

Joblessness soars as COVID-19 pandemic accelerates across US

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The past week saw a marked acceleration of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States. There were more than 375,000 coronavirus cases reported in the United States during the last seven days, more than the number of cases reported in February, March and the first week of April combined. The daily official number of deaths, which had been decreasing in the country to an average of just above 500 each day, shot up to more than 800 for the past three days.

As a result, there are now 3.2 million people that have been infected by the pandemic virus and more than 135,000 that have died. While 1.4 million have recovered, another 1.8 million people currently have active cases of COVID-19, half a million more than a month ago. Worldwide, there are more than 12.3 million total confirmed coronavirus cases and at least 556,000 deaths.

There were also another 1.3 million people who filed for unemployment for the first time last week, the 15th week in a row that new unemployment claims have been above 1 million and more than six times the number who newly filed this week last year. In addition, 18.1 million people placed continuing claims, more than 10 times those of a year ago.

The unemployment figures, moreover, only capture about half of those threatened with economic destitution in the wake of the shutdowns and layoffs in March and April in response to the pandemic. More than 1 million people filed claims last week under the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which provides benefits to those who are self-employed, and thus can't get normal unemployment benefits, or who are unable to work for COVID-19 related reasons.

The total number of people receiving this second type of assistance is 14.4 million, bringing the total number of people currently getting aid during the pandemic to

32.5 million. If the number of people receiving state and federal aid were a state, that state would be more populous than Texas.

Alongside the historically high unemployment figures, the National Bureau of Economic Research issued a paper noting that two-thirds of the workers currently receiving benefits are getting more money than they would be on the job. A fifth of them are currently getting double their salary. While the paper argues for a reduction of benefits or their elimination, it ignores the fact that its findings ultimately underscore the social crisis that had existed in the United States even before the pandemic.

Amid the ongoing public health and economic crises, there are increasing calls from medical professionals to again shut down states with growing outbreaks. Infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci noted yesterday in an interview on FiveThirtyEight that four states—Arizona, California, Florida and Texas—currently account for about half of the new infections in the country. He advocated at least pausing the reopenings in those states, as well as closing enclosed areas where large numbers of people gather, such as bars.

Dr. Ali Khan, a former health official at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was more direct in his comments. He told CNN, “If you’re not doing the ... things we’ve talked about in the past to get this outbreak under control, starting with test and trace ... your only option is to shut down.”

These warnings echo those that have been issued by the World Health Organization since countries around the world began to emerge from lockdown in late April. They noted then that lockdowns are only a temporary measure, one designed to allow public health systems to recover from the shock of a surge of infections, as well as set up mass testing and contact tracing

capabilities.

While some states have been able to recover from their record highs of daily infections and deaths, such as New York, others have continued to see a steady rise in cases. California, for example, had a stay-at-home order in effect since March 19, but allowed many types of businesses to partially reopen in May. This included retail stores, restaurants and recreational facilities, as well as factories and other manufacturing plants.

The state's new case numbers, however, have shot up in the past month. Unlike New York, which has had a sharp decline in daily cases, California's trend has been only flat or upward. It has seen a 275 percent increase in its number of new cases since May 25 and now reports more new cases each day than any state except Texas and Florida. California also leads the nation in daily deaths. Wednesday it reported 150 fatalities and yesterday at least 135.

In the aftermath of Wednesday's death count, Los Angeles County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer warned, "Our cases are rising. The rate of infection is increasing. And the number of hospitalizations are up. And today, we're even seeing a small increase in the number of deaths." She was also forced to admit, "Tragically, we do expect that more of our loved ones and neighbors may die of COVID-19 in the coming weeks with all of the increases we're seeing with hospitalizations."

The city has again begun to limit testing. While testing had become more widespread in May and parts of June, the growth in cases has forced Los Angeles to allow coronavirus testing only for those showing symptoms or working in an enclosed and crowded area, and for those who have come in contact with another person confirmed to have the virus. At the same time, local officials have estimated that 1 in 140 people living in LA County are unknowingly infected with the virus and are now far less likely to be tested.

Houston, Texas faces a similar situation. There are more than 40,000 cases just in Harris County, which includes Houston. As cases spiral upward, Houston also faces inundated hospitals and testing shortages. Staffing and bed shortages at the Lyndon B. Johnson Hospital last Sunday meant that at least 10 coronavirus patients who needed intensive care were forced to wait in the hospital's emergency room pending transfer to other area hospitals. The growing crisis forced Mayor

Sylvester Turner to cancel the upcoming in-person convention of the Texas Republican Party.

At the same time, paramedics for the city are reporting an increasing number of people dying at home before they can receive hospital care. While many of the fatalities are no doubt from the coronavirus, it is also likely that many have died of a heart attack, stroke or other sudden and dangerous medical condition that was not treated as a result of the overflowing hospitals during the pandemic.



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