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Inside C2

Southern DAILY

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Analysis: Omicron begins to leave mark on U.S. economy, but unlikely to derail it

Dec 23 (Reuters) - The fast-spreading Omicron variant of COVID-19 has started leaving an imprint on slices of the U.S. economy as some events are canceled or postponed, consumers cut back on restaurant dining and understaffed businesses shut down in some of the most-afflicted areas such as New York City.

But even as economists say the variant could be a drag on growth early next year, they caution it is too soon to gauge the mark that will be left by an iteration of the virus that may on balance prove less severe even if it is the most transmissible version yet in nearly two years of the pandemic. It also seems unlikely at this stage to prevent a second straight year of above-trend growth.

Preliminary data out Thursday from the U.K. government showed a 50-70% lower probability of an Omicron infection resulting in hospitalization than with the Delta variant. That followed a study on Wednesday from South Africa, where Omicron was first identified last month, that suggested infections peaked quickly there and symptoms were less severe. read more

Nonetheless, Mark Zandi, chief economist for Moody's Analytics, expects the U.S. economy to take a hit in the near term from a surge that could infect more people than earlier waves but end more quickly. He now forecasts the U.S. economy will grow by 2% in the first quarter of 2022, down from 5%. "Omicron is already affecting people's behavior and business practices," said Zandi, pointing to a decline in credit card spending over the past several weeks.

Credit card balances were fractionally lower in the week ending Dec. 8, marking the first time since October that they didn't increase week over week, according to the Federal Reserve.

Consumers are also cutting back on trips to restaurants as the virus spreads. The number of diners seated at U.S. restaurants was down 10% for the week ending Dec. 23 when compared with the same week in 2019, according to the restaurant reservations site OpenTable. That is lower than Nov. 25, when dining activity was on par with 2019 levels.

"The situation is changing rapidly and this is



far from the resurgence many restaurants were counting on this holiday," Debby Soo, chief executive of OpenTable, said in a statement to Reuters.

Still, other parts of the economy appeared to be running as usual for now.

The number of Americans filing new claims for unemployment benefits held below pre-pandemic levels last week. And while workplace activity declined slightly last week after rising earlier in December, it was in line with the drop seen heading into the holidays in 2019 and stronger when compared to the same time last year, said Dave Gilbertson, vice president of the payroll management firm UKG.

"So far, we haven't seen widespread business shutdowns, and customer demand remains strong across industries," Gilbertson said in an email.

And Americans by and large seemed more committed to their holiday travel plans. The number of people checked through airport security in the approach to Christmas is roughly double last year's volumes, Transportation Security Administration data showed. Wednesday's total exceeded the comparable 2019 level by about 144,000 passengers, one of only a handful of days so far to top pre-pandem-

ic levels and by the largest margin yet.

TOO EARLY TO KNOW

Some analysts say it may just be too soon for the effects of Omicron to show up in economic reports.

Consumer sentiment improved in December but Richard Curtin, director of the University of Michigan's Surveys of Consumers said "too few interviews" were done to capture the impact of the Omicron variant.

"Confidence and spending are likely to be depressed in January, but it is too early to know the eventual impact of Omicron on the economy," Curtin said in a statement on Thursday.

Some economists are downgrading their forecasts for how much the U.S. economy and the labor market will grow early next year amid a surge in infections and a decline in fiscal support.

Oxford Economics lowered its growth projections for next year to 4.1% from 4.4% because of the surge in infections, and says growth could slow to 3.7% if President Joe Biden's Build Back Better spending plan is com-

People queue for a COVID-19 test as the Omicron coronavirus variant continues to spread in Manhattan, New York City, U.S., December 21, 2021. REUTERS/Andrew Kelly/File Photo

pletely blocked. The package's odds of passing dimmed after Senator Joe Manchin said he would not support the bill, but some analysts say a modified version of the bill could be approved later.

And Aneta Markowska and Thomas Simons, economists for Jefferies, earlier this week said economic activity is likely to soften in January, and they "see relatively high probability" the labor market could contract next month, similar to December 2020, if more businesses furlough workers because of the virus. Biden announced new steps this week meant to stem the health and economic consequences of the infection surge, including new sites for testing and vaccination, more at-home rapid tests and an extension of the pause on student loan payments until May 1, 2022.

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LOCAL NEWS

After weeks walking, Mexico migrant caravan splits up on buses headed

MEXICO CITY, Dec 22 (Reuters) - Several hundred migrants that left southern Mexico in a caravan two months ago began boarding buses to northern Mexico on Wednesday, after reaching a deal with the Mexican government that will bring them closer to their dream of reaching the United States.

The caravan left the southern city of Tapachula near Mexico's border with Guatemala in late October with some 3,000 people, but hundreds gave up the tough journey as they trekked on foot for weeks. A smaller group, including toddlers, slowly made its way to Mexico City, where activist Irineo Mujica pressed government officials to provide visas and buses to bring the migrants further north.

"A new chapter is beginning, in which this caravan today will split up and dissolve so that each person can follow his dreams individually," Mujica told cheering migrants at the shelter where they have camped out, in a video on social media.

A memo from the government's Interior Ministry and National Migration Institute said they will bring migrants on buses to the northern cities of Hermosillo, Monterrey and Chihuahua, as well as Ciudad Juarez, just opposite Texas.

Migration officials in recent weeks also offered migrants buses out of Tapachula after thousands of arrivals overwhelmed the migration processing system there, leaving them stranded for months without jobs or lodging.

Many of the migrants in Mexico City, including Central Americans, Cubans and Haitians, said they saw the caravan as their only way to cross Mexico without risking deportation.

Henry Portillo, 23, said he joined the caravan to escape poverty in Honduras, where he has worked in farming since he was six years old and only learned to read and write as a teenager.

His wife, who made the trek with him, is due to soon give birth to a baby boy.

"My mission is the United States," Portillo said. "I want him to study, and not be like me."



A migrant reacts before leaving the shelter along other members of a migrant caravan that left southern Mexico two months ago and begin their journey to northern Mexico in buses after receiving their hu-

Editor's Choice



An explosion caused by a police munition is seen while supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump riot in front of the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, January 6, 2021. REUTERS/Leah Millis



Dr. Mayank Amin draws the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine at a clinic run by Skip-pack Pharmacy in Collegeville, Pennsylvania, March 7, 2021. REUTERS/Hannah Beier



Yoshia Uomoto, 98, reacts as her son Mark Uomoto and niece Gail Yamada surprise her with their first in-person visit in a year after indoor visitation restrictions due to the coronavirus were lifted at Nikkei Manor, an assisted living facility primarily serving Japanese-American seniors, in Seattle, Washington, March 30, 2021. Residents, who have all been fully vaccinated, can



Adrian James, 2, who tested positive for the coronavirus, breathes with the help of a ventilator at SSM Health Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, October 5, 2021. REUTERS/Callaghan O'Hare



The Dixie Fire, now over 200,000 acres, burns at night in Taylorsville, California, July 27, 2021. REUTERS/David Swanson



A person reacts after the verdict in the trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, found guilty of the death of George Floyd, in front of Hennepin County Government Center, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 20, 2021. REUTERS/Carlos... MORE

Southern DAILY Make Today Different

BUSINESS

COVID-19 Toll Not As Heavy, But The Pandemic Is Not Over

U.S. COVID-19 Deaths Officially Surpass 1918 U.S. Flu Deaths



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

U.S. COVID-19 deaths have now surpassed over 800,000, estimated deaths that occurred during the H1N1 influenza pandemic of 1918, but SARS-CoV-2 hasn't exacted as heavy a toll as that pandemic.

With a national population of around 103 million people at that time -- about a third of the current total of 330 million Americans -- the 1918 pandemic killed roughly 1 in 150 people in the U.S.; COVID has killed 1 in 500 Americans.

Globally, the 1918 flu wrought more havoc than COVID, too, infecting about 500 million people, or a third of the world's population at that time. It killed about 50 million people globally, according to CDC estimates.

SARS-CoV-2 has infected nearly 230 million people around the world and killed some 4.7 million of them.

There are many reasons for the differences in infection and mortality. The 1918 pandemic hit while the world was enmeshed in World War I and international travel was frequent; hospitals didn't have the same medicines and technology at their disposal to treat patients; the cause of the illness was unidentifiable and therefore a test, targeted treatment, or vaccine was impossible.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, global travel came to a halt and public health measures such as social distancing and masking were implemented relatively rapidly, vaccines were produced in record time, and treatments were investigated in real-time with a few proving helpful (with more still in development).

Still, misinformation and disinformation campaigns stymied the effectiveness of some of those approaches in the U.S., and the virus threw humanity a curveball with the far more transmissible Delta variant.

"Since May, [more than] 100,000 Americans unnecessarily lost their lives because they chose not to get vaccinated," tweeted Peter Hotez, MD, PhD, of Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "They fell victim to the vile yet unopposed antisense aggression from 3 sources: The far right including members of U.S. Congress, Governors, conservative news outlets; the 'disinformation dozen' identified by CCDH; and Russian propaganda."

With the U.S. now averaging some 2,000 deaths per day, and the potential for sustained, high levels of transmission to spawn another variant, SARS-CoV-2 can still wreak much more havoc. Whether that ever reaches 1918 H1N1 proportions remains to be seen. The comparison to the 1918 flu pandemic also serves as a reminder of

the risk that influenza poses. Since 1918, three other influenza pandemics occurred in the U.S.: H2N2 in 1957, H3N2 in 1968, and H1N1 in 2009. These pandemics were all far less severe than the first H1N1 pandemic. But that doesn't mean another killer flu -- or another deadly coronavirus -- outbreak is off the table.



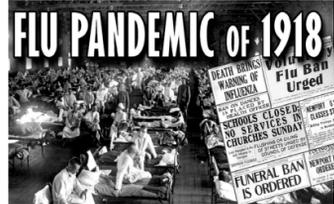
A reflection on the progress made since the 1918 pandemic by two CDC scientists published in Science for the 100-year anniversary of that outbreak concludes: "Philosopher George Santayana pointed out, 'Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' We are no doubt more prepared in 2018 for an infectious disease threat than in 1918. But it is critical to remember that preparation only stems from a global commitment to share data about viral isolates, support innovative research, and dedicate resources to assess the pandemic risk of new and emerging influenza viruses from zoonotic reservoirs." (Courtesy medpagetoday.com)

COVID Has Now Killed As Many Americans As The 1918-19 Flu

COVID-19 has now killed as many Americans as the 1918-19 Spanish flu pandemic did -- over 800,000.

The U.S. population a century ago was just one-third of what it is today, meaning the flu cut a much bigger, more lethal swath through the country. But the COVID-19 crisis is by any measure a colossal tragedy in its own right, especially given the incredible advances in scientific knowledge since then and the failure to take maximum advantage of the vaccines available this time. "Big pockets of American society -- and, worse, their leaders -- have thrown this away," medical historian Dr. Howard Markel of the University of Michigan said of the opportunity to vaccinate everyone eligible by now. Like the Spanish flu, the coronavirus may never entirely disappear from our

midst. Instead, scientists hope it becomes a mild seasonal bug as human immunity strengthens through vaccination and repeated infection. That could take time.



"We hope it will be like getting a cold, but there's no guarantee," said Emory University biologist Rustom Antia, who suggests an optimistic scenario in which this could happen over a few years.

For now, the pandemic still has the United States and other parts of the world firmly in its jaws. While the delta-fueled surge in infections may have peaked, U.S. deaths are running at over 1,900 a day on average, the highest level since early March, and the country's overall toll topped 675,000 Monday, according to the count kept by Johns Hopkins University, though the real number is believed to be higher. Winter may bring a new surge, with the University of Washington's influential model projecting an additional 100,000 or so Americans will die of COVID-19 by Jan. 1, which would bring the overall U.S. toll to 776,000. The 1918-19 influenza pandemic killed 50 million victims globally at a time when the world had one-quarter the population it does now. Global deaths from COVID-19 now stand at more than 4.6 million.



Photo shows a demonstration at the Red Cross Emergency Ambulance Station in Washington during the influenza pandemic of 1918. Historians think the pandemic started in Kansas in early 1918, and by winter 1919 the virus had infected a third of the global population and killed

at least 50 million people, including 675,000 Americans. Some estimates put the toll as high as 100 million. (Library of Congress via AP, File)

The Spanish flu's U.S. death toll is a rough guess, given the incomplete records of the era and the poor scientific understanding of what caused the illness. The 675,000 figure comes from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The ebbing of COVID-19 could happen if the virus progressively weakens as it mutates and more and more humans' immune systems learn to attack it. Vaccination and surviving infection are the main ways the immune system improves. Breast-fed infants also gain some immunity from their mothers.

Under that optimistic scenario, schoolchildren would get mild illness that trains their immune systems. As they grow up, the children would carry the immune response memory, so that when they are old and vulnerable, the coronavirus would be no more dangerous than cold viruses.

The same goes for today's vaccinated teens: Their immune systems would get stronger through the shots and mild infections.

"We will all get infected," Antia predicted. "What's important is whether the infections are severe."



Something similar happened with the H1N1 flu virus, the culprit in the 1918-19 pandemic. It encountered too many people who were immune, and it also eventually weakened through mutation. H1N1 still circulates today, but immunity acquired through infection and vaccination has triumphed. Getting an annual flu shot now protects against H1N1 and several other strains of flu. To be sure, flu kills between 12,000 and 61,000 Americans each year, but on average, it is a seasonal problem and a manageable one.

Before COVID-19, the 1918-19 flu was universally considered the worst pandemic disease in human history. Whether the current scourge ultimately proves deadlier is unclear.

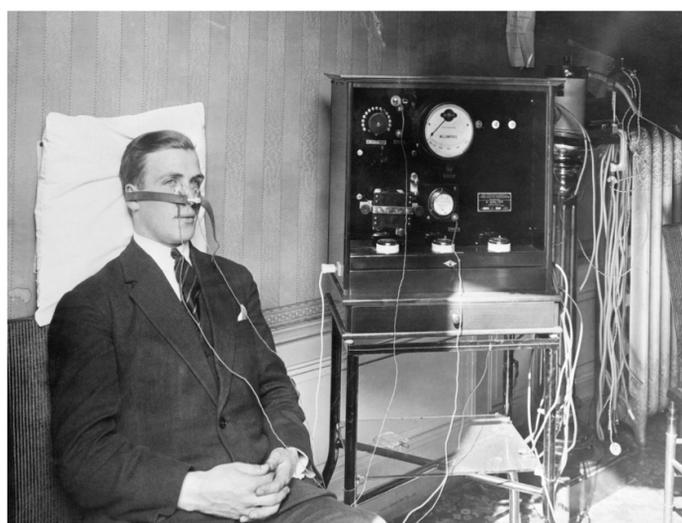
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Southern DAILY Make Today Different

COMMUNITY

(Article continues from above)

U.S. COVID-19 Deaths Officially Surpass 1918 U.S. Flu Deaths



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

In many ways, the 1918-19 flu -- which was wrongly named Spanish flu because it first received widespread news coverage in Spain -- was worse. Spread by the mobility of World War I, it killed young, healthy adults in vast numbers. No vaccine existed to slow it, and there were no antibiotics to treat secondary bacterial infections. And, of course, the world was much smaller.

Yet jet travel and mass migrations threaten to increase the toll of the current pandemic. Much of the world is unvaccinated. And the coronavirus has been full of surprises.

Professor Border of the University of Lyon in France demonstrates a machine he claimed could cure cold and flu symptoms in under one hour in about 1919.

Markel said he is continually astounded by the magnitude of the disruption the pandemic has brought to the planet. "I was gobsmacked by the size of the quarantines," the Chinese government undertook initially, Markel said, "and I've since been gob-gob-smacked to the nth degree." The lagging pace of U.S. vaccinations is the latest source of his astonishment.

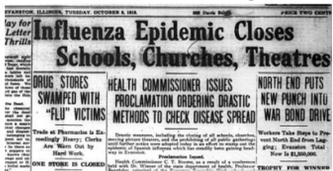
Just under 64% of the U.S. population has received at least one dose of the vaccine, with state rates ranging from a high of approximately 77% in Vermont and Massachusetts to lows around 46% to 49% in Idaho, Wyoming, West Virginia and Mississippi. Globally, about 43% of the pop-

ulation has received at least one dose, according to Our World in Data, with some African countries just beginning to give their first shots.

"We know that all pandemics come to an end," said Dr. Jeremy Brown, director of emergency care research at the National Institutes of Health, who wrote a book on influenza. "They can do terrible things while they're raging."

COVID-19 could have been far less lethal in the U.S. if more people had gotten vaccinated faster, "and we still have an opportunity to turn it around," Brown said. "We often lose sight of how lucky we are to take these things for granted."

The current vaccines work extremely well in preventing severe disease and death from the variants of the virus that have emerged so far.



It will be crucial for scientists to make sure the ever-mutating virus hasn't changed enough to evade vaccines or to cause severe illness in unvaccinated children, Antia said.

If the virus changes significantly, a new vaccine using the technology behind the Pfizer and Moderna shots could be produced in 110

days, a Pfizer executive said Wednesday. The company is studying whether annual shots with the current vaccine will be required to keep immunity high.

One plus: The coronavirus mutates at a slower pace than flu viruses, making it a more stable target for vaccination, said Ann Marie Kimball, a retired University of Washington professor of epidemiology.

So, will the current pandemic unseat the 1918-19 flu pandemic as the worst in human history? "You'd like to say no. We have a lot more infection control, a lot more ability to support people who are sick. We have modern medicine," Kimball said. "But we have a lot more people and a lot more mobility. ... The fear is eventually a new strain gets around a particular vaccine target."

To those unvaccinated individuals who are counting on infection rather than vaccination for immune protection, Kimball said, "The trouble is, you have to survive infection to acquire the immunity." It's easier, she said, to go to the drugstore and get a shot. (Courtesy apnews.com)

The 1918 Flu Pandemic Never Really Ended After infecting millions of people worldwide, the 1918 flu strain shifted -- and then stuck around.

An unthinkable 50 to 100 million people worldwide died from the 1918-1919 flu pandemic commonly known as the "Spanish Flu." It was the deadliest global pandemic since the Black Death, and rare among flu viruses for striking down the young and healthy, often within days of exhibiting the first symptoms. In the United States, the 1918 flu pandemic lowered the average life expectancy by 12 years.



What's even more remarkable about the 1918 flu, say infectious disease experts, is that it never really went away. After infecting an estimated 500 million people worldwide in 1918 and 1919 (a third of the global population), the H1N1 strain that caused the Spanish flu receded into the background and stuck around as the regular seasonal flu. But every so often, direct descendants of the 1918 flu combined with bird flu or swine flu to create powerful new pandemic strains, which is exactly what happened in 1957, 1968 and 2009. Those later flu outbreaks, all created in part by the 1918 virus, claimed millions of additional lives, earning the 1918 flu the odious title of "the mother of all

pandemics."

The Deadly Virus Struck in Three Waves

Jeffrey Taubenberger was part of the pioneering scientific team that first isolated and sequenced the genome of the 1918 flu virus in the late 1990s. The painstaking process involved extracting viral RNA from autopsied lung samples taken from American soldiers who died from the 1918 flu, plus one diseased lung preserved in the Alaskan permafrost for nearly 100 years. Now chief of the Viral Pathogenesis and Evolution Section at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Taubenberger explains that genetic analyses of the 1918 flu indicate that it started as an avian flu and represented a completely new viral strain when it made the leap to humans shortly before 1918. Lab tests of the reconstructed 1918 virus show that in its original form, the virus's novel encoded proteins made it 100 times more lethal in mice than today's seasonal flu. The 1918 pandemic struck in three distinct waves over a 12-month period. It first appeared in the spring of 1918 in North America and Europe largely in the trenches of World War I, then reemerged in its deadliest form in the fall of 1918, killing tens of millions of people worldwide from September through November. The final wave swept across Australia, the United States and Europe in the late winter and spring of 1919. But did the 1918 flu simply "go away" after that third wave? Absolutely not, says Taubenberger.

Virus Mutates Into Seasonal Flu



Since the whole world had been exposed to the virus, and had therefore developed natural immunity against it, the 1918 strain began to mutate and evolve in a process called "antigenic drift." Slightly altered versions of the 1918 flu reemerged in the winters of 1919-1920 and 1920-1921, but they were far less deadly and nearly indistinguishable from the seasonal flu. "The 1918 flu definitely lost its real virulence by the early 1920s," says Taubenberger. But what's truly incredible, according to genetic analyses, is that the same novel strain of flu first introduced in 1918 appears to be the direct ancestor of every seasonal and pandemic flu we've had over the past century.

"You can still find the genetic traces of the 1918 virus in the seasonal flu that circulate today," says Taubenberger. "Every single human infection with influenza A in the past 102 years is derived from that one introduction of the 1918 flu."

Welcome to the Pandemic Era

The 1918 flu pandemic was by far the deadliest flu outbreak of the 20th century to date, but it wasn't the only one to qualify as a pandemic. Even with the advent of the first seasonal flu vaccines after World War II, the flu virus has proven capable of some unexpected and deadly genetic tricks. In a normal flu season, vaccine scientists can track the most active viral strains and produce a vaccine that protects against changes in the human flu virus from year to year. But every so often, viral genes from the animal kingdom enter the mix. "If one animal is infected with two different influenza viruses at the same time," says Taubenberger, "maybe one virus from a bird and another from a human, those genes can mix and match to create a brand new virus that never existed before." That's what happened in 1957 when the 1918 flu, which is an H1N1 virus, swapped genes with another bird flu giving us the H2N2 pandemic, which claimed a million lives worldwide.



A man receives a shave from a barber wearing a mask during the ongoing flu pandemic, Chicago, Illinois, 1918. Chicago Sun-Times/Chicago Daily News Collection/Chicago History Museum/Getty Images.

It happened again in 1968 with the creation of the so-called "Hong Kong Flu," an H3N2 virus that killed another million people. The so-called "Swine Flu" pandemic of 2009 has an even deeper backstory. When humans became infected with the 1918 pandemic flu, which was originally a bird flu, we also passed it on to pigs. "One branch of the 1918 flu permanently adapted to pigs and became swine influenza that was seen in pigs in the US every year after 1918 and spread around the world," says Taubenberger. In 2009, a strain of swine flu swapped genes with both human influenza and avian influenza to create a new variety of H1N1 flu that was "more like 1918 than had been seen in a long time," says Taubenberger. Around 300,000 people died from the 2009 flu pandemic. All told, if 50 to 100 million people died in the 1918 and 1919 pandemic, and tens of millions more have died in the ensuing century of seasonal flus and pandemic outbreaks, then all of those deaths can be attributed to the single and accidental emergence in humans of the very successful and stubborn 1918 virus.

"We're still living in what I would call the '1918 pandemic era' 102 years later" says Taubenberger, "and I don't know how long it will last." (Courtesy history.com)