

The US COVID-19 toll to hit 3 million cases as Texas health system nears collapse

By Benjamin Mateus
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The United States will surpass 3 million cases of COVID-19 today, with over 133,000 deaths. It was exactly one month ago when this figure passed the 2-million mark, just after George Floyd's murder and the massive international protests against police violence and state repression. Many states had set into motion their return-to-work policies, opening movie theaters, restaurants, night clubs, beaches, parks, pools, and salons.

Yet the coronavirus, as many health officials and epidemiologists had warned, was still very much present and the necessary infrastructure to contain and isolate the virus was woefully lacking, even nonexistent, despite the assurances provided by Democratic and Republican governors that everything was under control.

However, very soon in the month of June, local and state health officials began warning of a rise in new cases COVID-19 cases, predominately along the sunbelt where states like Florida, Texas, and Arizona were the first to open the doors and encourage people to return to normal routines. Besides perfunctory statements that things were under control and admonishing young people to wear their masks and maintain social distancing, no effort was made to intervene.

On June 7, the United States saw its lowest daily count since the pandemic hit in force, with 18,930 new cases. Yesterday's three-day rolling average for the number of new cases per day was 52,439, a three-fold increase, though the daily number of deaths has been slowly declining, to just over 500, a fact that the Trump administration and its right-wing media apologists have seized on to dismiss the significance of the skyrocketing number of infections.

Several factors have been cited to account for this divergence. They include the time lag between new infections and deaths, a better understanding of the disease process with improvements in treatments, and the much lower median age of those infected in the June and

July surges. Regardless, many health systems in the hardest-hit areas are finding they are at capacity and have been sounding the alarm to reinforce lockdowns to allow the health systems to recover.

Eight states posted more than 1,000 new cases, with Florida reporting a one-day high of 11,458 cases of COVID-19, having surpassed 200,000 cases (100,000 new cases in two weeks). Only two states, Rhode Island and New Hampshire, have what could be construed as slightly declining numbers. Thirty-eight states have increasing numbers of new cases.

Arizona added 3,536 new cases yesterday, pushing the total close to the 100,000 mark. With close to 800,000 tests performed, the rate for testing positive is close to 11 percent. Governor Doug Ducey was compelled to issue an executive order reclosing restaurants, clubs, and gyms while urging the public to stay home as much as possible and to wear masks at all times in public settings. According to the Arizona Department of Health Services, 91 percent of ICU beds and 85 percent of regular hospital beds are occupied, and the likelihood of running out of bed space in a few weeks is a possibility.

Mexican authorities, citing the pandemic surge in the state, have closed the US-Sonora border over the weekend to non-essential travel. Independence Day would have brought many Arizonians to the beach towns of Rocky Point and San Carlos. The cases of COVID-19 in Sonora, Mexico, have reached an official count of 9,000, and hospitals in Nogales and Guaymas are reportedly at capacity.

The situation has grown most dire in Texas as the health infrastructure has been pushed beyond capacity. Texas has also surpassed 200,000 cases of COVID-19, adding almost 50,000 cases in one week. The cumulative death toll stands at 2,662, placing the crude case fatality rate at around 1.3 percent. On Saturday, Texas reported 7,890 hospitalized for coronavirus.

By all accounts, Governor Greg Abbott's complete indifference to the dangers posed by the coronavirus has led to the disastrous situation where conditions at the hospitals in Houston are now being compared to those in New York City at the height of its battle against the brutal outbreak.

According to public health experts, such as Bill Hanage, an associate professor of epidemiology at Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health, the crisis in Texas could have been avoided had local health officials been given the authority to manage the outbreak. Only late last week did the governor issue a mandate to wear masks in public and other basic mitigation practices. Vivian Ho, a health economist at Rice University and the Baylor College of Medicine, told the *Houston Chronicle*, "We're on the verge of a nightmarish catastrophe. On May 1, I thought we actually had a chance to get this virus under control and get the economy opened up safely. I'm not sure we can get it under control anymore."

Placing the governor's actions into context, by the end of April, approximately 2 million Texans were given a pink slip, and oil prices had plummeted to historic lows. Many hard-line conservatives were clamoring to open businesses. Despite public assurance to adhering to guidance from the public health sectors and use data-driven processes, all such measures were quickly abandoned. Any attempt by Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo to enforce fundamental "mask orders" was condemned by Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick and US Representative Dan Crenshaw, arguing she was exaggerating the dangers of the virus.

Manny Vela, a CEO of Valley Baptist Health System, one of the hospital systems in the Rio Grande Valley, said, "we are now at the point of grave concerns" as local hospitals have started diverting patients from overcrowded emergency rooms. According to the *Texas Tribune*, 10 of 12 hospitals in Hidalgo, Cameron, and Starr counties are at capacity. They are on patient bypass, meaning they are no longer accepting patients at their hospitals. According to Hidalgo county spokesperson Carlos Sanchez, the number of people hospitalized has tripled in the last two weeks.

According to Austin, Texas, Mayor Steve Adler, speaking with the *Wall Street Journal*, "We're on a trajectory right now that we could be inundating our intensive-care units here within the next week to ten days. We're watching the numbers daily. We may have to take more drastic action."

In Houston, physicians have to make difficult decisions

on who to admit for care. Improvisation is in order as hospitals scramble to accommodate and treat more patients. Staffing is stretched thin, making other functions the hospital performs—elective cases, a sundry of medical services, laboratory testing—backlogged, and extremely limited.

Methodist Hospital, one of the highest-ranked hospitals in the region, had almost 400 COVID-19 patients a week ago Sunday. In a few days, the number climbed to over 600 despite conservative admission criteria and rapid discharges. By the weekend, despite adding 130 inpatient beds, hospital administrators are estimating the system could reach 800 or 900 soon. This has become a typical situation for the hospital systems in Harris County, where Houston is located.

Speaking to the *New York Times*, Dr. Mir M. Alikhan, a pulmonary and critical care specialist, said, "What's been disheartening over the past week or two has been that it feels like we're back at square one."

Within the Republican Party, ultra-right elements have attacked Governor Abbott, not for bungling the response to COVID-19 and helping cause the public health disaster, but for going too far in restricting business activities. The Ector County Republican Party voted over the weekend to censure Abbott over his handling of the pandemic, accusing him of "overstepping his authority in responding to the coronavirus" and "violating five party principles related to his exercise of executive power during the pandemic."

At the same time, President Trump continued to dismiss the seriousness of the pandemic, downplaying the rise in cases as the result of "too much testing" and claiming that "99 percent of cases are totally harmless." There is method in this apparent madness, since the only effective action to be taken in response to the soaring infection rates would be a return to statewide lockdowns, which would tank the stock markets and cause the Dow Jones average to plummet—his sole guiding star.

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