

Delta variant fuels rapid surge of COVID-19 cases across southern US

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The rapid spread of the coronavirus across the southern US has caused growing concern among public health experts. During a press briefing last Thursday, White House COVID-19 response coordinator Jeff Zients noted that Texas and Florida accounted for nearly 40 percent of new COVID-related hospitalizations in the US over the past week.

In Texas, cases and hospitalizations are reaching heights not seen since February. According to the *Texas Tribune*, hospitalizations in the state have skyrocketed by 400 percent within the last month. The increase in cases has been fueled by the criminal policies spearheaded by Texas Governor Greg Abbott, who recently declared Texas is “past the time of government mandates.”

“Going forward, in Texas, there will not be any government-imposed shutdowns or mask mandates,” Abbott said. “Everyone already knows what to do.”

After lifting statewide mask mandates earlier this year, Abbott claimed personal responsibility and vaccinations would sufficiently contain the pandemic. However, the numbers are so staggering that the state health department was forced to admit in a tweet Wednesday that Texas is “facing a new wave” and the variant “has erased much progress to end the pandemic.”

Abbott himself was reported Tuesday to have contracted coronavirus, in a breakthrough infection, since he has been vaccinated. At his age, 63, and physical condition—he has been paralyzed from the waist down since 1984, due to an accident—the governor would be considered at higher risk from the virus.

Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton have focused on blocking local masking mandates and eviscerating public health and safety measures. On

Sunday, the Texas Supreme Court sided with Abbott and reversed a ruling that prevented him from enforcing a ban on local mask mandates in workplaces and schools.

Texas’ vaccination rate has consistently lagged behind other states. Its 44 percent full vaccination rate as of Tuesday ranks 36th nationally. The state’s positivity rate—the percent of virus tests coming back positive—was 17.7 percent on Tuesday, well above the 10 percent threshold that Abbott has previously identified as a danger zone. Furthermore, several of the state’s hospital regions have seen the percentage of COVID patients in their care rise about 15 percent.

Texas now has 11,552 people being treated in hospitals for COVID-19, according to the latest data provided by the state health department. The number of available ICU beds across the entire state has dwindled to 322, with some regions having none at all. According to state officials, 12 of 22 hospital regions in the state have 10 or fewer available ICU beds.

“I think it’s pretty clear in the data that Texas is in the middle—or beginning, depending on how you look at it—of a really major pandemic surge, and not just in case counts but particularly in looking at health care needs across the state,” said Spencer Fox, associate director of the COVID-19 Modeling Consortium at the University of Texas at Austin. “Many regions are now facing numbers that we haven’t seen since the winter,” he told the *Texas Tribune*.

Public health experts say the pandemic will only be exacerbated by the coming school year, especially after Abbott declared no district can require students to wear masks or get vaccinated. This is particularly problematic because many of those who are unvaccinated are children under age 12, who are not eligible for a vaccine.

Researchers have recorded higher vaccination rates in urban areas, but the cities' poorer neighborhoods and minority neighborhoods tend to have drastically lower rates. A CNBC analysis of state data found just 37 percent of people in Dallas County neighborhoods that are majority black and Hispanic have been fully vaccinated as of July 26, compared to 58 percent of people in majority-white neighborhoods. Overall, black and Hispanic Texans hold the lowest vaccination rates among racial groups statewide, at 28 percent and 35 percent respectively.

According to a CNBC analysis of data compiled by John Hopkins University, five states broke records for the average number of daily new COVID cases over the weekend. Florida, Louisiana, Hawaii, Oregon and Mississippi all reached new peaks in their seven-day average of new cases per day as of Sunday. Even more, Louisiana, Mississippi and Florida are suffering from the three worst per capita outbreaks in the country.

Florida reported a whopping 151,764 new COVID-19 cases for the week on Friday, marking a record seven-day average of 21,681 new cases per day, more than any other state. According to Florida's health department, more than half of the ICU beds in the state are occupied by COVID patients.

Florida's surge comes as Republican Governor Ron DeSantis refuses to enforce mask mandates and other pandemic policies to combat the massive outbreak. In May, DeSantis signed an executive order that permanently lifted all COVID-19 restrictions and banned local officials from enacting new pandemic policies.

Louisiana recorded a record seven-day average of more than 5,800 new COVID cases on Sunday, an increase of more than 26 percent from the previous week. The state also reported a seven-day average of 44 COVID-related deaths, a spike of over 46 percent compared to a week ago. Almost half of the state's 882 reported ICU beds were occupied by coronavirus patients as of Monday, compared with a nationwide average of 25 percent, according to the Department of Health and Human Services.

Louisiana has the fifth-lowest vaccination rate of any state in the US, with only about 38 percent of its population fully vaccinated against COVID-19, government data shows.

As of Monday, Mississippi reached a seven-day

average of nearly 3,300 new coronavirus cases, an increase of 57 percent from a week ago. The state's death toll also hit a seven-day average of 20, up almost 80 percent from a week ago. Mississippi has the nation's second-lowest vaccination rate, with 35.8 percent of its population fully immunized as of Sunday. State officials reported Monday that almost 55 percent of Mississippi's ICU beds were being used for COVID patients.



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