

California lifts all coronavirus restrictions amid warnings of a surge in infections among the unvaccinated

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This week California ended most of its coronavirus restrictions, including capacity limits, social distancing and mask requirements, as part of its so-called “Grand Reopening.” Basing itself on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the state still requires masks on public transportation, in hospitals and jails, as well as schools and child care centers.

The state’s Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board at first said that masks would still be required unless everyone in the same room had been vaccinated but reversed itself last week and said the fully vaccinated no longer had to wear masks or observe social distancing, regardless of the vaccination status of others. Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom said he would sign an executive order “to clear up any ambiguity.”

Limited public health measures will remain only for mass events with 5,000 or more people indoors or 10,000 people outdoors, with vaccine verification mandated or at least “recommended,” according to the revised public health order.

In a news release last Friday, Governor Newsom said the state would stop capacity limits and enforcement of physical distancing at all venues and retire the color-coded tier system for each county.

Despite the dangers of more infectious variants and less than 60 percent of the population over the age of 18 fully vaccinated, leaving a significant number of people still at risk of getting sick and dying, Newsom gloated, “With all due respect, eat your heart out, the rest of the United States. ... The state is not just poised to recover, it’s poised to come roaring back.”

California’s reopening is significant in that it was the

first in the US to impose a statewide lockdown in March of 2020 and began reopening some businesses last June before rising cases forced more restrictions again.

In December 2020 at the height of the state’s surge, Los Angeles had overflowing intensive care units (ICUs) and two COVID-19 deaths every hour. Although the state has one of the lowest per capita death rates in the country, it has more cases (3.8 million and counting) and deaths (63,000 and counting) than any other state.

Nationwide, an official campaign to declare the pandemic over has gathered momentum despite the more than 600,000 deaths and slowing rate of vaccinations. Newsom, like many other governors, promoted a series of lotteries to encourage people to vaccinate while sowing a sense of complacency.

Many regions of the state, particularly in the more rural North, where residents and local governments pushed back against mask mandates and other health measures, are now experiencing a disturbing rise in cases and hospitalizations.

Across the state around 72 percent of adults and 59 percent of all residents have received one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, according to the CDC. California has the third lowest seven-day death rate per capita and the seventh lowest seven-day infection rate per capita. In a similar fashion, New York lifted all state-imposed COVID-19 restrictions after 70 percent of its residents over 18 received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Officials say that 90 percent of the Newsom’s pandemic-related executive orders will be ended by September, while limited guidelines will remain in

place until October.

Public health officials have voiced their concerns with the California Nurses Association's President Sandy Reding saying, "This is not a sound public health strategy." Many have pointed out that the honor system for mask wearing will not work forcing businesses and essential workers to police customers and patrons.

While the numbers of COVID-19 cases in the state over a seven-day period are down 98 percent from their peak, and daily deaths and hospitalizations are down 96 percent, public health experts are still worried about unforeseen developments that could jeopardize this progress.

Dr. Mark Ghaly, California Health and Human Services secretary, warned that in places with low vaccination rates, "[w]e're gonna see outbreaks."

Ghaly told the *Los Angeles Times*: "I have no doubt that we'll see some places that are [largely] unvaccinated that are going to have an outbreak, and that's going to have real consequences."

Experts also worry that the Delta variant of coronavirus will find unvaccinated people. Dr. Robert Wachter, chair of UC San Francisco's Department of Medicine, tweeted: "If you're fully vaxxed, I wouldn't be too worried, especially if you're in a highly vaxxed region. If you're not vaccinated: I'd be afraid. Maybe even very afraid."

The danger for the unvaccinated will be especially acute in the fall and winter if COVID-19 transmission rates rise again among the unvaccinated. Wachter said that the Delta variant, which "appears to be even more infectious" than the Alpha variant, is now dominant in California and the US. He said that the Alpha variant was 40 percent more infectious than early strains of the coronavirus, and the Delta variant was 40 percent more infectious than that.

Wachter wrote: "Delta has made me nervous: I'll now bet we'll see significant ... surges this fall in low-vaccine populations due to [a] combo of seasonality, Delta's nastiness, & 'back to normal' behavior."

Although statewide 56 percent of California's adults have been vaccinated, some counties lag far behind like Riverside (45 percent), San Bernardino (42 percent), Merced (39 percent), Tulare (38 percent), Kern (37 percent) and Kings (31 percent).

Many rural Northern counties also have low

vaccination rates, like Siskiyou (40 percent), Shasta (36 percent), Yuba (34 percent), Tehama (30 percent) and Lassen (21 percent).

Of particular concern is whether the state's farmworkers, heavily exploited immigrants and many without legal status, are being vaccinated. State Health Secretary Ghaly told the *Los Angeles Times*: "There are still some communities that, because of their level of vaccination penetration, have some work to do. ... We may see some outbreaks. We may see some number of people hospitalized."



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