

March 25, 2021

Summary

The United States has 30,042,191 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 545,726 reported related deaths. Today, President Joseph Biden held the first press conference of his presidency, during which he pledged to distribute 200 million COVID-19 vaccine doses by his 100th day in office. Biden also said he maintains his goal of opening a majority of primary schools in the same timeframe. Already, almost half are open. According to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, only 0.1% of former President Donald Trump's \$26 billion COVID-19 relief package for American farmers went to Black farmers, even though 1.3% of all farmers in the United States are Black.

U.S. health officials publically questioned whether AstraZeneca may have relied upon outdated information in assessing its vaccine's efficacy data. Johnson & Johnson is less than halfway to its goal of 20 million shots by the end of March. Pfizer has begun testing its vaccine in children and is also testing an oral antiviral drug to treat COVID-19.

As of March 24, the United States averages around 1,000 COVID-19-related deaths per day—down from more than 2,000 per day in February, and over 3,000 per day in late January. However, the country has seemingly plateaued at around 55,000 new COVID-19 cases per day. While progress continues in the West and parts of the South, infection levels have remained high in the Northeast and are beginning to increase in some Midwestern states. Arizona is reporting COVID-19 cases at one of the lowest rates in the country, with fewer than 500 cases identified most days (compared to around 10,000 per day at Arizona's January peak). New Jersey continues to lead the United States in recent COVID-19 cases per capita.

New York reported 45 deaths, 4,600 hospitalizations, and 931 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Wednesday, March 24. Approximately 8,081, or 3.01% of the 268,276 tests administered in New York on March 24 were positive for COVID-19. As of March 24, New York has administered 8,231,872 doses of the vaccines to patients. 27.5% of New York residents have received at least one dose of the vaccines and 14.5% are fully vaccinated. On March 24, New York State launched a free, online public health training course, which will teach New York residents about preparedness for, and prevention of, public health emergencies. On March 22, 250 executives from major New York employers delivered a letter to Governor Cuomo and leaders of the State Legislature arguing that the State's current increased tax proposals would "jeopardize New York's recovery from the economic crisis inflicted by COVID-19," and urged the State to reconsider. On the same day, Governor Cuomo increased outdoor, residential gathering limits from 10 to 25 people. Additionally, social gatherings in public spaces can now host up to 100 people indoors (increased from 50) and 200 people outdoors.

U.S. Government Updates

- [*Biden Issues New Vaccine Goal During His First Press Conference*](#), March 25
 - Today, Biden held the first press conference of his presidency, during which he pledged to distribute 200 million COVID-19 vaccine doses by his 100th day in office.
 - When he entered office, Biden set a goal of 100 million shots in 100 days, but he achieved that goal on only his 58th day as president.
 - Biden also said he maintains his goal of opening a majority of primary schools by his 100th day in office. He cited a Department of Education report showing that nearly half of K-8 schools in the United States are already open.
 - Additionally, Biden said more than 100 million of the 127 million \$1,400 payments promised in his \$1.9 trillion stimulus package have arrived in people's bank accounts.
 - Among other statements on immigration, infrastructure, and filibuster reform, Biden announced he plans to seek reelection in 2024.
- [*Agriculture Secretary Says a Tiny Fraction of Trump Administration's COVID-19 Farm Relief Went to Black Farmers*](#), March 25
 - According to Agriculture Secretary Vilsack, who was confirmed in February with strong bipartisan support, only 0.1% (or \$20.8 million) of the Trump administration's \$26 billion COVID-19 relief package for American farmers went to Black farmers.
 - Of the 3.4 million farmers in the United States, 1.3% is Black.
 - Moreover, the 10% most disadvantaged farmers in the United States received 0.26% of the relief package, while the 10% most advantaged farmers received 60%.
 - The American Rescue Plan, the \$1.9 trillion relief package signed into law this month, will pay \$5 billion to farmers of color.

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

- [*CDC Interpretation of Forecasts of New Deaths and Hospitalizations*](#), March 24
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 42 models projecting the COVID-19 death rate. Predicted rates 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 remain stable or have an uncertain trend over the next four weeks. It predicts between 2,700 and 9,600 new deaths and between 458,000 and 578,000 cumulative deaths by April 17.
 - CDC [consolidated](#) data from 12 models projecting the number of daily COVID-19 hospitalizations. The forecast predicts daily hospitalizations will remain stable or have an uncertain trend nationally over the next four weeks, with between 2,500 and 7,300 new hospitalizations per day by April 19. It predicts that hospital admissions will increase in five jurisdictions and decrease in 14 jurisdictions.
- [*CDC Won't Allow Cruise Companies to Return to Business in July*](#), March 24
 - CDC has rejected a request by the Cruise Lines International Association to lift a no-sail order and allow ships to resume business in U.S. waters by July, rather than the previously [announced](#) November return date.
 - The Association accused CDC of dragging its feet, arguing that their proposed July timeframe is in line with Biden's forecast for when the U.S. will be "closer to normal."

- A CDC spokesperson responded, “Returning to passenger cruising is a phased approach to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19. Details for the next phase of the CSO are currently under interagency review.”

New York State

- [New York State COVID-19 Updates](#), March 25
 - New York reported 45 deaths, 4,600 hospitalizations, and 931 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Wednesday, March 24, 2021.
 - Approximately 8,081, or 3.01% of the 268,276 tests administered in New York on March 24 were positive for COVID-19.
 - As of March 24, New York has administered 8,231,872 doses of the vaccines to patients. 27.5% of New York residents have received at least one dose of the vaccines and 14.6% are fully vaccinated.
 - On March 22, 250 executives from major New York employers [delivered](#) a letter to Governor Cuomo and leaders of the State Legislature arguing that the State’s current increased tax proposals would “jeopardize New York’s recovery from the economic crisis inflicted by COVID-19,” and urged the State to reconsider. The group of executives warned that members of their workforce have resettled in other locations—generally with far lower taxes than New York—making it more difficult to get those employees to return to even greater taxes. The executives wrote, “[t]his is not about companies threatening to leave the state; this is simply about our people voting with their feet.”
 - On March 22, Governor Cuomo [increased](#) outdoor residential gathering limits from 10 to 25 people. Additionally, social gatherings in public spaces can now host up to 100 people indoors (increased from 50) and 200 people outdoors.
- [Governor Cuomo Announces Launch of Free Citizen Public Health Training Program](#), March 24
 - On March 24, New York State launched a free, online public health training course for New York residents. New York State Department of Health and Cornell University collaborated to create this program, which teaches about preparedness for, and prevention of, public health emergencies.
 - The course is a four-part, online program that equips New York residents with the tools to help organize community-led initiatives relating to prevention of, detection of, and response to public health emergencies. The program places an emphasis on how to find, use, and share verified information about public health matters from reliable sources.
 - Upon completion of the training, participants will be designated a “New York State Citizen Public Health Leader,” and will be informed of ways they can volunteer and support their local public health operations.

New York City

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), March 25
 - Beginning in September, New York City will [expand](#) its preschool program, providing for universal enrollment—open to all age-eligible children across the City. This free program, called 3K, is expected to save eligible families around \$10,000 per year. The City will use part of an estimated \$4.5 billion in federal stimulus to fund this expansion.

- Critics, such as Mayor de Blasio and New York City Councilman Mark Levine, continue to [question](#) Governor Cuomo’s push to reopen the State. The most recent round of criticism came after The Park Avenue Armory (“The Armory”), a prominent Manhattan arts presenter, announced that it would postpone an upcoming presentation until spring after three performers tested positive for COVID-19. Before the postponement, the art community viewed The Armory as a safe option due to its cavernous interior. However, the infections caused Mr. Levine, who chairs the City Council’s Health Committee, to reconsider the governor’s pace of reopening, stating “[i]t would be better to wait a little longer to get this right.”

Vaccines and Therapeutics

- [U.S. Health Officials Question AstraZeneca Vaccine Trial Results](#), March 23
 - The same day AstraZeneca released results of a clinical trial showing that its COVID-19 vaccine was 79% effective, the Data and Safety Monitoring Board (DSMB), an oversight board of medical experts tasked with monitoring the trial, sent a private letter to the company essentially accusing AstraZeneca of relying on incomplete information in assessing how effective its vaccine is.
 - The letter prompted the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to issue a press [release](#) the following day explaining, “DSMB expressed concern that AstraZeneca may have included outdated information from that trial, which may have provided an incomplete view of the efficacy data.”
 - The controversy between DSMB and AstraZeneca concerns whether or not to include more recently confirmed cases of COVID-19 among participants in the public release of data. DSMB had requested the data from AstraZeneca the week before the interim results of the trial were made public, but AstraZeneca says that it was not aware that DSMB expected it to include the updated figures in their news release.
 - With the more recent COVID cases included, the vaccine’s efficacy rate falls somewhat to between 69% and 74% effective.
 - AstraZeneca said on Tuesday that the interim results are “consistent” with even more recent data, which it says it will share with DSMB within 48 hours. It also vowed to reissue fuller results publically within the same timeframe.
 - Even if a 69% efficacy rate is more accurate, the vaccine remains indisputably effective. And AstraZeneca’s reporting that the trial showed that its vaccine is safe has not been called into doubt.
 - Late Wednesday, AstraZeneca [released](#) an updated analysis, insisting that its vaccine is 76% effective, compared to the 79% efficacy rate it reported earlier this week.
- [New Signs Johnson & Johnson May Not Be Able To Hit Vaccine Delivery Goal](#), March 23
 - Since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized Johnson & Johnson’s COVID-19 vaccine for emergency use in late February, nearly 4.6 million shots have been sent to state and federal vaccine programs. The federal government says that it has another 4 million doses of the vaccine to deliver to the states. The national retail pharmacy program is slated to receive 1.5 million shots next week, and states are expected to receive around 2 million shots.

- Although undoubtedly large, these numbers show that Johnson & Johnson is less than halfway to its self-imposed goal of delivering 20 million shots by the end of March. It failed to meet its original goal of delivering 12 million shots by the end of February.
- Nevertheless, Johnson & Johnson insists that it still expects to deliver 20 million doses of its single-shot vaccine by the end of March.
- Logistical complications may have contributed to the delay. Johnson & Johnson has been shipping vaccine components from Europe while waiting for FDA to authorize two American partners, BioSolutions and Catalent, to help produce the shots domestically. Catalent has now [received](#) authorization, and will begin shipping millions of vaccine doses throughout the country.
- [*Pfizer Begins Early Stage Clinical Trial Testing Oral Antiviral Drug for COVID*](#), March 23
 - Pfizer [announced](#) that it has begun conducting an early stage clinical trial in the U.S. testing an experimental oral antiviral drug to treat COVID-19, called PF-07321332.
 - The drug is a protease inhibitor, which works by inhibiting an enzyme that the virus needs to replicate in human cells. Protease inhibitors are currently used to treat other viral pathogens like HIV and hepatitis C.
 - Pfizer says that preclinical studies show that the oral drug demonstrates “potent” antiviral activity against the virus. The company promised more information at the American Chemical Society’s spring meeting on April 6.
 - Pfizer has also been working on an intravenously administered protease inhibitor, which is currently in a phase 1b clinical trial in hospitalized COVID-19 patients.
- [*Pfizer Begins COVID Vaccine Trial on Infants and Young Kids*](#), March 25
 - Pfizer announced that it started a clinical trial testing its COVID-19 vaccine on healthy children between the ages of 6 months to 11 years.
 - The company intends to enroll 144 children in the first phase of the study. The first participants in the study have already gotten their shots.
 - In the first phase of the trial, researchers will identify the preferred dosing level for three age groups: 6 months to 2 years, 2 to 5 years, and 5 to 11 years. The second phase will measure the safety and effectiveness of the selected dose levels by comparing children who have received the dose of vaccine to children who received a placebo.
 - Vaccinating children is crucial, public health officials and infectious disease experts say, because the U.S. is unlikely to reach herd immunity until children are vaccinated.

International

- Today, [Denmark](#) announced it will extend its suspension of AstraZeneca’s vaccine until April 15. Though European Medical Agency said last week there is no evidence the vaccine causes blood clots, Denmark’s Health Authority wants to investigate the issue further.
- Meanwhile, [Sweden](#) has restarted its AstraZeneca vaccination program.
- According to a study performed by researchers at Alexandria University in Egypt, only 58% of healthcare workers in ten countries across the [Middle East](#) (Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Pakistan, Sudan, and Yemen) plan to get vaccinated.
- [Israel](#) has fully vaccinated over half of its citizens, though it has not fully extended its successful vaccine rollout to Palestinian residents in the West Bank and Gaza.

- One day after announcing a tight lockdown ahead of the long Easter holiday, [German Chancellor Angela Merkel](#) on Wednesday revoked the plan, stating she could not successfully implement it in such a short timeframe.

Other Updates

- [Department of Labor Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims Report](#), March 25
 - Department of Labor (DOL) reports that another 684,000 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. Claims began spiking again around December, but are now decreasing.
 - 241,745 people filed new claims 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.
- [United Airlines Will Add More Than Two Dozen Flights as Leisure Travel Picks Up](#), March 25
 - Because of an increase in leisure travel, United Airlines plans to add more than two dozen new flights to its schedule starting Memorial Day weekend.
 - Most of the new flights will connect cities in the Midwest to tourist destinations, such as Savannah, Georgia and Central and South America.
 - Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has screened over one million people each day for the last two weeks, and ticket sales for future travel are rapidly increasing.
 - Even with the new flights, United said it will operate about 58% as many domestic flights and 46% as many international flights this May as it did in May 2019.
 - Delta also announced last week that it plans to add more than 20 nonstop flights to vacation destinations this summer.
- [Businesses Are Offering Free Food and Goods to People Who Get Vaccinated](#), March 25
 - Businesses around the United States are offering free doughnuts, amusement park rides, money, arcade tokens, yogurt, and even marijuana to people who can prove they are vaccinated against COVID-19.
 - The businesses offering these treats hope they will incentivize Americans to get vaccinated.
 - The trend is international. Last month, Tel Aviv, Israel offered free beer and peach juice to those who were inoculated at certain mobile vaccination clinics.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [Key Employee Benefit Provisions of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#), March 19
- [IRS and DOL Issue Separate COVID-19-Related Benefit Plan Guidance for Employee Benefit Plans and Plan Participants: Take Note of Opportunities and Deadlines](#), March 2

Send questions to:

- COVID-19-Implications@ropesgray.com