the Christmas holidays to get the vaccine out to children, preventing continued chaos next term,” Phillipson said.

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/dec/11/labour-demands-christmas-vaccine-guarantee-for-pupils-in-england>

### **Australia treasurer calls for easing Covid curbs despite rising cases**

Australia must loosen COVID-19 restrictions to bolster its economic recovery, Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said on Saturday, even as daily infections rose to a six-week high. "States need to keep calm and carry on. And not overreact to the Omicron variant," Frydenberg told reporters in Melbourne. Australia is one of the world's most vaccinated countries, with nearly 90% of people over 16 fully inoculated. Still, Australia said it found 1,753 COVID-19 cases in the past 24 hours, up about 3% in the last week and the highest daily total since Oct 29.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/australia-treasurer-calls-easing-covid-curbs-despite-rising-cases-2021-12-11/>

### **Singapore approves COVID-19 vaccine for children ages 5 to 11**

Singapore will start COVID-19 vaccinations for children aged 5 to 11 years before the end of this year, its health ministry said late on Friday. The Southeast Asian city-state has already vaccinated 87% of its 5.5 million population, and authorities were rushing to get children vaccinated amid concerns over rising number of paediatric COVID-19 cases. The dosage used for children will be one-third of that used in adults, similar to the United States.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/singapore-approves-covid-19-vaccine-children-ages-5-11-2021-12-10/>

### **Ghana to vaccinate returning travellers against COVID-19 on arrival**

Ghana will vaccinate returning citizens and residents against COVID-19 upon arrival at the airport from next Monday if they have not already received shots, its health service said, amid concerns over low take-up of vaccinations. All Ghanaians leaving the country will also be required to show proof of vaccination, health service director general Patrick Kuma-Aboagye said in a statement, citing as reasons a rise in COVID-19 cases and detection of the Omicron variant. Ghana has so far administered vaccines to cover roughly 5.7% of its population of 30 million, data compiled by Reuters showed.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ghana-vaccinate-returning-travellers-against-covid-19-arrival-2021-12-10/>

### **Ukraine receives more World Bank funds to fight COVID-19**

The World Bank has approved an additional \$150 million loan to help Ukraine speed up vaccinations against COVID-19, the international lender's Ukrainian office said on Saturday. Ukraine's government will spend \$120 million on 16.5 million vaccine doses and the rest will be used for IT, communications and public outreach, capacity building and cold chain and waste management equipment, the World Bank said. "This new additional financing will help Ukraine continue strengthening its COVID-19 response and vaccination activities," Arup Banerji, the World Bank's

regional country director for Eastern Europe, said in the statement.

<https://www.reuters.com/markets/rates-bonds/ukraine-receives-more-world-bank-funds-fight-covid-19-2021-12-11/>

### **China orders COVID-19 tests for travel with some border cities**

China has ordered some border cities to beef up vigilance against COVID-19 with measures such as mandatory testing for travellers, in its effort to prevent clusters caused by viruses arriving from abroad. Since mid-October, locally-transmitted symptomatic cases have risen to more than 2,000, with several small northern towns on the borders with Russia or Mongolia, among the hardest-hit, as health resources there are sparser than in major cities. "There have been multiple local outbreaks in China recently, all caused by viruses imported from overseas via cities with ports of entry," the government said in a notice, citing local areas' weaknesses in monitoring and failure to enforce measures.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-orders-covid-19-tests-travel-with-some-border-cities-2021-12-11/>

### **Will rich nations foot the bill for a global 'pandemic treaty'?**

World Health Organization member states have agreed to negotiate agreement on pandemic preparedness. Save the Children estimates that for every \$1 invested in the global COVID-19 vaccination drive, rich nations could avoid losing \$35 from their budgets. Yet, wealthy nations have failed to provide poorer countries with vaccines. And there has been a lack of coordination to tackle the pandemic. That need to cooperate is now gaining momentum after the Omicron variant was detected by scientists in South Africa. WHO member states have agreed to negotiate a global agreement on pandemic preparedness. And we look at why hypersonic missiles are driving a new arms race.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/program/counting-the-cost/2021/12/11/will-rich-nations-foot-the-bill-for-a-global-pandemic-treaty>

### **COVID-19: UK govt to keep 'restrictions under review' after 'very challenging new information' on Omicron, says Gove**

Michael Gove headed the talks with first ministers and deputy first ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to discuss COVID-19 data and coordination on the response.

<https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-uk-govt-to-keep-restrictions-under-review-after-very-challenging-new-information-on-omicron-says-gove-12492075>

### **New York State Will Require Masks in All Indoor Public Places**

New York Governor Kathy Hochul ordered all businesses to require masks indoors if they don't have a Covid-19 vaccine requirement. "My two top priorities are to protect the health of New Yorkers and to protect the health of our economy," she said in a Friday statement. "The temporary measures I am taking today will help accomplish this through the holiday season."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-10/new-york-state-will-require-masks-in-all-indoor-public-places>

### **German Lawmakers Back Vaccine Mandate for Health Workers**

German lawmakers overwhelmingly backed a bill Friday that requires staff at hospitals and nursing homes to get immunized against the coronavirus — the first of two vaccine mandates being considered in the country. Health Minister Karl Lauterbach had earlier told parliament it was unconscionable that some who work with particularly vulnerable people were still not vaccinated. "This vaccine mandate is necessary because it's completely unacceptable that, after two years of pandemic, people who have entrusted their care to us are dying unnecessarily in institutions because unvaccinated people work there," he said. "We cannot accept this."

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-10/german-lawmakers-debate-1st-partial-vaccine-mandate>

## **Partisan Exits**

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### **Billionaire's Bet on Pfizer Vaccine for China Fails to Pay Off**

As Covid-19 started spreading in Wuhan early last year, Chinese billionaire Guo Guangchang's drugmaker appeared to have scored a big win: A partnership with Germany's BioNTech SE, which went on to produce with Pfizer Inc. one of the world's most successful vaccines against the coronavirus. Yet almost a year later, the shot is yet to be approved in mainland China, and in recent weeks Beijing has thrown its heft behind a homegrown mRNA vaccine, allowing China's Walvax Biotechnology Co. to test its own experimental shot as a booster. The developments are raising new questions about whether the U.S.-German vaccine, licensed for the potentially lucrative Greater China region by Guo's Shanghai Fosun Pharmaceutical Group Co., will ever be used on the mainland, where President Xi Jinping's administration has backed a nationalist agenda on all fronts, including in the fight against the virus.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-12/billionaire-s-bet-on-pfizer-vaccine-for-china-fails-to-pay-off>

### **Austria's Restrictions on the Unvaccinated Appear to Be Working**

Austria, one of the worst-hit countries in Europe's latest Covid-19 surge, has seen infections plummet and vaccination rates soar after imposing a lockdown and saying it would make the shots mandatory next year. The measures, and the steep fall in new cases since they were announced, could offer some options to countries in a region where infections are still rising rapidly or plateauing at a high level. The Alpine republic introduced a lockdown and said it would mandate vaccines beginning next February on Nov. 22, when the weekly rolling average of daily new cases exceeded 1,500 and hospitals in areas with low vaccination rates were struggling to cope with the influx of patients.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/austrias-restrictions-on-the-unvaccinated-appear-to-be-working-11639234806>

### **Bulgaria's vaccine battle: the mistrust driving COVID's surge**

Fortunately, everything began with a bit of luck. I landed in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, on a late November Sunday afternoon. The weather was mild and sunny. After checking into my hotel, I went for a walk in the city centre with my filming kit. "I'm not a killer of grandpa and grandma." Scarcely five hundred meters from the hotel, I stumbled on around two hundred people noisily chanting and shouting. Among them were children and elderly people; whole families banging on drums and waving big Bulgarian flags. I approached and asked them what they were protesting about.

<https://www.euronews.com/2021/12/10/bulgaria-s-vaccine-battle-the-mistrust-driving-covid-s-surge>

### **Party furore deepens for Britain's Johnson, spokesman was at lockdown gathering**

UPDATE 3-Yahoo FinanceUK PM Johnson loses poll lead after lockdown party revelationsNasdaqUK PM Johnson's party loses poll lead after lockdown party ...Thomson Reuters FoundationUK PM Johnson loses poll lead after lockdown party revelations By Reuters | Editorials 24Editorials 24View Full coverage on Google News

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-pm-johnsons-party-loses-poll-lead-after-lockdown-party-revelations-2021-12-10/>

### **With Vaccine Mandate Looming, Business Owners Face Wary Workers**

Small-business owners are confronting challenges preparing for the Biden administration's vaccine mandate, with some saying efforts to comply are exacerbating hiring problems and stoking tensions with and among workers. Under new federal rules, employers with 100 or more workers must ensure employees get fully vaccinated or else test negative for Covid-19 at least weekly and wear a mask at work. A federal appeals court temporarily blocked implementation of the rules in response to legal challenges, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration agreed not to begin enforcement pending a court decision. Many business owners are nonetheless preparing for the mandate, slated to take full effect Jan. 4.

[https://www.wsj.com/articles/with-vaccine-mandate-looming-business-owners-face-wary-workers-11637404200?mod=business\\_minor\\_pos6](https://www.wsj.com/articles/with-vaccine-mandate-looming-business-owners-face-wary-workers-11637404200?mod=business_minor_pos6)

### **As COVID surges, Greece pursues unvaccinated with fines and vans**

When a mobile COVID vaccination unit arrived at his Greek village, Yiorgos Toumanidis showed up for his booster shot. "I know what it's like," said the 71-year-old, who has had the virus. "I spent a month at home with antibiotics ... That's when we understood what's going on, how dangerous the situation is. I didn't hesitate. With the first opportunity, I did the vaccine."

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/10/as-covid-surges-greece-pursues-unvaccinated-with-fines-and-vans>

## **Scientific Viewpoint**

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### **How Sequencing Covid-19's Viral Genome Helps Hunt for Variants**

To keep up with changes to the virus that causes Covid-19, scientists are using a technology called genomic sequencing. The process starts with a Covid-19 test. Some samples that test positive for the coronavirus in a laboratory are pulled aside and sent off for sequencing, a review of the virus's genetic material that can take as little as a day or more than a week. The SARS-CoV-2 genome has about 30,000 individual building blocks to decode, compared with about three billion in the human genome. Sometimes researchers have equipment to sequence the samples on hand or nearby. But often samples must be shipped elsewhere, which can take days. "Just the sheer logistics of shipping these samples from where they're tested to where they're going to be sequenced, that can be huge," said Pavitra Roychoudhury, an acting instructor in the laboratory medicine and pathology department at the University of Washington.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-sequencing-covid-19s-viral-genome-helps-hunt-for-variants-11639314003>

### **Taiwan confirms first cases of Omicron variant**

Taiwan confirmed on Saturday its first cases of the Omicron variant of coronavirus, found in three people who had arrived from abroad. The island's Central Epidemic Command Centre said the infections were found in travellers arriving from Britain, the southern African nation of Eswatini and the United States. Like all entrants, they were tested on arrival and already subject to two weeks of quarantine.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taiwan-confirms-first-case-omicron-variant-2021-12-11/>

### **COVID-19: Two jabs offer little protection against Omicron - but booster makes vaccine at least 70% effective**

Two doses of the AstraZeneca and Pfizer/BioNtech vaccines offer little protection against the Omicron variant of COVID, but a booster raises their effectiveness to between 70 and 75 percent. The UK Health Security Agency also said the country will have more than one million Omicron infections by the end of this month if current trends continue unchanged. Analysis of 581 people with confirmed Omicron showed the AstraZeneca and Pfizer/BioNtech jabs provided "much lower levels of protection against symptomatic infection compared to the protection that they provide against Delta", it said in a statement. But it added: "The preliminary data showed effectiveness against the new variant appears to increase considerably in the early period after a booster dose, providing around 70-75% protection against symptomatic infection.

<https://news.sky.com/story/covid-19-uk-set-to-have-one-million-omicron-infections-by-end-of-december-but-booster-jabs-effective-says-ukhsa-12492031>

### **South Africa says no signal of increased Omicron severity yet**

South African scientists see no sign that the Omicron coronavirus variant is causing more severe illness, they said on Friday, as officials announced plans to roll out vaccine boosters with daily infections approaching an all-time high. South Africa alerted the world to Omicron late last month, prompting alarm that the highly mutated variant could trigger a new surge in global infections. Hospital data show that COVID-19 admissions are now rising sharply in more than half of the country's nine provinces, but deaths are not rising as dramatically and indicators such as the median length of hospital stay are reassuring.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/south-africa-sees-positive-signs-hospital-data-amid-omicron-wave-2021-12-10/>

### **Japan researchers use ostrich cells to make glowing COVID-19 detection masks**

Japanese researchers have developed masks that use ostrich antibodies to detect COVID-19 by glowing under ultraviolet light. The discovery by Yasuhiro Tsukamoto and his team at Kyoto Prefectural University in western Japan could provide for low-cost testing of the virus at home, they said in a press release. The scientists started by creating a mask filter coated with ostrich antibodies targeting the novel coronavirus, based on previous research showing the birds have strong resistance to disease.

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/japan-researchers-use-ostrich-cells-make-glowing-covid-19-detection-masks-2021-12-10/>

### **South African doctors see signs omicron is milder than delta**

As the omicron variant sweeps through South Africa, Dr. Unben Pillay is seeing dozens of sick patients a day. Yet he hasn't had to send anyone to the hospital. That's one of the reasons why he, along with other doctors and medical experts, suspect that the omicron version really is causing milder COVID-19 than delta, even if it seems to be spreading faster. "They are able to manage the disease at home," Pillay said of his patients. "Most have recovered within the 10 to 14-day isolation period." said Pillay. And that includes older patients and those with health problems that can make them more vulnerable to becoming severely ill from a coronavirus infection, he said.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-health-africa-south-africa-southern-africa-bd7a30e490c407b8d84afe5ac9e203e>

### **Omicron Now Dominant Variant in Cape Town, Wastewater Shows**

Omicron is now the dominant coronavirus variant in Cape Town, the South African Medical Research Council said, citing wastewater analyses. The variant was found in 11 of 12 wastewater samples collected in Cape Town on Nov. 30, the council said in a statement on Friday. The delta variant was only dominant at one wastewater plant in the city, it said. People infected with Covid-19 shed viral particles in their feces. While the particles are not infectious, they provide an indication of the prevalence of the disease and can be used to determine which variant is dominant

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-10/omicron-now-dominant-variant-in-cape-town-wastewater-shows>

### **Omicron Will Be Dominant Strain Within Days, Say U.K. Officials**

Covid vaccine boosters improve protection to as much as 75% against a rapidly spreading omicron variant that's much more likely to bypass two doses than earlier strains, preliminary U.K. data show. The basic course of shots from AstraZeneca Plc and the Pfizer Inc.-BioNTech SE partnership provided much lower defenses against symptomatic infection with omicron, compared with the delta strain, the initial study showed. A booster lifted protection to 70% to 75% in the early days after the shot. "These early estimates should be treated with caution, but they indicate that a few months after the second jab, there is a greater risk of catching the omicron variant," Mary Ramsay, head of immunization at the U.K. Health Security Agency, said in a statement.

[https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-10/omicron-will-be-dominant-strain-within-days-say-u-k-officials?utm\\_source=google&utm\\_medium=bd&cmpid=google](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-10/omicron-will-be-dominant-strain-within-days-say-u-k-officials?utm_source=google&utm_medium=bd&cmpid=google)

## **Coronavirus Resurgence**

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### **Mexico reports 199 more deaths from COVID-19**

Mexico's health ministry on Friday reported 2,992 new COVID-19 cases and 199 more deaths in the country, bringing the official number of infections to 3,914,706 and the death toll since the pandemic began to 296,385. The health ministry has previously said that the real numbers are likely significantly higher.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/mexico-reports-199-more-deaths-covid-19-2021-12-11/>

### **A year after first U.S. shots, pandemic hallmarks re-emerge**

Nearly a year after COVID-19 vaccines were first administered in the United States, the country is returning to many of the hallmarks that defined earlier pandemic life: mask mandates, mass vaccination sites, crowded hospitals and a rising death toll. Amid hope that humanity would soon get the upper hand on the coronavirus, New York City intensive care unit (ICU) nurse Sandra Lindsay received a dose of Pfizer's just-approved vaccine last Dec. 14, becoming the first inoculated U.S. resident.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/year-after-first-us-shots-pandemic-hallmarks-re-emerge-2021-12-10/>

### **UK scientists urge more restrictions to fight omicron surge**

The British government may need to introduce tougher restrictions to slow the growth of the omicron variant and prevent a new surge in COVID-19 hospitalizations and deaths, British scientists said Saturday. U.K. health officials say omicron is spreading much more quickly than the delta strain and is likely to replace it and become the dominant variant in Britain within days. The U.K. recorded 58,194 coronavirus cases on Friday, the highest number since January, though what portion were the omicron variant is unclear. Concerns about the new variant led Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government to reintroduce restrictions that were lifted almost six months ago. Masks must be worn in most indoor settings, vaccine certificates must be shown to enter nightclubs and people are being urged to work from home if possible.

<https://apnews.com/article/coronavirus-pandemic-science-business-lifestyle-health-97bf16e1973f8352b09be8200fea9bf7>

### **U.K.'s New Daily Covid Cases Hit Highest Since January**

The U.K. government is considering whether tougher rules are needed to curb a "deeply concerning" new wave of the pandemic, as daily infections soared to the highest level since the start of the year. "We absolutely need to keep everything under review," Cabinet minister Michael Gove told broadcasters on Friday after he led an emergency meeting with leaders of the devolved U.K. nations. The meeting was "presented with some very challenging new information" and the country is facing a "deeply concerning situation," he said.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-10/u-k-new-daily-coronavirus-cases-at-highest-since-january>

### **Navy medics join COVID fight in hard-hit New Mexico**

Dozens of U.S. Navy medics have deployed to New Mexico to treat a Delta variant-fueled surge in COVID-19 patients as part of a military operation to treat virus hotspots across Western and Midwest states. New Mexico is suffering one of the highest levels of new coronavirus infections in the country, its hospitals reaching record capacity levels. Nearly 50 Navy medics are treating COVID-19 patients at the San Juan Regional Medical Center in Farmington, northwest New Mexico, where critical care patient numbers have been over 200% of capacity for weeks

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/navy-medics-join-covid-fight-hard-hit-new-mexico-2021-12-10/>

### **Low staff vaccination tied to nursing home COVID deaths; experimental vaccine targets multiple coronaviruses**

Low rates of COVID-19 vaccination among nursing home staff are linked with high rates of coronavirus illness and death among residents, even when residents have been vaccinated, a U.S. study found. Using national data from early June through late August 2021, researchers compared nursing homes with the highest and lowest percentages of vaccinated staff. In communities with high rates of COVID-19, homes with the lowest staff vaccination rates had more than twice as many residents develop COVID-19 and nearly three times as many residents die from it. This was true regardless of vaccination rates among the residents and of other differences between the facilities, the researchers reported on Wednesday in The New England Journal of Medicine

<https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/low-staff-vaccination-tied-nursing-home-covid-deaths->

[experimental-vaccine-2021-12-10/](#)

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### **New Lockdown**

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#### **Swiss mull limited lockdown as COVID-19 cases rise**

Switzerland may have to impose another limited lockdown to break the momentum of rising coronavirus cases that threaten to overwhelm its healthcare system, the government said on Friday. "This is really a critical phase. The trends are going in the wrong direction," Health Minister Alain Berset told reporters in Bern as the cabinet launched consultations with regional authorities and social partners on the way forward. The government said it may expand the requirement for proof of vaccination or recovery from the virus for access to many indoor venues, which would leave out unvaccinated people even if they have negative test results.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/swiss-consider-limited-pandemic-lockdown-covid-19-cases-mount-2021-12-10/>