

Coronavirus cases in Oregon, Washington outpace rise in national case counts

Bryan Dyne
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The rise in the number of daily confirmed coronavirus cases in Oregon and Washington is currently outpacing the national average, causing an increase in deaths and hospitalizations in both states.

Across the United States, the number of daily cases has increased from about 56,000 in mid-March to just under 72,000 now, an increase of about 29 percent. In Oregon, however, the average number of daily cases had dropped to less than 250 and now stands at 590, a 136 percent increase. Similarly in Washington, cases have risen from a low point of 650 per day to more than 1,200, an 86 percent increase.

In total, Washington has suffered more than 384,000 cases of coronavirus and at least 5,400 deaths. Oregon has had nearly 173,000 infections and more than 2,400 confirmed fatalities from the deadly disease.

The growth in new cases has also spurred a rise in hospitalizations. In a press conference Thursday Washington's Democratic Governor Jay Inslee noted that new hospitalizations caused by the pandemic are now more than 40 a day, up from 30 last month. "We have to prevent this from taking over the state of Washington," the governor commented, warning of a fourth wave of the pandemic in the state.

Inslee did not, however, announce any new changes for the ongoing reopenings in the state. Just last week, he updated the criteria for counties to stay in Phase 3 of Washington's reopening plan, ordering that a given county must have both increasing case counts and hospitalizations before being forced back into Phase 2 restrictions. Under earlier metrics, a county would be moved back to Phase 2 if either case counts or hospitalizations were rising.

As such, only Cowlitz, Pierce and Whitman counties are in Phase 2. The vast majority of the state, including King County, which includes Seattle, remains under

Phase 3 restrictions, in which indoor dining, retail stores and gyms can operate at 50 percent capacity.

Moreover, despite the rising case counts, school reopenings proceed across the state. Elementary students in Seattle returned to classrooms on April 5, while at least 10,000 middle and high school students will be returning to partially in-person classes on April 19. The return to in-person learning has spurred on the ever greater spread of the pandemic, as shown starkly in recent data from Michigan .

The move to reopen was ratified by the Seattle Education Association union, which claims that four-fifths of its members approved the agreement with the Seattle Public Schools administration. The school system reports, however, that only about 50 percent of families will be allowing their children to again enter schools, indicating a widespread concern over the continued and ongoing dangers of the pandemic.

Oregon faces a potentially worse situation. Genetic testing of the virus has found eight variants of the coronavirus, including those first detected in the United Kingdom, Brazil and South Africa. As of Wednesday, the state epidemiologist Dr. Dean Slideling noted that of those variants there were 69, 4 and 8 cases known in the state, respectively. All are suspected to be more contagious and deadly, and there is a danger that they could become the dominant strains in the state and wider region if they are allowed to continue spreading.

Most concerning is a threefold rise of the number of cases of the British variant over the past week. Known cases from two other variants, both from California, also doubled from April 5 to April 10, which experts warn are likely more widespread than currently known, given that all the variants of the coronavirus often spread asymptotically.

It is suspected that the rise of these variants is what

has driven renewed coronavirus surges in the state. In Lane County, for example, there are currently about 270 known infections, bringing the total of those infected in the county of 351,000 to 11,430. Of those infected since March 24, 93 have been under 18 years old, further indicating that children can and do get infected and spread the virus. Health officials have warned about transmission at sporting events.

Despite these warnings and clear dangers, the Oregon Department of Education is going forward with its reopening plan. Per Governor Kate Brown's claim in March that students should "return to the learning environment we know serves [students] best: in-person instruction," schools in the state have now been ordered to begin offering full or hybrid in-person learning by April 19.

Moreover, the guidelines for closing schools are based on cases in the general population, which can be as high as 200 per 100,000 residents before schools are forced to revert to in-person learning. The other metric used is the test positivity rate, which can be as high as a staggering 10 percent before the state recommends schools shut down. This is in line with policies around the country, which state education departments are making restrictions as limited as possible.

The excuse used is that, with the rollout of the vaccines, schools are safe (though other large gatherings inexplicably remain restricted). Such statements ignore the fact that the vaccine rollouts have been disorganized at best, and that wealthier areas are receiving the vaccine first. ZIP code data from the Oregon Health Authority reveals that the Portland suburb of Lake Oswego, one of the highest income towns in the state, has a vaccination rate of 58 percent. In contrast, only about 22 percent of those in eastern Portland have received the vaccination.

In other words, the working class areas, with those who are more likely to be unable to work from home, are the least vaccinated and thus the most susceptible to the virus. In addition, the proliferation of so many variants in the state greatly heightens the danger of a mutation that avoids immunity, gained either from surviving the virus or from a vaccine.

As such, workers must be clear that the only way to stop the pandemic in Oregon, Washington, nationally and internationally, is through as many measures to contain the virus as possible, including vaccines,

continued testing, contact tracing and isolation. Schools and nonessential businesses must be shut down, with full financial compensation for those impacted. As has been demonstrated by the fourth wave of the pandemics crashing over the Pacific Northwest, half measures do not suffice.



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