

February 16, 2021

Summary

The United States has 27,703,142 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 486,520 reported related deaths. On Sunday, the White House expressed concerns regarding the independence of World Health Organization's investigation into the origins of the coronavirus. Today, President Biden's administration announced a coordinated effort across federal executive departments to extend pandemic-related forbearance and foreclosure protections for homeowners.

The United States averaged around 91,000 confirmed COVID-19 cases per day over the last week—down from an average of nearly 250,000 per day at the peak of January. On February 15, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that the tristate area's first confirmed case of the South African COVID variant had been identified in a Connecticut resident, who was transferred to a New York City hospital for care. As of February 15, Rhode Island has one of the highest seven-day rolling averages of positive COVID-19 cases; the State also struggles with inoculation, reporting the lowest percentage of residents vaccinated with a first dose across the United States. On February 15, National Governors Association issued a letter asking President Biden for enhanced reporting and coordination between federal and state governments on COVID-19 vaccine distribution efforts. On February 10, Ohio authorities announced that they discovered a reporting error that caused up to 4,000 COVID-19 deaths to be left out of the State's death count.

New York reported 107 deaths, 6,620 hospitalizations, and 1,271 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Monday, February 15, 2021. Approximately 6,753, or 4.95% of the 136,392 tests administered in New York on February 15 were positive for COVID-19. As of February 15, New York has received 2,192,675 first doses of the vaccines and administered 2,024,225 first doses to patients. New York State has received 1,178,350 second doses of the vaccines and administered 900,303 second doses to patients. Governor Cuomo's job approval rating has dropped 10 points since January amid bipartisan criticism of his administration's flawed reporting of nursing-home resident deaths from COVID-19. As of February 15, New York State's rolling 7-day positivity rate for COVID-19 tests dropped to 3.71%—the lowest positivity rate since November 30, 2020. However, 11 new cases of the U.K. COVID variant have been identified in New York, bringing the State's total confirmed case count to 70. On February 14, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed Executive Order 202.94 into law—affording certain State Liquor Authority-licensed establishments the option to stay open until 11pm, instead of the previously-mandated 10pm closing time.

Politics

- [*White House: China Must Release Data from Earliest Days of the Outbreak*](#), February 13
 - After World Health Organization (WHO) presented its initial research on the origins of COVID-19 last week, the White House expressed “deep concerns” that the forthcoming report may not be “independent” and “free from intervention or alternation by the Chinese government.” National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said in a statement, “To better understand this pandemic and prepare for the next one, China must make available its data from the earliest days of the outbreak.”
 - Separately, [*State Department*](#) spokesman Ned Price said the U.S was supportive of the investigation and WHO, but would draw on “information collected and analyzed by our own intelligence community to evaluate the report once we’ve received it.”
 - Peter Daszak, who participated in [*WHO*](#)’s investigation, tweeted, “I am disappointed that a statement came out that might undermined the veracity of this work even before the report is released.”
 - [*WHO*](#) scientists spent four weeks in China studying the origins of the virus. In initial statements on the research, WHO has said the virus likely originated in an animal, not a lab, but that “the introduction through an intermediary host species . . . will require more studies and more specific, targeted research.”

- [*Biden Administration Announces Extension of COVID-19 Protections for Homeowners*](#), February 16
 - Today, the Biden administration announced a coordinated effort by Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Veterans Affairs, and Agriculture to extend and expand relief programs aimed at preventing Americans from falling further into debt and losing their homes.
 - Specifically, the departments will: 1) extend the foreclosure moratorium for homeowners through June 30, 2021; 2) extend the mortgage payment forbearance enrollment window until June 30, 2021; and 3) provide up to six months of additional mortgage payment forbearance for borrowers who entered forbearance on or before June 30, 2020.

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

- [*COVID Data Tracker Weekly Review*](#), February 12
 - CDC summarized key COVID-19 disease indicators for the week ending February 12.
 - The number of new cases reported in the United States for the week was 97,309. The seven-day average number of daily cases reported was 104,217. This is a 22.5% decrease compared to the previous weeks’ average and an overall 69% decrease compared to the national peak on January 8, 2021.
 - As of February 11, 46.4 million vaccine doses have been administered in the United States. Overall, approximately 34.7 million people in the United States have received at least one dose of vaccine, which is 10.5% of the population. 11.2 million people have received two doses of vaccine, which is 3.4% of the population. The seven-day average number of reported vaccine dose administrations was 1.6 million, a 24% acceleration compared to the previous week.
 - The number of new hospital admissions on February 9 was 8,957, a 50% decrease compared to the national peak on January 5, 2021. The current seven-day average of

new hospitalizations is 9,279 per day, a decrease of 14.4% compared to the prior week's average.

- The total number of deaths reported on February 11 was 3,645, a 30% decrease compared to the national peak on February 4, 2021. The current seven-day average of reported deaths is 3,013 per day, a “negligible” 1.4% decrease compared to the prior week's average.
- Three types of variants have been detected in the U.S. 981 cases of the B.1.1.7 variant (U.K. variant) have been detected in 37 states, an increase of 61% compared to the previous week. 13 cases of the B.1.351 variant (South Africa variant) have been detected in five states. Three cases of the P.1 variant (Brazil variant) have been detected in two states.
- [*CDC Offers Clearest Guidance Yet For Reopening Schools*](#), February 12
 - CDC [released](#) updated guidance to assist communities in deciding when and under what conditions K-12 schools should return to in-person learning (or, if they are currently open, whether they should remain so).
 - CDC recommends that local decision-makers should consistently implement mitigation strategies to reduce transmission. Most importantly, these mitigation strategies include universal and correct mask use and physical distancing. CDC further recommends that schools implement weekly screening testing of students and staff, if possible, to identify infected individuals without symptoms.
 - School administrators, CDC instructs, should work with local public health officials to assess the level of risk in the community.
 - The updated guidance includes color-coded charts dividing schools' reopening options into four zones: blue (low transmission; 0-9 new cases per 100,000 people and less than 5% positive tests in past seven days), yellow (moderate transmission; 10-49 new cases per 100,000 people and 5-7.9% positive tests in past seven days), orange (substantial transmission; 50-99 new cases per 100,000 people and 8-9.9% positive tests in last seven days), and red (high transmission; 100 or more new cases per 100,000 people and 10% or more positive tests in last seven days).
 - CDC encourages school districts in blue and yellow zones to consider reopening for full, in-person learning. School districts in orange zones may consider limited reopening, such as hybrid learning or reduced attendance, but should implement as many mitigation strategies as possible. For school districts in red zones, CDC recommends that middle and high schools should remain virtual only, unless all mitigation strategies above, especially constant masking and six-foot distancing, can be strictly implemented. Because younger children pose less [risk](#) of spreading COVID-19, elementary schools in red zones may consider limited reopening, with physical distancing required.

New York State

- [*New York State COVID-19 Updates*](#), February 16
 - New York reported 107 deaths, 6,620 hospitalizations, and 1,271 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Monday, February 15, 2021.
 - Approximately 6,753, or 4.95% of the 136,392 tests administered in New York on February 15 were positive for COVID-19.

- As of February 15, New York has received 2,192,675 first doses of the vaccines and administered 2,024,225 first doses to patients. As of February 15, New York has received 1,178,350 second doses of the vaccines and administered 900,303 second doses to patients.
- As of February 15, New York State’s rolling seven-day positivity rate for COVID-19 tests [dropped](#) to 3.71%—the lowest positivity rate since November 30, 2020. However, 11 new cases of the U.K. COVID variant have been [identified](#) in New York, bringing the State’s total confirmed case count to 70.
- On February 14, Governor Andrew Cuomo [signed Executive Order 202.94](#) into law. This executive order gives bars, restaurants, gyms, casinos, billiard halls, and other State Liquor Authority-licensed establishments the option to stay open until 11pm (an increase of 1 hour from the previous, State-mandated 10pm closing time).
- [New York Gov. Cuomo’s Job Approval Dips as Criticism Mounts Over Nursing-Home Deaths](#), February 16
 - Governor Cuomo’s job approval rating has dropped 10 points since January amid bipartisan criticism of his administration’s reporting practices for nursing-home resident deaths from COVID-19.
 - State officials now say more than 15,000 residents of nursing homes, assisted-living, and adult-care facilities were confirmed, or are presumed, to have succumbed to COVID-19 since March of last year—a tally that is around 50% higher than the State’s earlier disclosures.

New York City

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), February 16
 - Beginning on February 22, New York City’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) [will](#) partially restore overnight service on the subway, pending continued positive trends in New York City’s COVID-19 indicators. Currently, the MTA plans to move subway closure from 2am to 4am. The changes will lengthen the subway’s operations by two hours while enabling the MTA to continue the most aggressive deep cleaning and disinfecting regimen in its history.
 - On February 11, New York City authorities [raided](#) a Long Island City warehouse that held more than 1.7 million counterfeit N95 masks—marking one of the biggest seizures of personal protective equipment (PPE) since the pandemic began. Queens County District Attorney’s Office, which spearheaded the investigation, charged the warehouse manager with felony trademark counterfeiting.
- [New York’s MTA to Increase Tolls at Bridges, Tunnels by 7%](#), February 11
 - New York City’s MTA is seeking a 7.1% increase for tolls at bridges and tunnels—beginning in April.
 - MTA board members will consider the toll proposal on February 18. MTA officials believe the proposal is likely to pass.
 - MTA’s proposal comes amid multibillion-dollar losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. MTA officials say the new price would generate about \$62 million in additional revenues this year and \$116 million in 2022.

Vaccines and Therapeutics

- [*Researchers Propose that Humidity from Masks May Lessen Severity of COVID-19*](#), February 12
 - A new [study](#) from NIH now indicates that mask-wearing provides yet another benefit: the humidity created inside the mask may help combat respiratory diseases, including COVID-19.
 - Researchers who conducted the study noted lower levels of disease severity among people who regularly wear a mask and become infected with the virus. The researchers now suggest that this phenomenon is likely due to increased hydration of the respiratory tract, which is known to benefit the immune system, caused by a substantial increase in humidity in the air that mask-wearers breathe in.
- [*Four Potential COVID-19 Therapeutics Enter Phase 2/3 Testing in NIH ACTIV-2 Trial*](#), February 12
 - NIH has started to enroll volunteers to test additional investigative drugs in its Accelerating COVID-19 Therapeutic Interventions and Vaccines ([ACTIV](#)) program.
 - Newly [announced](#) sub-studies will test four new interventions: an inhalable beta interferon delivered by nebulizer; a long-acting monoclonal antibody combination that will be studied as both an infusion and an intramuscular injection; and an orally administered serine protease inhibitor that may block the virus that causes COVID-19 from entering cells.

International

- A South Korean lawmaker said Tuesday that the country has evidence [North Korea](#) has tried to steal COVID-19 vaccine and treatment technology by hacking the computer systems of pharmaceutical companies, including Pfizer.
- On Wednesday, [Colombia](#) plans to kick off its vaccines campaign in a rural part of the country to show that vaccines will be available to everyone, not just city elites.
- Auckland, [New Zealand](#) went into lockdown after three members of a family tested positive for the coronavirus. New Zealand has seen only 2,330 confirmed cases and 25 deaths since the start of the pandemic.
- [South Africa](#) will partner with the African Union to share 1 million AstraZeneca vaccine doses with other countries on the continent. South Africa is no longer offering the AstraZeneca vaccine to its citizens after it showed limited efficacy against the COVID-19 variant first detected there.
- [WHO](#) approved AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use in its Covax initiative, which distributes coronavirus vaccines to developing countries. The only other vaccines approved for emergency use by WHO is the one created by Pfizer.

Other Updates

- [*Storm Slows Vaccine Rollout as Clinics Close and Deliveries Stall*](#), February 16
 - The winter storm sweeping across much of the United States early this week has slowed the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.
 - Many southern states, including Texas, Alabama, and Kentucky, have cancelled or rescheduled vaccine appointments. Other states, like Washington, are dialing back vaccination plans for later in the week in anticipation of delays in the delivery of doses.

- [*TSA Reports Back-to-Back Days of More than 1 Million Travelers over Presidents' Day Weekend*](#), February 16
 - On both Sunday and Monday, more than 1 million travelers passed through TSA checkpoints. This marks the first time since early January that the number of daily travelers passed the 1-million mark.
 - TSA spokeswoman Lisa Farbstein said numbers were actually reduced over the weekend, due to winter storms that cancelled many flights.
 - The uptick in travel likely marks increasing confidence in the COVID-19 vaccines. However, CDC is still encouraging travelers to postpone any leisure travel until the pandemic is under control.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [*Nine Key Takeaways for Providers as Illinois Returns to Phase 4 of the "Restore Illinois" Plan*](#), February 11
- [*Bipartisan Proposal for Extension and Revision of Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act \(CARES Act\) – Summary of Key Provisions*](#), January 27

Send questions to:

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