

February 18, 2021

Summary

The United States has 27,876,525 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 492,302 reported related deaths. On Wednesday, the White House announced a series of new actions aimed at increasing COVID-19 testing capacity in the United States. Earlier today, Vice President Kamala Harris said that the 2.5 million women who have left the work force because of the pandemic constitute a “national emergency” that President Joseph Biden’s \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 stimulus bill will address.

Pfizer and Moderna have released reports questioning the effectiveness of their vaccines against the multiple variants circulating throughout the globe. Specifically, Pfizer announced results of a new study that shows its vaccine may result in two-thirds fewer antibodies in patients diagnosed with the South Africa variant. However, researchers stated that they believe the vaccine will still work to neutralize the virus, even with fewer antibodies, and Pfizer has begun exploring updates to its vaccine, if necessary.

The United States has averaged around 81,000 positive COVID-19 cases per day over the past week—the lowest seven-day, rolling average since the beginning of November. However, the country continues to average more than 2,000 COVID-19 deaths per day, and is on pace to reach 500,000 total deaths by next week. As of February 17, Florida has the most confirmed cases of the U.K. COVID variant across the United States, with nearly 380 confirmed cases—doubling the case total of the next closest state.

New York reported 114 deaths, 6,434 hospitalizations, and 1,258 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Wednesday, February 17. Approximately 6,794, or 3.15% of the 215,731 tests administered in New York on February 17 were positive for COVID-19 (New York’s lowest positivity rate since November 23, 2020). As of February 17, New York has received 2,335,250 first doses of the vaccines and administered 2,109,690 first doses to patients. New York State has received 1,284,300 second doses of the vaccines and administered 984,100 second doses to patients. Federal prosecutors have commenced an investigation into New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s reporting of COVID-19-related nursing home deaths in New York State. This week, Cuomo announced that indoor family entertainment centers and “places of amusement” can open at 25% capacity beginning March 26, outdoor amusement parks can open at 33% capacity beginning April 9, and camps can “begin to plan for summer opening.”

U.S. Government Updates

- [White House Announces Actions to Expand COVID-19 Testing Capacity](#), February 17
 - In a Wednesday briefing, the Biden administration announced a series of new [actions](#) aimed at increasing COVID-19 testing capacity in the United States.
 - First, the Departments of Health and Human Services and Defense will spend \$650 million to expand testing for primary schools and congregate settings. The departments will “establish regional coordination centers to organize the distribution of COVID-19 testing supplies and partner with laboratories across the country . . . to collect specimens, perform tests, and reports results to the relevant public health agencies.”
 - Additionally, the two departments will allocate \$815 million to increasing domestic production of COVID-19 testing supplies and materials, such as pipette tips and polymers used in antigen tests.
 - Finally, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) will dedicate \$200 million to expand genomic sequencing of the virus, which will be critical in efforts to detect and ward off variants of the virus.
- [Harris Says Women Leaving the Work Force because of the Pandemic is a “National Emergency.”](#) February 18
 - On Thursday, Harris said that 2.5 million woman leaving the work force since the beginning of the pandemic amounts to a “national emergency.”
 - According to Labor Department, only 1.8 million men have left the work force because of the virus.
 - The stimulus bill will seek to address the discrepancy with a \$3,000 tax credit per child, a \$40 billion investment in child care assistance, an extension of unemployment benefits, and \$130 billion to assist in the reopening of primary and secondary schools.

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

- [CDC Interpretation of Forecasts of New Deaths and Hospitalizations](#), February 17
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 37 models projecting the COVID-19 death rate. Predicted rates of increase differ among the forecasts, depending on assumptions about the prevalence and rigor of social distancing behaviors. CDC’s national ensemble forecast indicates that the number of newly reported COVID-19 deaths will likely decrease over the next four weeks. It predicts between 8,400 and 18,500 new deaths and between 530,000 and 559,000 cumulative deaths by March 13.
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 12 models projecting the number of daily COVID-19 hospitalizations. The models predict daily hospitalizations will likely decrease in 46 jurisdictions and increase in zero. The forecasts estimate 2,300 to 7,300 new COVID-19 hospitalizations per day by March 15.
- [First Identified Cases of SARS-CoV-2 Variant B.1.1.7 in Minnesota](#), February 17
 - Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) [announced](#) that it has identified for the first time the B.1.1.7 variant (U.K. variant) in specimens from eight people taken in January. The emergence of the U.K. variant is concerning, as it is more [transmissible](#) than certain other COVID-19 lineages.
 - Of the first eight Minnesotans identified with the variant, six reported recent travel within the 14 days prior to disease onset—three international (two to West Africa and

one to the Dominican Republic) and three domestic (all to California). None traveled to the United Kingdom.

- Notably, six of the cases were identified from the 31 specimens sequenced by the MDH Public Health Laboratory, representing 19% of the specimens. Not all COVID-19 tests detect S-gene target failure, which identifies that a case is associated with the variant.
- As of February 14, 1,173 cases of the U.K. variant have been identified in 39 states and the District of Columbia. According to CDC, modeling data [suggests](#) that the variant could become the predominant variant in the United States in March 2021.
- [Percentage of Middle and High School Students Aged 13–21 Years Attending In-Person Classes Who Reported Observing Fellow Students Wearing a Mask](#), February 12
 - A CDC web survey administered to middle and high school students in October 2020 asked: “Thinking about students you see at school, how often do these students wear masks in the following locations?” Responses ranged from “all the time” to “never.”
 - Approximately 65% of students reported that fellow students wore a mask “all the time” in the classroom and in hallways or stairwells. That number drops significantly in other locations: school busses (42%), restrooms (40%), cafeteria (when not eating) (36%), sports or extracurricular activities (28%), and outside on school property (25%).

New York State

- [New York State COVID-19 Updates](#), February 18
 - New York reported 114 deaths, 6,434 hospitalizations, and 1,258 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Wednesday, February 17, 2021.
 - Approximately 6,794, or 3.15% of the 215,731 tests administered in New York on February 17 were positive for COVID-19 (New York’s lowest positivity rate since November 23, 2020).
 - As of February 17, New York has received 2,335,250 first doses of the vaccines and administered 2,109,690 first doses to patients. As of February 17, New York has received 1,284,300 second doses of the vaccines and administered 984,100 second doses to patients.
 - New York will [open](#) 13 more community-based pop-up vaccination sites throughout the State from February 18 – 20. Each site will administer first dose vaccines for 1 – 2 days at a time, depending upon the location, and then close. The sites will then reopen three weeks after their respective closing date to administer second doses. Governor Cuomo expects these sites to vaccinate around 3,850 people.
 - On February 17, Governor Cuomo [announced](#) that twenty-three additional bars and restaurants’ liquor license would be suspended for “egregious violations of COVID-19-related regulations.” In 2021, the State has filed 449 charges against bars and restaurants for violating rules meant to stop the spread. Businesses found in violation of COVID-19 regulations face fines up to \$10,000 per violation, while egregious violations can result in the immediate suspension of a bar or restaurant's liquor license.
 - On February 17, Governor Cuomo announced that indoor family entertainment centers and “places of amusement” can [open](#) at 25% capacity beginning March 26, outdoor amusement parks can open at 33% capacity beginning April 9, and camps can “begin to plan for summer opening.”

- On February 17, a group of New York State Senators [confirmed](#) that they will attempt to pass legislation aimed at limiting Governor Cuomo’s pandemic-related power.
- [U.S. Prosecutors Investigating How Cuomo Administration Handled Covid-19 in Nursing Homes](#), February 18
 - Federal prosecutors have commenced an investigation into New York Governor Andrew Cuomo’s reporting of COVID-19-related nursing home deaths in New York State. State records released last week show that the death toll for long-term-care facilities is more than 15,000—about 50% higher than earlier reports.
 - This new inquiry, led by U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of New York, is in addition to an August request for records from U.S. Department of Justice’s civil-rights division about state-run nursing homes.
 - Rich Azzopardi, a senior adviser to Governor Cuomo commented, “[a]s we publicly said, Department of Justice has been looking into this for months. We have been cooperating with them, and we will continue to.”

New York City

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), February 18
 - As of February 18, Janno Lieber, New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s (MTA) Chief Development Officer, [said](#) he expects MTA to commit at least \$6.2 billion to system-wide upgrades in 2021. This commitment is, in part, made possible by the federal government’s COVID-19 relief packages, which have given MTA an aggregate \$16 billion in financial aid.
 - On February 16, New York City health officials released data that showed disparities in COVID-19 vaccination rates by ZIP Code. Mayor Bill de Blasio [acknowledged](#) that doses haven’t been uniformly administered across the city. However, the mayor claimed that the numbers do not fully capture the reasons for variance—given that inoculation eligibility has been limited to specific groups of people, and that vaccines supply has been limited. The mayor ultimately concluded in saying “[t]he simple, straightforward way to think about this is we want to see much greater consistency among communities.”

Vaccines and Therapeutics

- [Pfizer Says South African Variant Could Significantly Reduce Vaccine Protection](#), February 17
 - Pfizer and BioNTech [announced](#) that [results](#) from a new laboratory study [conducted](#) by researchers at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) suggest that the South Africa variant of COVID-19 may reduce antibody protection from the Pfizer vaccine by two-thirds.
 - The study tested a genetically engineered version of SARS-Cov-2 with the mutations found in the South African variant against a panel of sera from 15 participants in the previously reported Phase 3 trial who had been immunized with the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine. Although the results indicated a reduction in neutralization of the virus with the South African variant mutations, all the sera neutralized the virus.
 - Because it is not yet known what level of antibodies is needed to protect against the virus, the researchers say that it is unclear whether the two-thirds reduction in the level

of neutralizing antibodies will render the vaccine ineffective. Co-author of the study and UTMB professor Pei-Yong Shi expressed confidence that the Pfizer vaccine will likely be protective against the variant and should, at the very least, protect against severe disease and death.

- Pfizer said that it is considering development of an updated version of its mRNA vaccine or a booster shot, should that step become necessary.
- Moderna, along with NIH, also [published](#) a separate [letter](#) reporting a reduction in the antibody response in South Africa variant cases. The letter concludes that protection against the South African variant conferred by the Moderna vaccine remains to be determined.
- [NIH Funds Study to Evaluate Remdesivir for COVID-19 in Pregnancy](#), February 17
 - A new study funded by National Institutes of Health (NIH) will [evaluate](#) the effects of Remdesivir in pregnant women who have been prescribed the drug to treat COVID-19.
 - The study will evaluate how the drug is absorbed, moves through the body, and is broken down and eliminated. Researchers will test plasma and umbilical cords from women who received the drug within five days of delivery and will test breast milk in women who are lactating.
 - Remdesivir, originally developed to treat Ebola and Marburg virus, has been shown through NIH [research](#) to accelerate recovery in advanced COVID-19 cases and was [approved](#) by U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for treatment of COVID-19 in adults over 12 years. But it has not been approved specifically for use during pregnancy, which is known to influence a drug's effects (though it may be prescribed to pregnant people if their physicians believe it might benefit them).
- [Prophylactic Intranasal Spray in Ferrets](#), February 17
 - According to a new [study](#) in *Science Magazine*, an intranasal spray with an engineered peptide has successfully prevented ferrets from being infected with COVID-19.
 - 12 ferrets were given the intranasal spray or a mock preparation daily for two days and then cohabitated for 24 hours with ferrets that were positive for the virus. All of the untreated ferrets became infected, but none of the treated ferrets did.
 - The scientists who conducted the study state that the lipopeptides used in the spray are highly stable and could thus readily translate into a safe and effective intranasal preventative method to reduce transmission of the virus.
- [FDA Issues Warning Letter to Company for Selling Unapproved Products](#), February 16
 - FDA [announced](#) that it had issued a warning [letter](#) to Evolved Ayurvedic Discoveries, Inc./BioCBDPlus for selling unapproved products with fraudulent COVID-19 claims.
 - In particular, FDA alleges that the company misleadingly represented that several of the company's cannabidiol (CBD) products can mitigate, prevent, treat, diagnose, or cure COVID-19.

International

- Nearly half of [Israel](#)'s population has received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. The state is now opening certain leisure activities to fully vaccinated persons.

- [Hong Kong](#)'s government approved Sinovac's vaccine after government-appointed experts received trial data showing a 62.3 percent efficacy rate after two doses of the vaccine. Hong Kong is one of the only governments to grant approval, as Sinovac has not publicly released its trial data.
- [Zimbabwe](#) has commenced its vaccination campaign using 200,000 Sinopharm doses donated by China. Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron has said [Europe and the United States](#) should donate more vaccines to developing countries as part of a "war of influence" against Russia and China.
- The deputy governor of Jakarta, [Indonesia](#) told reporters that the city would fine residents who refuse a COVID-19 vaccines up to \$356.89. Polls show high rates of COVID-19 vaccines skepticism in Indonesia.
- [Peruvians](#) are criticizing their government for vaccinated political officials before health care workers.
- [England](#) has seen a plummet in COVID-19 cases, despite its battle with a more contagious strain of the virus. Officials said the decrease is due to the country's stringent lockdown policies.

Other Updates

- [Department of Labor Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims Report](#), February 18
 - Department of Labor (DOL) reports that another 861,000 workers filed initial claims (seasonally adjusted) for unemployment benefits last week.
 - The number of new claims had trended downward since March, when nearly seven million people filed for unemployment insurance in a single week. However, claims began spiking again around December.
 - 516,299 new claims were filed for Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, the federal program intended to help freelancers, gig workers, the self-employed, and others not normally eligible for state jobless benefits.
- [U.S. Life Expectancy Plunged by One Year in 2020](#), February 18
 - Life expectancy in the United States dropped from 78.8 years in 2019 to 77.8 years in 2020, according to [National Center for Health Statistics](#).
 - This marks the largest decrease since World War II.
 - The plunge varied across racial and ethnic lines: life expectancy for a black American declined by 2.7 years, while it declined by only 0.8 for a white American.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [Nine Key Takeways for Providers as Illinois Returns to Phase 4 of "Restore Illinois" Plan](#), February 11

Send questions to:

- COVID-19-Implications@ropesgray.com