

# B.1.1.7 variants detected in Florida are approaching dangerous threshold

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This Friday, more than 1.357 million travelers took to the air as spring break revelers sought respite and leisure from a long, painful winter. This was the single highest air travel figure since the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a pandemic on March 11, 2020.

Though these figures are far less than from the same day in 2019, it has alarmed the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). According to a recent travel industry survey, 12 percent of respondents were making travel plans, and Miami expects university students from over 200 colleges to visit over the next few weeks.

Despite their premature guidelines for vaccinated individuals, the CDC continues to recommend against non-essential travel even for fully vaccinated people. Last Monday, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, appearing on MSNBC, said, "We know that after mass travel, after vacations, after holidays, we tend to see a surge in cases. We really want to make sure—again with just ten percent of people [fully] vaccinated—that we are limiting travel."

The United States, with more than 30 million confirmed COVID-19 cases and nearly 550,000 deaths, is in a precarious position. As it manages to fumble along with the most extensive vaccination campaign in its history, it also casts aside nearly every precaution against the pathogen. President Joe Biden is hedging his bet, tantamount to reckless endangerment, that sufficiently enough people have been vaccinated or previously infected to see a blunting of the impact of a spring surge.

All eyes are now on Florida, where the B.1.1.7 variant, the variant first detected in the United Kingdom, is approaching a dangerous threshold—50 percent of all new cases subject to genetic testing. Not

only is this variant more transmissible, but almost everyone also agrees the virus is more lethal than its predecessor. In December of 2020, the UK saw a dramatic surge in cases leading to a lockdown. At the same time, Manaus, Brazil, despite having had many previous infections, faced a deluge of new cases attributed to the variant first discovered there known as P.1.

However, many state and local officials who have repeatedly called for reopening all businesses and schools throughout the pandemic are now playing down the risks attributed to these variants and instead touting the recent declines and vaccine initiatives as a cause to celebrate.

However, do the numbers bear such optimism?

After a one-day high of over 21,000 cases on New Year's Day, numbers have been steadily declining in Florida. But more recently, they have been falling at a slower pace and then reached a plateau with approximately 5,000 new COVID-19 cases per day. Since March 6, numbers have been ticking upward and over the weekend, when figures usually are lower, the state posted over 5,000 three days running. Other states, such as New Jersey, New York and Rhode Island, have seen numbers plateau or tick upwards.

Already cars are causing traffic congestions throughout Miami as vacationers are flooding restaurants, bars, cafes along strips of white sandy beaches. Daytona Beach has been hosting the 80th edition of its ten-day annual event known as Bike Week. There is virtually no attention to public health measures. With 300,000 people having attended the Florida motorcycle rally, it is reminiscent of the Sturgis motorcycle rally that converged in western South Dakota in August. With weeks, both North and South Dakota were inundated with cases of COVID-19.

Dr. Olveen Carrasquillo, chief of general internal medicine at the University of Miami's Miller School of Medicine, told the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, "It's a challenge. We see the light at the end of the tunnel, so there's a lot of complacency. The thing that concerns me is there are much more infectious variants coming around." Florida has the highest number of B.1.1.7 variants detected, at 690 out of more than 3,000 nationally. They have also reported five cases of the P.1 variant and one case of the B.1.351, the variant first reported from South Africa.

Dr. Carrasquillo added, "We're almost there, but it's not a time to relax everything we've been doing. The numbers look really, really positive, but an event like this [Bike Event], where people come, gather, and then go back to other parts of the country, has the potential to be really catastrophic."

Estimates obtained from the COVID Tracking Project noted that by February 21, approximately 28.6 percent of Florida's population had been infected. According to the Washington post-vaccination tracker, as of March 14, 20.4 percent of Floridians have received at least one jab, while 11 percent have completed their vaccination. Close to 60 percent of the elderly over 65 have received at least one dose of the vaccine.

Assuming some level of overlap between those who survived being previously infected and those vaccinated, it is safe to think that probably 40 percent of the population has some protection against the coronavirus. The actual proportion of the population needed for herd immunity has been estimated at 70 percent, but those figures were for the wild-type variants and a higher percentage may be needed for the new strains. Given all precautions have been tossed aside, it remains to be seen how the B.1.1.7 lineage will impact the predicted spring surge with this level of immunity. Yet, such an irresponsible experiment is not settling well with public health officials.

Speaking with Chuck Todd on NBC's "Meet the Press," Dr. Anthony Fauci reminded the host again that his concern is with a plateau in numbers of daily cases being above 60,000. He called that disconcerting. Like Sweden, Italy, and Germany, where their epidemiological curves had plateaued, as these countries moved to lift restrictions, it led to a sudden rise in new infections.

Many states like Texas and Mississippi are rapidly

receding mask mandates, demanding school reopening and lifting local businesses' restrictions. An emergency room physician from Austin, Texas, Dr. Natasha Kathuria, told ABC, "We fear that opening our economy to 100 percent, just before spring break, is a recipe for disaster. Without a mask requirement, front-line workers are at exceptional risk for a potential confrontation with patients who may be unwilling to wear a mask now that there is no mandate. Texas was the most aggressive state to reopen after our national lockdown, and we became the epicenter for COVID-19 a few months later. We cannot risk that again."

Approximately 70 million people in the United States have received one or both doses of COVID-19 vaccines in the US, accounting for 21 percent of the population. The seven-day average stands at more than 2.5 million vaccinations per day. With 136 million doses distributed, this is the largest rollout across the globe thus far. However, the rollout has been extremely chaotic and has prioritized speed over eligibility.

Those who are 75 years or older have accounted for 60 percent of all COVID-19 deaths but only account for 23 percent of all first doses. Additionally, more affluent populations in wealthy counties have been disproportionately vaccinated than underserved regions of the country. The implication of these developments means that a possible fourth wave will punish those poorest and most vulnerable.



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