

COVID-19 outbreaks skyrocket at US colleges and universities as new variants emerge on campuses

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5 April 2021

As the US death toll approaches 600,000, universities and colleges across the country are reemerging as hotspots of COVID-19 outbreaks. The spike in cases is a direct result of thousands of students returning to campuses after spring break, despite the critical lessons from the disastrous fall semester reopenings.

Four months into the arrival of the COVID-19 vaccine, universities are still far from having vaccinated all current students, contrary to what many had promised. To further exacerbate the situation, in addition to numerous spikes in coronavirus cases, colleges are now reporting cases of the new COVID-19 variant found on their campuses.

Since the start of this year, it is estimated that more than 120,000 cases are linked to colleges and universities and 530,000 since the start of the pandemic. A data-driven study on 30 large universities revealed that a spike in campus infection rates preceded a peak in the surrounding counties by less than 14 days, implying that universities had become COVID-19 superspreader sites.

A survey by the *New York Times* shows that at least 18 colleges have reported more than 1,000 cases in 2021 alone. At least 15 college institutions detected new COVID variants. Readers should note that not all testing conducted at college campuses are capable of detecting and differentiating between the variants, so it is expected that the actual numbers are higher.

The reopening drive can be seen across the country, including Republican- and Democratic-controlled states. Infections are rising at college campuses, with those in Florida and Arizona reporting among the worst numbers of outbreaks. Adding fuel to the fire, over the past month mask mandates have been lifted in at least six states, including Texas, totaling some 37 million people.

In Florida, where Governor Ron DeSantis issued an order to nullify all public health measures imposed by local governments, cases have skyrocketed with a total of 2,077,032 infections since the start of the pandemic and

6,017 cases on April 2.

The University of Florida in Gainesville has observed the highest case number for 2021, with 2,138 confirmed cases between January and March and a total of 8,894 since the start of the pandemic. According to the university's testing dashboard, there were more than 130 confirmed cases on campus over the past five days. The second highest case count at a university is Arizona State University, which had 1,822 cases for 2021 and 6,327 since the start of the pandemic.

Compared to other states, Texas had the second highest case number of cases, at 2,401,898, and third highest number of deaths, 47,725, since the start of the pandemic. University of Texas at Dallas has recorded at least 247 cases on campus, with 193 of them being students. Tragically, a German language professor there recently passed away after contracting the virus.

University of Texas at Austin (UTA) recorded a total of 1,226 student cases and 225 staff cases in 2021 alone. The university has seen 3,896 cases among faculty, staff and students since the start of the pandemic. It can be estimated that more than six percent of the entire student body have been infected since the start of the pandemic.

According to the UTA president, three staff have died from COVID-19. Within the span of just two weeks between March 17 and 30, Texas A&M University, which had kept classes open throughout the pandemic, recorded 278 cases. Between August 8, 2020 and January 2, 2021, the university recorded a total of 4,890 cases.

In Colorado, 19 total outbreaks have been listed active on multiple campuses. University of Colorado at Boulder recorded a total of 3,334 cases, and University of Denver recorded 929 cases.

The disastrous conditions are the same for Democratic-controlled states, such as Washington, New York and California. Washington State University registered 73 new infections over the past weekend alone. The cases at New

York University's Washington Square campus nearly tripled between March 18-29 with the positivity rate on a 14-day rolling average jumping from 0.28 percent to 0.81 percent.

On February 1 University of California, Berkeley students were instructed to self-sequester and stay in their dorms as much as possible for a week, after the university reported a surge of 44 new cases which increased the weekly infection rate from 0.4 percent to 1.2 percent, a threefold jump.

Northeastern University had 135 cases between March 25-31. Boston College had 134 positive cases between March 22-April 4. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) had 221 cases in the month of March.

A number of college campus administrations are requiring mandatory asymptomatic testing. This allows campuses to pose as having drastically lower rates of infection compared to testing within the larger population, which is biased toward those with symptoms and higher positivity rates.

This can be seen at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD), which touts a public COVID Dashboard displaying a graph comparing the percentage of positive cases among students, campus employees and San Diego County as a whole. However, its weekly mandatory COVID-19 testing for students sets up the fallacious argument that the campus is safer because it has a lower positivity rate relative to the county but omits the bias in the sample.

UCSD announced that it will vaccinate 5,000 campus community members per day. But five days into the start of vaccination, only 2,847 vaccines were administered in total, far from what was promised.

At the University of San Diego (USD), the campus went into lockdown over a spike in cases of 291 between January 24-February 12. It is estimated that 11 percent of all students living in residential housing have tested positive.

In addition, COVID-19 variants have been detected at a number of campuses. Students at University of Pittsburgh had a large outbreak last week with over 76 cases of the UK variant (B.1.1.7), which is known for its higher transmission and death rates.

At least 15 college institutions have recorded cases of the infectious and lethal COVID-19 variants, including University of Michigan; Tulane University; University of California, Berkeley; University of Miami; University of Texas at Austin; University of Washington; Davidson College; University of Central Florida; University of Virginia; Michigan State University; University of Pittsburgh; Penn State; University of Memphis; Duke University and University of Arizona.

All of these universities except Duke University have found the UK variant (B.1.1.7) on their campuses, while researchers at Duke University have found that the California (B.1.427/B.1.429) and New York (B.1.429)

variants were seen on campus following the holiday break. It can be predicted that most college institutions across the United States are having similar experiences.

Although outbreaks on campuses are undoubtedly the responsibility of university officials, students are continuously scapegoated for the rise in infections.

The fact of the matter is that on-campus housing and in-person lectures that university officials are aggressively promoting are simply not suitable for keeping an adequate social distance for containing the virus.

COVID-19 was the third leading cause of death in 2020, with the death toll reaching 568,000 since the start of the pandemic. The national death rate in 2020 increased by 16 percent compared to 2019, which is the largest percentage increase in a single year since World War I. Although the current national case number is lower compared to the peak in January, the pandemic is far from over.

In an effort to cover up the bipartisan policy of reopening, the Democratic Party together with the corporate media have produced dishonest narratives that the Biden administration has been carrying out measures to contain the pandemic. Throughout his presidential campaign, Biden repeated that his administration will "listen to the science," but in reality, he has been continuing the same homicidal policy of reopening schools and businesses that former President Trump spearheaded in the interests of preventing any loss in corporate profits.

Mass opposition to the reopening of schools and universities is appearing forcefully among educators and students at every level. Teachers and educators across the nation are forming rank-and-file committees to oppose in-person instruction. Students and university professors are voicing their criticism towards the university administrators' decisions for full reopening of campuses.

College and K-12 campuses have become one of the key battlegrounds for the fight to save lives and end the reckless policies of the financial oligarchy that prioritize profit over human lives. It is urgently necessary to shut down all nonessential businesses, allocate resources for safety measures such as online learning, and implement policies based on science and genuine democracy. The mobilization of students, educators and the whole working class is essential in fighting against the homicidal policy of the profit-driven financial elites.



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