

The July days of the COVID-19 pandemic wreak havoc on the US

Benjamin Mateus
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The first confirmed case of a person infected with COVID-19 was traced back to November 17, 2019 (260 days ago), in a 55-year-old man from Hubei province in China. Since then, 18.1 million people have been infected globally, and more than 691,000 have perished.

It has been 195 days since the first person with COVID-19 was identified in the US, in Washington state. Since then, the US has become the epicenter of the global pandemic, with over 4.8 million cases and over 158,000 deaths, outpacing every other nation without a seeming end to the daily gruesome figures. Two million cases were recorded just in July. The previous high in April had seen close to 900,000 cases.

At the end of May, when the initiative to reopen the country's economy was in full throttle, the nation had barely brought the pandemic under any semblance of control. The daily cases coming off the spring surge, when the seven-day moving average had reached a peak of 32,471, had barely seen a 30 percent decline when the Trump administration and states were clamoring to loosen restrictions and allow commerce to resume.

As predicted, the number of cases started to rise again in mid-June, especially in the Sun Belt states that were keen on opening up as soon as possible. The decline in fatality rates served to assure governors and state officials that the rise in cases was a byproduct of more testing as well as younger people becoming infected. Again, public health experts cautioned that fatality rates would begin climbing soon. But these concerns were dismissed by the media, touting the declines in death rates as assurance that young people were somehow impervious to the effects of the virus.

The physics of the pandemic has proven that such optimistic sentiments were misplaced. In the first week

of July, the seven-day moving average of daily fatalities reached its lowest point, with 521, and began climbing steadily, having now reached a seven-day moving average of 1,129. The curve for new cases peaked nearly 10 days ago, reaching a seven-day moving average of over 68,000, and has been on a slow decline. There have been at least 27,585 people who have succumbed in July. By all accounts, it is expected that daily deaths will continue to increase over the next two to three weeks before reaching their peak.

Three states have surpassed New York with total cases—California (513,763), Florida (487,132) and Texas (449,736). Georgia, New Jersey, Illinois, Arizona, North Carolina, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Tennessee have all passed 100,000 cases. California has the distinction of third place in the number of deaths, with 9,370, behind New Jersey and New York. For July, this represents a 51.6 percent increase, just for fatalities. Texas, with 7,266 fatalities, saw a 155 percent increase in deaths. Florida, with 7,022 deaths, has seen a 97.6 percent increase.

Despite the downturn in new daily cases, previously staunch supporters of rapid reopening are now raising the alarm and acknowledging that the pandemic in the US is deeply entrenched in communities throughout the Midwest. Dr. Deborah L. Birx, the White House's coronavirus coordinator, speaking on CNN, said, "What we are seeing today is different from March and April. It is extraordinarily widespread. It's into the rural as equal to urban areas. To everybody who lives in a rural area, you are not immune or protected from this virus."

Dana Bash, CNN's chief political correspondent, followed with the question, "People are panicked, people are worried, people don't understand why this is seemingly completely out of control. Is it time to

reset?” Dr. Birx, uneasy, barely managed to defend the administration’s response to the pandemic and essentially deflected the question.

On July 29, a coalition of health experts urged the federal government to step back from their push to reopen the economy and move to close nonessential businesses. A letter drafted by Matthew Wellington, public health campaigns director, US PIRG, and signed by more than 1,000 health professionals, reads, “Hit the Reset Button—of all the nations in the world, we’ve had the most deaths from COVID-19. At the same time, we’re in the midst of ‘reopening our economy,’ exposing more and more people to coronavirus and watching the number of cases, and deaths, skyrocket.”

Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security published a report over the weekend titled “Resetting Our Response: Changes Needed in the US Approach to COVID-19.” They, too, are advocating a shutdown of nonessential businesses, explicitly calling for the closure of high-risk activities and settings “in jurisdictions where the epidemic is worsening” and to “reinstitute stay-at-home orders where health care systems are in crisis.” Additionally, they are demanding bolstering supply chains for personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing equipment, as well as establishing a robust ramping up of contact tracing.

The US economy’s contraction in the second quarter of 2020 was the worst ever recorded. Gross domestic product fell nearly 10 percent, shrinking by \$1.8 trillion. The only comparison to such a collapse in historical reference is to the Great Depression and the demobilization after World War II. Every week in July, the number of unemployment claims exceeded 1 million.

Jerome H. Powell, the Federal Reserve chair, told reports last week, “The path forward for the economy is extraordinarily uncertain and will depend in large part on our success in keeping the virus in check.” Neel Kashkari, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, has expressed concern over the toll the pandemic has taken and suggested a short-term lockdown to get control of the health crisis. The end of July saw US unemployment supplements expire for tens of millions of people. And still, like their response to the pandemic, Washington continues to bicker over the relief package.

The pandemic is shifting to new locations, rapidly moving into Midwest states like Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska, predominately due to summer travels. Government officials in some of these states are attempting to reimpose restrictions again, warning residents that a surge could overwhelm their limited hospital capacities. Yet a lack of a real coordinated effort and comprehensive strategy by the Trump administration has led to widespread social resentment and frustration.



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