

HEALTH

Why is Arizona worst for COVID-19 nationwide? Here are 7 contributing reasons

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Published 6:00 a.m. MT Feb. 1, 2021 | Updated 8:10 a.m. MT Feb. 2, 2021

For most of January, Arizona has had the highest rate of new COVID-19 cases in a nation that has led the world in its number of positive cases and deaths.

And Arizona has also had one of the highest weekly rates of new COVID-19 deaths in the country, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

During the first wave of the pandemic, Arizona also briefly topped the nation and the world for its COVID-19 case rate.

A second surge of illness is normal for the course of pandemic, but some critics argue it was not inevitable for Arizona to lead the nation in case rates for most of the past month. Known COVID-19 deaths in Arizona as of Friday had eclipsed 13,000.

Why Arizona has led the country during the latter part of the latest U.S. surge? Here are seven possible reasons:

Bars and restaurants remain open and Arizona does not have a statewide mask mandate

Although Arizona has been in the midst of the worst COVID-19 surge since the pandemic began, bars, restaurants, movie theaters and gyms are all open, albeit with restrictions about capacity.

As of Jan. 28, 37 states plus Washington, D.C., required face coverings in public, but Arizona is not one of those states, AARP research shows.

Local jurisdictions may impose their own mask policies and according to research from Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey's office, most Arizona residents live in an area with a mask

requirement.

Critics argue that a statewide policy would be more consistent, as some areas of the state either don't have such policies or have rescinded them. For example, Kingman rescinded its mask mandate prior to the second surge of COVID-19 illness.

When COVID-19 cases in the state began to spike after Memorial Day, Ducey allowed local jurisdictions to make their own mask rules, and on June 29 he paused the operation of all bars, gyms, movie theaters and water parks.

The Arizona Department of Health Services on Aug. 10 released guidelines outlining which businesses could reopen based on levels of virus spread.

In the guidelines, limited dine-in service is allowed when a county reaches a moderate level of coronavirus spread. Maricopa County is in the substantial spread category and has been for the past 12 weeks.

Restaurants can be open because the governor's guidelines only address how businesses could reopen, not what businesses should do if cases escalate.

Dr. Joshua LaBaer, director of the Arizona State University Biodesign Institute, said at a recent news briefing that mitigation policies in the summer to limit indoor gatherings and boost mask-wearing were successful in curbing the spread by the end of summer, but then the state let its guard down.

"At the beginning of September things looked really good, and then we decided that everything looked good and then we opened everything up again, and almost within a month, we saw those numbers start to rise again," LaBaer said.

Around the start of October, LaBaer and others began pointing to signs of an oncoming second surge in Arizona.

Will Humble, executive director of the Arizona Public Health Association, blames Arizona's poor COVID-19 ranking on a lack of evidence-based mitigation efforts by state leaders.

It is not "bad luck or fate," he said.

"It is largely because of a series of bad decisions, misplaced priorities and an inability to execute core responsibilities," he wrote in a Jan. 24 association report about the pandemic in Arizona.

Humble calls where Arizona is right now "the consequences of missed opportunities."

"Sadly, many of these COVID cases and deaths could have been avoided if Governor Ducey and Director Christ (state health department director Dr. Cara Christ) had implemented evidence-based public health policy interventions and had learned from their successes and mistakes," Humble wrote. "Because they did not, many thousands of lives have been unnecessarily lost. It is an unimaginable tragedy."

Haphazard enforcement of mitigation measures; few businesses cited

Even if mitigation measures are on the books, they have been haphazardly and minimally enforced in Arizona, even as the state twice ranked worst in the country for spread of the virus.

An Arizona Republic analysis of police data through early December found that no one in the Phoenix area's 12 largest cities, Tucson or Flagstaff had been cited for disregarding local or countywide mask mandates that had been in place for six months to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Few other virus-related enforcement measures were taken. Only a handful of businesses had been cited for staying open or not following reopening guidelines, despite a mountain of complaints.

Phoenix area police and the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office last year cited or referred fewer than 75 businesses out of more than 3,500 complaints, according to The Republic investigation. The state health department issued closure notices to a dozen businesses for violating reopening guidelines.

Businesses and homeowners that held gatherings or broke guidelines typically just received phone calls or warnings rather than citations, fines or closures.

Cities focused on "education" surrounding mask-wearing rather than any type of enforcement.

That left businesses on the hook for urging their customers to wear masks.

With few teeth behind the mandates, Arizona has had its fair share of instances of crowded businesses and people refusing to wear masks, at a time when public health experts have recommended people stay home as much as possible.

"I would certainly recommend staying home as much as you can," LaBaer said Wednesday, urging people to avoid being in indoor spaces with others.

"The virus is everywhere out there. The fraction of people in Arizona that have it is high, so if you're in a room with ten other people, there's a very good possibility that at least one of them is spreading virus at that moment, so I would avoid being out if you don't have to."

Elected officials who downplay and deny the severity of pandemic

U.S. Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Ariz., throughout the pandemic has urged Arizonans to flout national and local public health guidance on COVID-19.

Biggs, the chairman of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, repeatedly has said Arizonans should be able to use hydroxychloroquine as a preventive COVID-19 measure, but it's not recommended for prophylactic use by the federal or state government.

Arizona Republican Party Chair Kelli Ward's Twitter account was temporarily suspended in July after a determination that she violated the social media platform's policy on spreading misleading and "potentially harmful" information about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier this month, members of Ducey's own Republican Party voted to censure him over his decision to impose emergency rules during the pandemic.

Biggs, whose 5th Congressional District includes much of the East Valley area, also urged members of the public to "unmask," sending a message that contradicts guidance from public health experts and scientists.

Biggs is not a public health expert, a physician or a scientist but a spokesman for Biggs in September defended the congressman's messages, saying, "He, along with each of his constituents, should have the freedom to choose what is best for themselves, their families, and their loved ones in any health scenario."

Individual behavior: Many Arizonans don't like government directives, pandemic fatigue

When state Republican Party activists voted to censure Ducey, they cited his decision to impose emergency rules restricting "personal liberties" and forcing compliance with "unconstitutional edicts."

In the ongoing session of the Arizona Legislature, some Republican lawmakers have taken initial steps to curb Ducey and future governors' power during emergencies. The state lawmakers want the Legislature to have more power to intervene in crisis situations.

Ducey issued an emergency declaration last March. He has implemented a host of executive orders in response to COVID-19 since then, causing some legislators and constituents to chafe under what they've called the trampling of civil liberties, even as others beg the governor to do more.

"Certainly Arizonans, God bless them, there's a little bit of a libertarian streak in this state," LaBaer of ASU said.

"We're going to do it the way we want to do it.' There are many ways in which that kind of mindset is fantastic, it's what makes us special, but when you need everybody to participate in mitigation factors to prevent the widespread exponential growth of a virus, you really need everybody to participate or else the people who don't are going to spread virus," he said.

In December, videos showing a group of maskless protesters decrying COVID-19 health guidelines at Phoenix's Christown Spectrum Mall went viral as Arizona's COVID-19 case numbers and hospitalizations were climbing.

Several videos, filmed at different stores including Target and Walmart, showed the group walking through the stores as some waved American flags and held signs opposing masks and other guidelines.

There's a difficult abstract calculation for members of the public to process when it comes to the reasons for social distancing and wearing masks, LaBaer said.

Even though one individual may not get very sick from the virus, and may not even feel it at all, "you are a link in a chain that may lead to somebody else getting it and dying," he said.

"That's hard to understand sometimes. You can go out about the Valley right now, and I guarantee you that if you go to some restaurants, you're going to see people standing shoulder to shoulder without masks on, or indoors at bars, shoulder to shoulder without masks on, even though we're in the midst of, without a doubt, the worst surge Arizona has ever experienced in its history," LaBaer said.

"So it's hard sometimes for people to grasp that concept, but it's nonetheless without a doubt true, so that's got to be contributing here."

There's also pandemic fatigue. It has been nearly a year of staying away from loved ones, attending school classes from home, working from home and canceling travel plans.

Athletes have endured detrimental pauses in training and missed key competitions. Families have been unable to hold large in-person funerals for loved ones. Weddings have been postponed. Some people are isolated and experiencing mental health issues.

And health leaders are urging us to keep it up for even longer, until enough people are vaccinated to stamp out outbreaks.

“Until we get 60, 70% of people vaccinated, we really need to continue wearing masks; we need to continue following all the guidelines,” LaBaer said. “We’re nowhere near herd immunity at this point, so it’s a frustrating time, I know, psychologically because we all know that there’s a potential for a way out of this, but we’re not there yet, so we have to continue doing what we’re doing.”

Arizona is a winter travel destination

Some states have restricted who can visit, and others require travelers to fill out health forms at the airport when they arrive, show proof of a negative test or quarantine for designated periods of time.

In New York state, travelers who leave the airport without completing the form are subject to a \$10,000 fine.

Arizona recommends winter visitors quarantine for 14 days, but it's not a requirement. In November, Trip Advisor named Sedona and Scottsdale as top Thanksgiving destinations. Weeks after Thanksgiving, COVID-19 cases began to spike.

November and December are typically months when visitors who spend the winter season in Arizona begin to arrive. Historically, many winter visitors have come from states such as North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin that in November and December were experiencing an exponential surge in cases. Arizona hosts high numbers of winter residents from Canada as well.

During Thanksgiving week, hundreds of youth sports teams from the U.S., Canada and Mexico descended on Arizona for soccer, hockey, baseball and basketball tournaments. Public health experts said that even if the players are careful on the field, there's a risk for spread simply because of the travel — visiting families will often stay in hotels and go to restaurants and stores.

Following media reports of the tournaments, the Phoenix City Council voted 7-2 to prohibit tournaments at city-owned sports complexes until community spread falls from the "high" category to the "low" and "moderate" risk categories under the Maricopa County Department of Public Health guidelines.

Mayor Kate Gallego also said Phoenix would immediately cancel the tournaments scheduled at its facilities for December and January.

But not all cities and towns in Arizona took such action and some continue to host sporting events.

Health leaders asked the state in December to pause sports tournaments statewide until spread of the virus is more controlled, but nothing happened.

Timing of Arizona's second surge

A second surge is a normal occurrence in any pandemic and was anticipated for COVID-19.

But the timing of Arizona's second wave over the holidays was less than ideal.

Arizona's second wave began later than other states, following surges in the Midwest. Cases in Arizona started climbing in November before Thanksgiving and then the holidays came, exacerbating the spike. That's why some health providers referred to Arizona's situation as a "surge within a surge": case counts already were climbing when the impact of holidays gatherings hit.

The state reported more than 17,200 new cases on Jan. 3, the highest number of new COVID-19 cases reported in a single day since the pandemic began, toppling the state's previous record from Dec. 8 by nearly 5,000 cases.

So far, Arizona's hospitalizations of people with confirmed and suspected COVID-19 appears to have plateaued Jan. 11, which was 17 days after Christmas and nearly two weeks after New Year's. The incubation period for the new coronavirus is typically two to 14 days.

Geography: Cross-border movement between Mexico and Arizona

Nowhere in Arizona has been harder hit by COVID-19 than rural Yuma County, where agriculture is the No. 1 industry.

Yuma County's rate of COVID-19 cases is the highest in the state, at 15,164 per 100,000 people as of Friday, according to state data. The U.S. rate on Friday was 7,688 cases per 100,000 people, the CDC said.

Yuma's location next to California and Mexico has been a factor in the area's high COVID-19 case rate, said Amanda Aguirre, president and CEO of the Regional Center for Border Health in Somerton.

The county is its own four corners area, an intersection of the Mexican states of Baja California and Sonora and the U.S. states of California and Arizona, Aguirre said.

San Luis Río Colorado on the Mexican side of the border was hit hard by the virus, as were the nearby areas of Imperial Valley, California and Mexicali, which is fewer than 50 miles from the Yuma County border city of San Luis.

"The population is huge on the Mexican side and there's a lot of mobility between the families on both sides, going back and forth," Aguirre said. "Just the nature of people, they want to continue celebrating weddings and birthdays. ... I think the message was not really resonating with some of the general public."

Commerce also is moving across the border. Officials from other Arizona border counties such as Santa Cruz County also have attributed high rates of COVID-19 spread in part by cross-border traffic.

Aguirre has had car lineups two miles long at her clinic for people needing COVID-19 testing, she said.

During the winter months, Yuma's population swells from both winter visitors and migrant agricultural workers.

"I still see the farm workers in buses being transported to different locations. Some are wearing masks and some are not," she said. "It has been a struggle."

Yuma County's current challenge is with vaccine supply. Aguirre said she has a waiting list of more than 10,000 people who want a COVID-19 vaccine and she thinks it's imperative that the thousands of farm workers in the area get immunized as quickly as possible. She's working with elected leaders, hoping to make that happen.

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