

New York and New Jersey governors ease restrictions even as infections increase

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1 April 2021

New Jersey and New York are among the states with the highest seven-day rates of new daily coronavirus infections per 100,000 residents in the United States. Although the numbers in these states are lower than they were at the most recent peak in January, they are much higher than they were when the current wave began, and they are increasing daily.

Despite the worsening state of the pandemic, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo and New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, both Democrats, are easing restrictions meant to control the pandemic. Their policies are deliberately sacrificing public health to the need of the banks and big corporations to accumulate profit.

On April 1, New York had 7,789 new cases and 87 new deaths. The number of hospitalizations in New York City has decreased, however. It may decrease further or plateau, according to health officials. But changes in the numbers of hospitalizations and deaths always lag behind changes in the number of cases, which have been increasing.

The circulation of new and potentially more contagious viral variants remains a concern in New York. A March 30 report from the New York City Department of Health shows that variants now make up 72 percent of new cases in the city.

A new variant named B.1.526 was detected in New York in November, believed to have originated in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan. The report indicates that it is responsible for 43.2 percent of new cases in New York City. This variant is spreading quickly and might be able to evade available antibody treatments and vaccines. The second most prevalent is the UK variant (B.1.1.7), which represents 26.2 percent of new cases. A variant first identified in California (B.1.427) accounts for 1.8 percent of new cases.

Approximately 3.5 million New York residents, or about 18 percent, had been fully vaccinated as of April 1. All adult residents of the state will become eligible for the vaccine on April 6. A State Supreme Court judge has ruled that New York must offer the vaccine to all its prisoners after months of stonewalling by the Cuomo administration. But the vaccine alone will not end the pandemic. Other basic public health measures such as masks, social distancing and the closure of schools and nonessential businesses with full compensation are necessary.

But rather than imposing these restrictions, Cuomo is loosening the old ones. “Let’s get back to life and living. It is safe,” he said in mid-March, brazenly denying reality. Yankee Stadium and Citi Field, where New York’s two baseball teams play, have been converted to mass vaccination sites. But, with an eye on revenue, Cuomo has allowed the Yankees and Mets to play and their fans to return as of April 1, provided that fans show that they have been vaccinated or have tested negative for COVID-19. Large performing arts centers also opened on Thursday at 20 percent of their capacities.

In addition, Cuomo has allowed indoor fitness classes to resume. These classes “are the settings where we have seen COVID-19 spread,” New York City Health Commissioner Dr. Dave Chokshi told NBC. “We remain in a period where we shouldn’t be throwing caution to the wind. We still do have risk of COVID-19 spread,” he added, illustrating that Cuomo’s decisions lack any scientific basis.

Perhaps Cuomo’s most reckless move is his permission for restaurants to open as much as 50 percent of their capacity for indoor dining. Most infections are believed to take place indoors between people who are not wearing masks, and Cuomo’s

policy will turn restaurants into centers of viral transmission.

New Jersey faces a similar situation at this point of the pandemic. On March 31, the state recorded 4,871 new cases and 82 deaths. Hospitalizations for COVID-19 had increased for three days in a row and were 28 percent higher during the previous two weeks. The state's seven-day average for newly confirmed cases was 3,977, which was 19 percent higher than during the previous week and 36 percent higher than the previous month.

About 606 cases of the UK variant and 112 of the New York variant have been identified in New Jersey, according to State Communicable Disease Service Director Dr. Ed Lifshitz. But the real number could be higher, he cautioned, particularly since the state is only testing 2 percent of positive coronavirus results to identify the strain. These two variants account for between 10 percent and 40 percent of new cases, Dr. Lifshitz said. The Brazilian and South African strains are circulating within the state as well.

To date, 2.73 million residents of New Jersey have received at least one dose of vaccine, and 1.57 million have been fully vaccinated. The latter figure represents 23 percent of the state's adult population. But demand for the vaccine remains greater than supply, and vaccination appointments are scarce.

Despite progress in the administration of vaccines, the pandemic is worsening in the state. March 31 was the second straight day that New Jersey recorded more than 4,000 cases. It also was the third time in six days that the state had reported this number of cases. In addition, March 31 was the second day in a row during which the state announced more than 40 coronavirus-related deaths. The most recent test positivity rate was 14.26 percent, and the transmission rate was above 1 for two days in a row.

"We are definitely in another wave of this virus," said state Health Commissioner Judith Persichilli at a recent press briefing. "The transmission is pretty rampant right now," she said on March 29.

"We're at a pretty critical moment," Murphy admitted. Despite this dangerous situation, his administration is loosening restrictions. As of the morning of April 2, he increased the limit on outdoor gatherings to 200 people. Businesses that can seat 2,500 people have been allowed to increase their indoor

seating capacity to 20 percent, and their outdoor capacity to 30 percent.

So far during this academic year, New Jersey has recorded 221 in-school coronavirus outbreaks that resulted in 1,002 confirmed cases. Yet Murphy has allowed the distance between desks to be reduced from six to three feet, following recent dubious changes to guidance from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). He has said that in-person instruction will be mandatory in September, and parents who remain concerned about the coronavirus will have no remote learning option.

It is obvious that Murphy, the multimillionaire former Goldman Sachs executive, is basing his decisions not on the current data, but on the need for the financial and corporate aristocracy to extract more profit from workers. Cuomo is guided by the same class interests. Neither Democrat is willing to protect the health, and very lives, of the working class. Republican governors such as Greg Abbott of Texas and Ron DeSantis of Florida are acting even more openly, junking essentially all restrictions. These developments underscore the fundamental incompatibility of capitalism with public health.



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