

“After Plummeting, the Virus Soars Back in the Midwest”

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States like Missouri, Illinois and Wisconsin are riding a frustrating seesaw during the pandemic, with new coronavirus cases rising again after apparent progress.

CHICAGO — First, the Pacific Northwest and the Northeast were hit hardest as the coronavirus tore through the nation. Then it surged across the South. Now the virus is again picking up dangerous speed in much of the Midwest — and in states from Mississippi to Florida to California that thought they had already seen the worst of it.

As the United States rides what amounts to a second wave of cases, with daily new infections leveling off at an alarming higher mark, there is a deepening national sense that the progress made in fighting the pandemic is coming undone and no patch of America is safe.

In Missouri, Wisconsin and Illinois, distressed government officials are retightening restrictions on residents and businesses, and sounding warnings about a surge in coronavirus-related hospitalizations.

In the South and the West, several states are reporting their highest levels of new coronavirus cases, with outbreaks overwhelming urban and rural areas alike.

Across the country, communities including Snohomish County, Wash., Jackson, Miss., and Baton Rouge, La., have seen coronavirus numbers fall and then shoot back up — not unlike the two ends of a seesaw.

In Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker sounded an unusually somber note this past week as he delivered a warning that reverberated across the state: Even though Illinoisans had battled an early flood of coronavirus infections and then managed to reduce the virus’s spread, their successes were fleeting. As of Thursday, the state was averaging more than 1,400 cases a day, up from about 800 at the start of July.

“We’re at a danger point,” Mr. Pritzker said in Peoria County, where the total number of cases has doubled in the last month.

Gone is any sense that the country may soon get a hold of the pandemic. Instead, the seven-day average for new infections hovered around 65,000 for two weeks. Progress in some states has been mostly offset by growing outbreaks in parts of the South and the Midwest.

“There’s a sort of collective tiredness and frustration, and of course I feel it, too — we all feel it,” said County Judge Lina Hidalgo, the top elected official in Harris County, which includes Houston. “So it’s difficult to know that there’s no real end in sight.”

On Friday, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, the nation’s top infectious-disease expert, told Congress he was cautiously optimistic that a safe and effective coronavirus vaccine would be available by the end of the year or early 2021, though the federal government’s ability to speedily immunize most Americans was unclear.

Even finding out who has the virus is a challenge, as testing programs have frustrated many Americans with lengthy delays in providing results.

The picture is similarly depressing overseas, where even governments that would seem well suited to combating the virus are seeing resurgences.

New daily infections in Japan, a country with a long tradition of wearing face masks, rose more than 50 percent in July. Australia, which can cut itself off from the rest of the world more easily than most, is battling a wave of infections in and around Melbourne. Hong Kong, Israel and Spain are also fighting second waves.

None of those places has an infection rate as high as the United States, which has the most cases and deaths in the world, more than the next two hardest-hit countries — Brazil and England — combined.

In American communities that saw improvement in June, such as Milwaukee County in Wisconsin, there was a widespread feeling of relief, said Dr. Ben Weston, the director of medical services for the Milwaukee County Office of Emergency Management.

But then mask-wearing and social distancing began to relax.

“There was a sense of complacency, like, ‘We’re finally beyond this, it’s finally getting better,’” he said. “We were seeing our numbers go down, but the reason is because of physical distancing. It’s because people were being so careful. There was no reason to think that cases weren’t going to rise.”

On Thursday, Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, made another attempt to get a handle on the outbreaks in his state, issuing an order that every Wisconsinite wear a mask indoors in public beginning Saturday.

Many states have traced new outbreaks to the loosening of the economically costly restrictions aimed at stopping the spread of the virus.

In California, which has had more than 500,000 coronavirus cases, more than any other state, the reopening has proved disastrous. When the pandemic was ravaging the Northeast in March and April, California kept its daily case count around 2,000, and the state was praised for its early and aggressive actions to combat the virus.

The state is now averaging more than four times as many cases — 8,500 a day. Los Angeles County and other Southern California counties account for the majority of the state's infections, but the virus is now everywhere.

That notion was reinforced on Tuesday when health officials in one of the most remote parts of the state, Modoc County, which had been the last of California's 58 counties without a known case, announced that the virus had arrived.

A waitress at the Brass Rail, a Basque restaurant and bar, tested positive, raising concerns about the virus's spread in a tight-knit county with a population of 8,800 and where cows outnumber people five to one. (A billboard there warning residents of the coronavirus tells people to stand one cow's length apart.)

The waitress and her husband recently returned from a trip to the Central Valley, according to the co-owner of the Brass Rail, Jodie Larranaga, who said she assumed that the waitress was infected during her journey.

That the virus is now present in the evergreen forests of the northeastern corner of the state is testament to its inexorable spread, say the county's residents. Alturas, the only incorporated city in Modoc County, is so isolated that its high school football team must drive as long as five hours to reach its opponents.

"We all felt very safe for a while," said Juan Ledezma, the owner of a thrift shop on Main Street in Alturas. "Right now, it's a little bit scary."

Businesses across the country have abandoned their own plans to return to normal in light of the virus's resurgence.

The company that operates a popular water taxi on the Chicago River, ferrying commuters to work each day, had hoped to reopen by Labor Day. This week, officials postponed those plans until March.

The historic Berghoff restaurant in Chicago's Loop reopened at the end of June after months of closure, a sign that the coronavirus curve had flattened and the city's downtown was ready to start humming again.

This week, as coronavirus infections surged in Illinois, the restaurant abruptly shut its doors for the second time.

"It broke my heart," said Pete Berghoff, whose family has owned the restaurant since 1898. "We reopened, and after about three weeks my enthusiasm was beaten out of me."

From state to state and region to region, the picture of coronavirus spread is shifting daily as some communities see gradual improvement and others suddenly struggle.

A few places, including Arizona, South Carolina and Texas, have started to see new case reports drop after huge surges. California, Florida and Louisiana continue to report some of their highest daily totals of the pandemic.

The Rio Grande Valley in Texas is suffering through perhaps the worst current outbreak in the country, with hundreds of new cases and dozens of deaths a day. In more than half of states, outbreaks continue to grow.

In Missouri and Oklahoma, cases have grown to alarming levels, with both states now averaging more than 1,000 each day. And in Maryland, daily case numbers are ticking upward again after periods of sustained progress.

The Northeast, once the virus's biggest hot spot, has improved considerably since its peak in April, when the region suffered more than any other region of the country. Yet cases are now increasing slightly in New Jersey, Rhode Island and Massachusetts, as residents move around more freely and gather more frequently in groups.

Across the country, deaths from the coronavirus continue to rise. The country was averaging about 500 per day at the start of July. Over the last week, it has averaged more than 1,000 daily, with many of those concentrated in Sun Belt states. On Wednesday, California, Florida and Texas reported a combined 724 deaths, about half the national total.

Houston, the fourth-largest city in the country, has been adjusting to a new normal where the only thing certain is that nothing is certain. After cases and hospitalizations seemed to level off and even decrease in recent days, Harris County on Friday broke a single-day record with 2,100 new cases.

“I think to a certain extent, we saw a spike because people were fatigued over it,” said Alan Rosen, who leads the Harris County Precinct One constable’s office. “They were fatigued over hearing about it every day. They were fatigued about being cooped up in their house and being away from people.”

People there have been coping with the lulls and peaks of a physical, emotional, fiscal and logistical crisis from an invisible foe nearly three years after surviving Hurricane Harvey, one of the worst disasters in American history.

“It is a roller coaster,” said Mr. Rosen, who recovered after getting infected with the virus in May. “It’s not like a hurricane that’s coming through and we know what to do. We know we got to clean up and rebuild and everybody is accustomed to the time frame. But with this, there are just so many unknowns.”

Julie Bosman reported from Chicago, Manny Fernandez from Houston and Thomas Fuller from Alturas, Calif. Mitch Smith contributed reporting from Chicago.

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