



## Reduced public health measures contributed to deadly COVID-19 surge in the Americas, PAHO Director says

*Deaths rose to 202 people per hour in the Region, despite overall decline in cases.*



**Washington D.C., 16 February 2022 (PAHO)** – Complacency around mask wearing, travel, and indoor gatherings created a perfect opportunity for the new Omicron variant to spread rapidly throughout the region and increase deaths, alerted PAHO Director, Carissa F. Etienne, with many places remaining “just as they were before.”

“Reduced public health measures were insufficient to reduce the scale of

this wave. And now we're dealing with the consequence: a rise in infections is driving a surge in deaths," she said at a media briefing today.

While still very high, COVID-19 infections declined by 31% this week, and deaths continued to rise by 5.6%.

"Undoubtedly, Omicron overtook us," the Director said. "Every time infections surge, there is a heavy toll for our families and communities," with peaks in cases followed by peaks in deaths three weeks later.

"COVID-19 is a preventable disease. And right now, we're losing far too many lives," she added. "As Omicron arrived, we didn't use all the tools we had developed to slow the spread and prevent infections."

More than half of deaths in the latest surge occurred in people over the age of 65 but many others occurred among those yet to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Unvaccinated people of all ages still fill up hospitals and ICU beds.

"Omicron has shown that the vaccines we have at hand can protect most of us from severe illness and death," Dr. Etienne said.

To ensure more equitable access, PAHO's Revolving Fund has now delivered 100 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines to 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean in coordination with COVAX.

The PAHO Director thanked donors for contributing 30% of the 100-million dose milestone and urged countries "to focus on filling in critical gaps in vaccination coverage," to ensure that at least 20 million more people are fully vaccinated, particularly high-risk groups.

"We won't overcome this pandemic unless we protect these groups, and then go beyond to cover everyone who is eligible," she said.

Dr. Etienne also highlighted that countries must be vigilant about implementing public health measures quickly. They must adjust hospital systems to accommodate new surges, while ensuring health care workers have the tools, they need to safely treat COVID-19 patients.

"We need to activate our responses more rapidly to keep pace with the current wave and stay ahead of future surges of this very fast, very serious virus," she added.

With up to 202 people dying every hour due to this latest surge, “inaction is not an option,” the PAHO Director said.

Turning to the COVID-19 situation in the region, countries of the Americas reported 3.3 million new cases and more than 34,000 COVID-19 related deaths.

In North America, the United States recorded the highest number of deaths in the subregion – 17,000.

Countries in Central America and in the Caribbean reported a surge in COVID-19 deaths, as well as an increase in hospitalizations, reaching 19% in some countries and territories of the Eastern Caribbean.

In South America, deaths in Brazil reached the highest numbers ever, setting a record for this wave.

### **Links**

[Director’s Remarks](#)

[Conferencia de prensa de la OPS sobre COVID-19 / PAHO’s Press Briefing on COVID-19 - AUDIO ORIGINAL](#)

[PAHO Press Briefing on COVID19 - AUDIO ENGLISH](#)

[Coletiva de Imprensa OPAS - COVID-19 - AUDIO PORTUGUÊS](#)

[Conférence de Presse COVID-19 – AUDIO FRANÇAIS](#)

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The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) works with the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of its population. Founded in 1902, it is the world’s oldest international public health agency. It serves as the Regional Office of WHO for the Americas and is the specialized health agency of the Inter-American system.