

Surging COVID-19 cases bring a 2020 feel to the end of 2021

December 18 2021, by Jennifer Peltz and Bobby Caina Calvan



Nurse Sheena Davis administers a dose of a Moderna COVID-19 vaccine during a vaccination clinic at the Keystone First Wellness Center in Chester, Pa., Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Rourke

U.S. officials intensified calls Friday for unvaccinated Americans to get

inoculated in the face of the new omicron variant that contributed to a record number of infections in New York and threatened to wipe out a second holiday season in Europe.

Though the calendar is about to change, Friday had a distinctly 2020 feel: NFL games were postponed because of COVID-19 infections. The Rockettes Christmas show was canceled for the season. European governments imposed a spate of restrictions that ground travel to a halt and saw travelers lying low.

Much remains unknown about omicron, but officials warn that it appears more transmissible than the delta variant, which has already put pressure on hospitals worldwide. The uncertainty alone was enough for many people to change their plans.

In the United States, President Joe Biden's administration resisted tightening any restrictions, but also sketched out dire scenarios for the unvaccinated in a plea for hesitant Americans to get the shot.

"For the unvaccinated, you're looking at a winter of severe illness and death, for yourselves, your families, and the hospitals you may soon overwhelm," White House coronavirus response coordinator Jeff Zients said Friday, echoing the president's own comments earlier this week.



People walk past a Christmas tree in King's Cross train station, in London, the Eurostar hub to travel to European countries including France, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. After the U.K. recorded its highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, France announced Thursday that it would tighten entry rules for those coming from Britain. Hours later, the country set another record, with a further 88,376 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported Thursday, almost 10,000 more than the day before. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

The new variant is already in "full force" in New York City, Mayor Bill de Blasio said, with new cases hitting a one-day record of more than 8,300 on Thursday. But new hospitalizations and deaths – so far – are well below their spring 2020 peak and even where they were this time last year, city data shows.

The coronavirus also interrupted sports in the U.S. again. The NFL announced Friday that three games would be pushed from the weekend to next week because of outbreaks. The league has not specified whether the cases came from the omicron variant.

The Radio City Rockettes called off four performances scheduled for Friday because of breakthrough COVID-19 cases in the production, and plans for upcoming shows were still being assessed. The popular holiday program generally has four shows per day in December at Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan.



A syringe is prepared with the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine at a vaccination clinic at the Keystone First Wellness Center in Chester, Pa., Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Rourke

Dr. Stanley Weiss, a Rutgers University epidemiology professor, said officials need to react faster, citing a willingness to redefine fully vaccinated to include booster shots, for example.

"Everyone wants us to be through with this pandemic, but in order to get us through it, we can't ignore the realities of what's going on and what is needed," Weiss said.

Denmark [decided to close theaters, concert halls, amusement parks and museums](#) in response to virus cases. In Spain, friends and classmates canceled traditional year-end dinners.

Scotland and Wales on Friday pledged millions of pounds for businesses hurt in Britain's latest infection surge, a move that heaped pressure on Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government to do the same in England.

Treasury chief Rishi Sunak held talks with business representatives who have demanded more support, decrying a "lockdown by stealth" in which government officials recommend people cut back on socializing as much as possible without officially imposing the strict rules of past shutdowns.



People wait in line to get tested for COVID-19 at a mobile testing site in Times Square on Friday, Dec. 17, 2021, in New York. New York City had been mostly spared the worst of the big surge in COVID-19 cases that has taken place across the northeastern and midwestern U.S. since Thanksgiving, but the situation has been changing rapidly in recent days. Credit: AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura

Britain reported record numbers of infections three days in a row this week, the latest on Friday with more than 93,000 cases tallied.

Businesses ranging from vacation providers to pubs and theaters saw a wave of cancellations as customers decided to skip merrymaking for now rather than risk being infected and missing family celebrations later.

Even Britain's Christmas pantos—beloved and raucous holiday

performances—are under threat. The Belgrade Theatre in Coventry in western England had to refund 180,000 pounds (\$240,000) in ticket sales after customers decided not to go to shows. It was also forced to cancel 12 performances of "Beauty and the Beast" because half the cast tested positive.

"There's been a real dent of confidence," Executive Director Joanna Reid told the BBC.

Scotland's first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said Friday that financial assistance for business must come from the central government because it has the borrowing power to finance the scale of aid that is needed.



People wait after being vaccinated as riders train at the National Velodrome in Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, west of Paris, France, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. The

government is holding a special virus security meeting Friday to address growing pressure on hospitals in France from rising infections. Credit: AP Photo/Christophe Ena

"Business is already bleeding, every 24 hours counts," Sturgeon said during a briefing in Edinburgh, Scotland's capital. "There is no time to waste."

The already beleaguered travel and tourism industry is being particularly hammered.

Eurostar, which operates trains across the English Channel, sold out of tickets to France on Friday before new rules restricting travel to and from Britain took effect. Long lines snaked around the parking lot at the Eurotunnel, which runs the tunnel that drivers use to cross the water.

Ryanair originally expected to carry about 11 million passengers in December, but that figure dropped to 10 million, chief executive Michael O'Leary told the Guardian. Europe's biggest airline will also cut about 10% of its capacity in January.

Amanda Wheelock, 29, a graduate student at the University of Michigan, canceled a trip to France with her partner as cases spiked there. Even though the surge isn't necessarily due to omicron, the uncertainty about the new variant, and a new requirement that all U.S. travelers have to test negative before flying back to the U.S., made her worry that the trip would be more stressful than fun.



People talk with the staff member of Radio City Music Hall after cancellations of The Rockettes performance due to COVID-19 cases on Friday, Dec. 17, 2021, in New York. New York City had been mostly spared the worst of the big surge in COVID-19 cases that has taken place across the northeastern and midwestern U.S. since Thanksgiving, but the situation has been changing rapidly in recent days. Credit: AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura

Instead, she's traveling to the Anchorage, Alaska, area to see friends.

"A vacation with a lot of stress is probably not a great vacation," said Wheelock, who is from Arvada, Colorado.

The Advantage Travel Group, which represents about 350 U.K. travel agents, said business fell by 40% in mid-December from a month

earlier. Those numbers, including flights, cruise bookings and package holidays, add to the travel industry's existing slump, which had already seen business fall by two-thirds since the pandemic began, CEO Julia Lo Bue-Said.

"Our members are dealing with customers who are really nervous about traveling now," she said "They're really nervous about bookings for the New Year because they fear that there's a risk that the government will make more knee-jerk reactions."

Many in the travel and hospitality trades hoped they had put the worst behind them, nearly two years into a pandemic that has devastated those industries. They saw this holiday season as a chance to claw back some of what was lost—until omicron cast a pall reminiscent of the early days of the crisis.



People queue up to get COVID-19 booster injections outside a vaccination centre in a UCL (University College London) building, in London, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. After the U.K. recorded its highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, France announced Thursday that it would tighten entry rules for those coming from Britain. Hours later, the country set another record, with a further 88,376 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported Thursday, almost 10,000 more than the day before. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

Richard Stevens estimates he has lost out on 4,000 pounds (\$5,300) worth of bookings at his rental ski chalet in the French Alps after the new, stricter travel rules for people coming from Britain were announced.

He lost his first reservation when a guest called to say that the restrictions won't allow anybody to come to France without a compelling reason, Stevens said. "And the compelling reason doesn't include going on holiday."

Celebrity chef Michel Roux and other restaurateurs have invested heavily to remake their venues to address safety concerns—and hoped to reap some of the benefits.

To return to a state of huge uncertainty for a second consecutive Christmas is "like a kick in the stomach," said Roux, who has a destination restaurant in London.

Jorge Riera, who manages a traditional Spanish diner in central Madrid, said it doesn't matter that authorities have not imposed specific restrictions and, at most, have only issued recommendations.



A poster explaining the cancellations of the Hamilton Broadway shows due to COVID-19 cases at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on Friday, Dec. 17, 2021, in New York. New York City had been mostly spared the worst of the big surge in COVID-19 cases that has taken place across the northeastern and midwestern U.S. since Thanksgiving, but the situation has been changing rapidly in recent days. Credit: AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura



A sign asking people to wear face coverings to curb the spread of coronavirus at London St Pancras International rail station, in London, the Eurostar hub to travel to European countries including France, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. After the U.K. recorded its highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, France announced Thursday that it would tighten entry rules for those coming from Britain. Hours later, the country set another record, with a further 88,376 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported Thursday, almost 10,000 more than the day before. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham



People wait in line to get tested for COVID-19 at a mobile testing site in Times Square on Friday, Dec. 17, 2021, in New York. New York City had been mostly spared the worst of the big surge in COVID-19 cases that has taken place across the northeastern and midwestern U.S. since Thanksgiving, but the situation has been changing rapidly in recent days. Credit: AP Photo/Yuki Iwamura



A woman wearing face mask to protect against COVID-19 walks with a shopping bag along a shopping center in Paris, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. France's government is desperately trying to avoid a new lockdown or stricter measures that would hurt the economy and cloud President Emmanuel Macron's expected campaign for the April presidential election. Credit: AP Photo/Michel Euler



An intubated COVID-19 patient gets treatment at the intensive care unit at the Westerstede Clinical Center, a military-civilian hospital in Westerstede, northwest Germany, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Martin Meissner



Empty seats outside a restaurant in London, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. On what would normally be one of the busiest times for pubs and restaurants just before Christmas, customer numbers are down in central London due to concerns about the new omicron variant. Friday night in Central London was muted with one bar saying they have 30 customers inside when there should have been 170, with large amounts of cancellations in recent days. Credit: AP Photo/Alastair Grant



People walk through St Pancras train station, in London, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. After the U.K. recorded its highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, France announced Thursday that it would tighten entry rules for those coming from Britain. Hours later, the country set another record, with a further 88,376 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported Thursday, almost 10,000 more than the day before. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham



A government digital poster encouraging people to wear face masks to curb the spread of coronavirus, is displayed in a bus stop in London, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. After the U.K. recorded its highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, France announced Thursday that it would tighten entry rules for those coming from Britain. Hours later, the country set another record, with a further 88,376 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported Thursday, almost 10,000 more than the day before. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

"Most of our customers prioritize the well-being of their relatives over going out for a fun night with colleagues," Riera said.

In the past week alone, cancellations rolled in for about half of the booked space, sometimes on the same day of the event, the manager

said.

"People are once again afraid of the virus," he said.

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