

# COVID-19 Pandemic Response in Brazil

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In 2020, the world was struck with a pandemic no one saw coming—a crisis that has affected every single sector in the world. As the world has tried to combat the pandemic, every country has found a different way to approach the situation. As we learned more about this virus, scientists started to work on vaccines, and the goal was to get rid of the virus through the fastest, but also least damaging way possible. However, like everything else, many people and country leaders had different perspectives on what was the best way to approach the problem. Going against the World Health Organization (WHO) and other experts' recommendations, Brazil's president, Jair Bolsonaro, considered that it was best to go through the pandemic by letting everyone get COVID-19 antibodies from getting the virus itself. This is one way of achieving herd immunity. Herd immunity occurs when a large proportion of a population becomes immune to a disease, whether by getting the antibodies due to infection or by vaccination, making the spread from one person to another less likely.<sup>1</sup>

Many health specialists and organizations found that herd immunity by vaccination would be the best solution to overcoming the pandemic. Many countries' leaders followed these recommendations and advised their countries to get vaccinated. However, in the case of Brazil, the president believed that it was best to achieve this by everyone getting infected instead of getting vaccinated. He said it was better to get COVID-19 than to get vaccinated, and saw this as the solution to the problem.<sup>2</sup> This was not a popular approach by specialists: "the biggest fear those of us who study pandemics have is that

the use of the herd immunity through infection strategy might be legitimized as a response to other epidemics."<sup>3</sup>

## *Being the Epicenter of the Pandemic*

Many health specialists criticized Bolsonaro's plan of action; he delayed the purchase of vaccines, gave false statements about the virus, and campaigned for unproven medical treatments, all to incentivize obtaining herd immunity through widespread infection.<sup>4</sup> Brazil's government allegedly let the virus rip through the country with the aim of achieving widespread immunity, which led to unnecessary deaths and infections.<sup>5</sup> There was never a national lockdown, and the president blocked local leaders' efforts to impose restrictions, calling the governors and mayors "tyrants" for trying to stop the spread of the virus.<sup>6</sup> This resulted in Brazil being one of the countries with the most cases of infection and deaths in the world, and also resulted in a collapsed healthcare system, even though in the past they had proven to have a great one. They have by far the highest overall death toll in Latin America and the second highest in the world, and have the second highest rate of deaths per 100k population in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Brazil usually has a robust vaccination culture, comprising of vaccination campaigns and vaccine production. However, since the president did not agree with the idea of COVID-19 vaccinations, Brazil did not produce their own vaccines, so they had to depend on imported vaccines

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<sup>1</sup> Mayo Clinic, "Herd Immunity and Covid-19 (Coronavirus): What You Need to Know," Aug. 28, 2021, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/coronavirus/in-depth/herd-immunity-and-coronavirus/art-20486808>.

<sup>2</sup> Manuela Andreoni, "Coronavirus in Brazil: What You Need to Know." *The New York Times*, Oct. 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/brazil-coronavirus-cases.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Judy Stone, "Covid-19, Brazil's Bolsonaro, and Herd Immunity," *Forbes*, November 6, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/judystone/2021/11/06/covid-19-brazils-bolsonaro-and-herd-immunity/?sh=5e223afd5af6>.

<sup>4</sup> Lise Alves, "Health Experts Welcome Brazil Covid-19 Inquiry Findings," *The Lancet* 398, no. 10312, Nov. 6, 2021:1674–1675., [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(21\)02398-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(21)02398-9).

<sup>5</sup> Jake Horton, "Covid Brazil: Why Could Bolsonaro Face Charges?" *BBC*, 27 Oct. 27, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56663217>.

<sup>6</sup> Andreoni, "Coronavirus in Brazil."

<sup>7</sup> Horton, "Covid Brazil..."

from China and India, which meant they did not have enough vaccines for the whole population. Thus, their vaccination campaign was slow and it was not a priority like it was in other countries, which was a challenge for the Brazilian Health System (SUS). Brazil did not show an effort for testing either, and we can see this in the 1 million tests per month that they have been doing since the pandemic started, in comparison to the 20-30 million tests the United States does.<sup>8</sup> In countries such as the United States, vaccines were a priority once they were approved. Everyone was incentivized to get vaccinated, and this is why the current situation in the U.S. and Brazil is different.

## ***Brazil vs. the United States***

In comparison to other countries, such as the United States, we can see how Brazil's actions led them to be the epicenter of the pandemic. By attempting to end the virus through herd immunity, the president let his citizens get infected, which caused many fatalities and suffering, and did not incentivize vaccination, which is perhaps the clearest and most successful way to currently get rid of the virus. While Brazil was ignoring the virus to keep its economy from collapsing, countries like the United States were facing it by incentivizing vaccination and social distancing, which is why, even though the U.S. also had a high number of cases and deaths in total, they were able to get it under control and get the healthcare system up again.

Also, the U.S. has more resources, which is why they were able to treat more people than Brazil. The latter was running out of resources and still pushing for herd immunity without actually being able to treat their citizens. The lack of treatment also widened the inequality

gap between social classes. Brazil has a lot of inequality between its citizens, and clearly only the ones with resources had access to the necessary medications and treatments. This left lower class people to deal with the virus on their own, especially indigenous groups in the Amazon, who were more vulnerable to getting infected. In the United States, masks were mandated in order to stop the spread of the virus. The U. S. also put a lot of effort into creating vaccines and getting their population vaccinated. By developing their own vaccines, they had primary access to them.

Both Brazil and the United States have a large population, so it was reasonable that they had high numbers of cases. However, letting your country get infected on purpose when there is another way brought significant consequences to Brazil, mainly making them the epicenter of the pandemic. They were having unnecessary deaths by a virus which already had taken too many lives. It is not only illogical but also immoral to let people die when there is another way around it. Bolsonaro viewed the virus that had swept the whole world as a "measly cold," saying that "all of us are going to die one day."<sup>9</sup> This even led them to having travel bans in other countries, because the rest of the world was making an effort to stop the spread. As of November 2021, we saw vaccinated populations in the U.S. start experiencing normal life without masks, while Brazil is still in a high peak of the pandemic and has not experienced that yet.

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<sup>8</sup> Andreoni, "Coronavirus in Brazil..."

<sup>9</sup> Andreoni, "Coronavirus in Brazil..."

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