

New York tri-state area to lift most COVID-19 restrictions May 19

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New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced May 3 that his state and the neighboring states of New Jersey and Connecticut would lift most of their remaining COVID-19 restrictions on May 19, just over two weeks later.

Capacity restrictions in office buildings, theaters, museums, retail stores, bars, restaurants and gyms will end May 19. Businesses, including restaurants, will still have to guarantee six feet between groups of patrons, although even that requirement can be removed by either checking for vaccination or negative test status or through physical barriers.

Cuomo is also lifting capacity restrictions on indoor and outdoor gatherings in New York, with commercial venues increasing to 30 percent capacity indoor and 33 percent outdoor, and with the outdoor social gathering cap increasing to 500 people, up from 200. Similar actions are being taken in other states, with New Jersey lifting indoor catering event capacity to 50 percent and allowing for restaurant buffets starting May 7.

The three states collectively making up the tristate area around New York City have a population of 33.1 million, and were hard-hit by the pandemic in the spring of 2020, with New York City the global epicenter for weeks. The three states have seen a total of 86,792 COVID-19 deaths, according to Worldometer: 52,886 in New York, 25,769 in New Jersey and 8,137 in Connecticut. On a per capita basis, New Jersey and New York have been the worst-affected states in the US, with Connecticut in seventh place.

While the three states have seen a decline in new COVID-19 cases and deaths thanks in part to vaccinations, lifting restrictions at this stage is reckless. New cases are at levels comparable to the early stages of the fall-winter surge, and new variants of COVID-19

that are more communicable and lethal—including the so-called UK variant and a variant that originated in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan—make up an increased percentage of cases in the region, including the majority in New York City.

Moreover, while there has been significant progress on vaccination, most of the population is still vulnerable to COVID-19, and the vaccination rate is slowing. In New York, for example, less than 48 percent of the population has had their first dose, with less than 38 percent having completed their vaccine series. Three of New York City's boroughs—the Bronx, Brooklyn and Staten Island—are below the inadequate statewide numbers.

Should there be another resurgence in COVID-19, Cuomo is preparing to blame it on the population, rather than the lifting of restrictions. "Maintaining this progress is critical and in order to keep moving in a positive direction, New Yorkers must continue to take all the proper precautions," he declared at the news conference announcing the reopening measures. "If we let up now, we could slide backwards and that is something nobody wants."

Office buildings are currently limited to 50 percent capacity, and were only scheduled to go to 75 percent May 17. Just two days later, the capacity limit will increase to 100 percent, well before any data can be gathered on the effect of increasing it to 75 percent.

The removal of capacity restrictions is coupled with a push for a general revival of economic activity, much of it with the aim of bolstering the Manhattan real estate market and related business interests, which have suffered from the switch to remote work by many businesses, such as banks, based in the global financial center.

A chief example is New York City Mayor Bill de

Blasio ordering 80,000 municipal workers who had been working remotely back into offices May 3. This was followed by de Blasio declaring, “This is going to be the summer of New York City,” saying that the city would be reopened by July 1. This actually preceded Cuomo’s announcement.

The New York City subway system will resume 24-hour service May 17, just in time to shuttle service-sector workers staffing crowded bars and restaurants between work and home in the early morning. The subway has been shut down from 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. daily, recently shortened to 2 a.m. to 4 a.m., to sanitize subway cars.

Lifting the capacity restrictions will allow for increased ticket revenue for museums, which have been devastated by the pandemic. The Broadway League announced that musicals and plays will return in September, meaning that many workers in New York’s cultural sector will have been out of work for a year and a half before the curtain rises again. Many museums and other cultural institutions—and, more to the point, their workers —have been on life support at best since March 2020.

In lifting COVID-19 restrictions and prioritizing private profit over public health, Cuomo and his fellow governors are not alone. Cuomo, New Jersey’s Phil Murphy and Connecticut’s Ned Lamont are all Democrats, but there is little to distinguish their actions from their Republican counterparts across the country, other than rhetorical support for masking and social distancing. Perhaps the most egregious action has been that of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, issuing an executive order removing counties’ own restrictions.

President Joe Biden has also been at the forefront of the deadly drive to reopen schools and other businesses nationally. Schools have been a particular center of infection in Michigan’s outbreak and children make up a growing share of infections in the United States.



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