

Italy targets the unvaccinated with new virus restrictions

January 10 2022, by Nicole Winfield



People stroll along the Via del Corso avenue in Rome, on Jan. 5, 2022. New coronavirus restrictions have gone into effect in Italy that amounted to a near-lockdown for the unvaccinated. As of Monday, proof of vaccination or a recent infection is required to access public transport, coffee shops and a host of other activities. The new "super" health pass requirement, which eliminates the ability to access services with just a negative test, coincided with the return to work and school for many Italians after the Christmas and New Year holiday. Credit: AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia

Italy targeted the unvaccinated with a host of new coronavirus restrictions Monday, with proof of vaccination or recovery from a recent infection required to enter public transport, cafes, hotels, gyms and other popular venues.

The new "super" health pass requirement, which eliminates the ability to show just a negative test to gain access to services, comes as many Italians returned to work and school after the Christmas and New Year's holidays and as Italy's new COVID-19 infections are soaring past 100,000 per day.

The government has responded to the omicron-fueled wave of infections by passing new restrictions aimed at encouraging vaccine holdouts to get their jobs or be increasingly shut out of recreational and even essential activities, such as taking a bus or subway to work.

Italians have generally supported the restrictions, which in recent months have also included outdoor mask mandates and a standard health pass to get into workplaces. The new restriction were enforced Monday by police fanning out at train stations to check passengers' vaccine status and make sure they were wearing the more protective Ffp2 face masks, which were now required on public transport.

"I'm happy that they are controlling everywhere," said Carola, Pasqualotto, a member of the Imperi sport center where the front desk was checking members' vaccination status. "I am in favor of mandatory vaccines for all."

Premier Mario Draghi, though, has faced criticism for his government's decision last week to mandate vaccinations for anyone 50 and older.



Cars line up at a rapid swab testing drive-thru site in Rome, Dec. 30, 2021. New coronavirus restrictions have gone into effect in Italy that amounted to a near-lockdown for the unvaccinated. As of Monday, proof of vaccination or a recent infection is required to access public transport, coffee shops and a host of other activities. The new "super" health pass requirement, which eliminates the ability to access services with just a negative test, coincided with the return to work and school for many Italians after the Christmas and New Year holiday. Credit: AP Photo/Andrew Medichini, File

Critics say the fine for noncompliance, which starts at 100 euros (\$113), is far too low to make defying the requirement hurt. But the fines rise significantly—to as high as 1,600 euros (nearly \$1,800)—for those in that age group who enter their workplaces starting in mid-February if they still aren't vaccinated.

Meeting with reporters on Monday, Draghi defended the vaccine

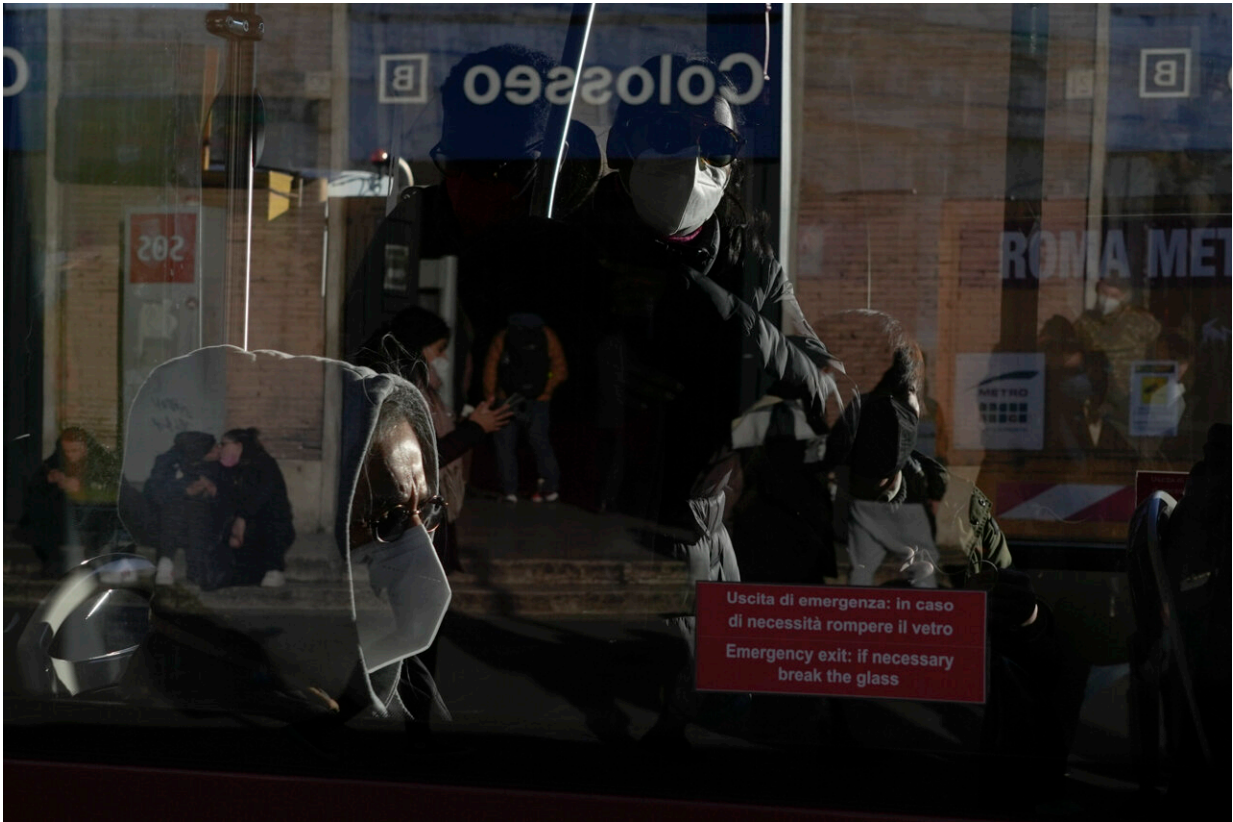
obligation.

"The data tells us that those older than 50 run greater risks, and that intensive care units are occupied by two-thirds of those not vaccinated," the premier said.

Doctors have also been warning that the flood of COVID-19 patients in recent weeks creates the risk that hospitals will not be able to do regular surgeries or offer proper care to non-COVID-19 patients.

Italy, where the coronavirus outbreak first erupted in Europe in February 2020, has fully vaccinated 86% of its 12-and-over population, and nearly 75% of those who are eligible have received a booster.

But 2 million people out of Italy's population of 60 million are currently positive, impacting essential services. School districts have complained they don't have enough teachers to reopen, since so many are positive or in quarantine.



People wear an FFP2 mask to curb the spread of COVID-19 on a bus in Rome, on Jan. 8, 2022. New coronavirus restrictions have gone into effect in Italy that amounted to a near-lockdown for the unvaccinated. As of Monday, proof of vaccination or a recent infection is required to access public transport, coffee shops and a host of other activities. The new "super" health pass requirement, which eliminates the ability to access services with just a negative test, coincided with the return to work and school for many Italians after the Christmas and New Year holiday. Credit: AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino, File

Two southern regions, Sicily and Campania which includes Naples, defied the government by keeping their schools closed on Monday. But after a parent challenged the closure in court, the schools in Campania were ordered to reopen on Tuesday.

Draghi said he wanted to depart from the previous government's decision to close schools during the first year of the pandemic, calling schools "fundamental to democracy."

"We want to be cautious, very cautious, but also to minimize the economic and social effects, but above all on kids, who suffered the most" by the long school closures, Draghi said.

Young people "in the evening go to pizzerias, they do sports all afternoon," the premier added. "It makes no sense to close schools and to not close the rest" of society.

Italian teachers are required to be vaccinated and some 99% are, according to Education Minister Patrizio Bianchi.

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Citation: Italy targets the unvaccinated with new virus restrictions (2022, January 10) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-01-italy-unvaccinated-virus-restrictions.html>

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