

US states press reopening amid mounting dangers from COVID variants

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The COVID-19 pandemic has killed more than 600,000 people in the United States, according to the semi-official tabulation by Johns Hopkins University. But while more people have been killed in the US by coronavirus than in any other country, American state governments are moving pell mell to drop all public health protection against the deadly virus, while the Biden administration points to a July 4 reopening of the entire country.

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer announced Thursday that all the state's restrictions on social distancing, indoor gatherings and mask-wearing will be lifted next Tuesday, ending 15 months of state-mandated public health requirements.

All capacity limits will be removed for bars, restaurants, arenas, churches and other indoor venues, and the state's mask mandate will end 10 days earlier than the previous goal of July 1. Limits on entry into most health care and juvenile facilities will end, remaining only for visits to prison inmates and individuals living in long-term care facilities.

Whitmer crassly acknowledged that her administration was now focused on boosting corporate and business profits, declaring, "Our top priority going forward is utilizing the federal relief funding in a smart, sustainable way as we put Michigan back to work and jump-start our economy."

State health officials justified the lifting of restrictions based on the level of vaccination and the return of warmer weather as summer approaches. About 50 percent of the adult population of the state is fully vaccinated, while 61 percent has received at least one shot.

Whitmer had said in April that she would lift restrictions only when 70 percent of the population had received at least one shot. That promise has been

unceremoniously discarded in a capitulation to right-wing opposition, which reached the point that ultra-right gunmen linked to the Republican Party were arrested last year in the midst of a plot to kidnap and murder the Democratic governor for her actions in enforcing a limited lockdown.

The figures on vaccination mask significant regional disparities. Better-off suburban areas are more vaccinated than impoverished cities like Detroit and Flint and far more heavily vaccinated than the predominately rural northern half of the state, where economic dislocation and the domination of fundamentalist religion and the Republican Party play a pernicious role.

The same disparities exist on a national scale. The vaccination rate in the Northeast and West Coast states is over 70 percent, while in many of the poorer states of the South and Mountain West the vaccination rate is as low as 35 percent. Midwest industrialized states like Michigan fall somewhere in between.

Some inner-city areas in the Northeast have low adult vaccination rates: only 38 percent of adults in the Bronx and 41 percent in Brooklyn, two of the boroughs that comprise New York City, have been fully vaccinated.

From May to June, the vaccination rate has slowed sharply in the United States, down at least two-thirds from the April peak, according to a survey by the *Washington Post*. In 12 states, mainly in the South and Mountain West, daily vaccination rates have fallen below 15 shots per 10,000 residents. In Alabama last week, it was only four per 10,000.

The *Post* study found that until about 10 days ago, the rate of vaccination was not highly correlated with the rate of new infections, but this has begun to change. Counties with low vaccination rates (fewer than 20

percent vaccinated) have seen rising rates of infection. Counties with higher vaccination rates (at least 40 percent) have seen rates of infection declining.

Under these conditions, with as many as 100 million US adults not vaccinated, as well as nearly all children, there is a vast pool of vulnerable people unprotected from the new variants of coronavirus now spreading rapidly throughout the world.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) declared this week that the Delta variant, first observed in India, is now a “variant of concern,” making it a serious threat to those who are not vaccinated. The CDC estimated that the Delta variant accounts for as many as 10 percent of all new COVID-19 infections in the US, up from 2.7 percent two weeks ago, and as many as 20 percent in the Western states.

The Delta variant is far more infectious than the Alpha or UK variant, which became dominant worldwide during the winter and was in turn far more infectious than the original, or “wild,” form of coronavirus that emerged in China in December 2019.

In an interview with National Public Radio Thursday, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said, “If you are not vaccinated, you are at risk of getting infected with the virus that now spreads more rapidly and gives more serious disease.”

Fauci pointed to the mounting crisis in Britain, even though a higher proportion of the population is vaccinated than in the US, because the Delta variant has swept rapidly through the large remainder of the population that is still unvaccinated. He warned that US states with a much lower vaccination rate than Britain’s could be in great danger.

Similarly, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy told CNN, “I’m worried about those who are unvaccinated,” because the Delta variant “is rapidly increasing here in the United States.”

Epidemiologists not constrained by working for the Biden administration have been sharper in their warnings against complacency. Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the University of Minnesota’s Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy, pointed to the danger of regional variations in the US.

“The variants continue to spin out of infections around the world and have gotten more complicated

and more dangerous,” he said. “We have a mistaken belief [the pandemic] is over here, but there are over 100 counties where less than 20 percent of the people have one dose of vaccine,” Osterholm continued. He added, “The challenge is what is the next variant going to look like.”

Dr. Peter Hotez, co-director of the Center for Vaccine Development at Texas Children’s Hospital, expressed concern about the impact of the Delta variant in his region of the country. “I’m really holding my breath about the South and what happens over the summer,” Hotez warned in an interview with CNBC. “Here in the South, particularly in Louisiana, Mississippi, we’re seeing really low vaccination rates. And less than 10 percent of adolescents are vaccinated in many of these southern states, so we have a real vulnerability here.”

Eric Feigl-Ding, an epidemiologist and senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, also warned that states with low vaccination rates could be at risk given the rapid spread of the variant. “If the UK is where we should draw our lessons, I think the US is in for a surge in the lower vaccinated states.”



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