

New York, California order locked down in response to COVID-19

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21 March 2020

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo today announced that the state will be under lockdown starting Sunday evening at 8pm until further notice. Cuomo's statement was issued the day after California Governor Gavin Newsom ordered his state's 40 million people to "stay home or at their place of residence." In both states, essentially all forms of social gatherings have been effectively banned in an effort to stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These orders were mirrored by the governors of Connecticut and Illinois. By Sunday evening, some 75 million people and more than a fifth of the United States population will be under some form of state-level executive order to stay indoors. The only exceptions will be if they are getting essential supplies or employed in "federal critical infrastructure sectors," as defined by the Department of Homeland Security.

Workers forced to stay on the job include those in "medical and health care, telecommunications, information technology systems, defense, food and agriculture, transportation and logistics, energy, water and wastewater, law enforcement, and public works." There are at the same time no provisions to provide the necessary personal protective equipment or sanitizer to prevent the spread of the coronavirus at these workplaces, placing these workers at great risk of infection and possibly death.

Twenty-eight states have also mobilized parts of their Army and Air National Guard, according to the *Military Times*. While these units are ostensibly being used to collect virus samples and provide relief supplies, it is an indication that they will be used to enforce the orders of the governors if necessary.

The coronavirus has now infected at least 276,000 people worldwide and killed more than 11,400, nearly double what these figures were a week ago. There were

30,000 new cases in just the past 24 hours. The United States itself has suffered a more than six-fold increase in cases since last Saturday, to 19,522, and a four-fold increase in deaths, now at 262. The number of new cases now exceeds that of Spain and Germany and rivals that of Italy, the new epicenter of the pandemic.

Coronavirus cases are currently mostly concentrated in New York, with 8,402 cases and 46 deaths, followed by Washington, which currently has 1,524 cases and 83 deaths, and California, at 1,249 cases and 24 deaths. Twenty-three other states, however, have at least 100 confirmed cases and no state has less than seven. More than half have at least one death.

New York City is currently facing a massive shortage in medical equipment, with Democratic mayor Bill de Blasio warning that the city's health system will run out of personal protective supplies in three weeks at most. He has asked for 3 million N95 masks, 50 million surgical masks, 15,000 ventilators and 25 million each of surgical gowns, gloves, coveralls and face masks to handle the surge of coronavirus cases that are expected to come in the next several weeks.

For his part, US President Donald Trump continued his xenophobic characterization of COVID-19, again referring to it at yesterday's press conference as "the Chinese virus." He also used the coronavirus as a further excuse to crack down on immigration, stating that "we've had this problem for decades, but now with the national emergency... we can actually do something about it." Trump continued, "This is now at a level nobody has ever approached." Trump explicitly reassured corporations that trade and cargo would be unaffected.

Amid a widespread shortage of respirators in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently released guidelines advising

medical professionals providing care to infected patients to use bandannas to protect themselves from COVID-19 when surgical masks are unavailable. This both places the health care providers at higher risk of becoming infected as well as allows the contagion to spread even further.

The United States is critically behind other countries in terms of testing availability, and hospitals are encouraging suspected coronavirus cases, even if they have been in contact that has tested positive, not to show up at emergency rooms unless they have severe symptoms. By failing to carry out widespread testing, quarantines, and isolations, the US response risks a devastating expansion of the pandemic.

“Large scale physical distancing, movement restriction, are in a sense a temporary measure,” noted World Health Organization Executive Director Dr. Michael Ryan yesterday. “What they do is they slow down to some extent the spread of infection in communities and thereby take pressure off the healthcare system. They don't fundamentally deal with the problem of disease transmission, and if you want to get back to what countries like Korea are doing, Japan or China, Singapore, Hong Kong and others. If you want to get back to that then you really have to get back to the hard-core public health measures of case finding, contact tracing, quarantine, isolation.”

WHO spokesperson Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove continued, saying “Ample testing ... isn't enough. We know that by finding those cases, isolating cases, and caring for those cases is critical. Quarantining of your contacts so that they cannot pass the virus onward is absolutely critical to stopping transmission moving between people.”

These statements followed warnings this week from London's Imperial College and the Harvard Global Health Institute, which warned that even with large scale lockdowns and other interventions, more than 1.1 million people are likely to succumb to the disease in the US alone.



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