

March 8, 2021

Summary

The United States has 29,021,686 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 525,399 reported related deaths. On Saturday, the Senate voted 50-49 to pass President Biden's \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief plan. The plan includes direct payments to certain individuals; an extension of federal unemployment benefits; funding for vaccines, COVID-testing, school re-openings, and state and local governments; and increases to the child tax credit. The House plans to vote on the final version of the bill tomorrow.

CDC has released its first guidance for people who have been fully vaccinated against the virus. The guidance allows for some relaxation of precautions for vaccinated people when interacting with other fully-vaccinated or low-risk people. Mask wearing and social distancing are still advised while in public regardless of whether one has been vaccinated. CDC also released an analysis of data suggesting that mask mandates and restrictions on in-person restaurant dining contributed to lower levels of infections and deaths attributable to COVID-19. Moderna has partnered with Baxter International to help solve some bottlenecks in its vaccine production.

The United States continues to report a decline in positive COVID-19 cases per day, with 40,336 confirmed cases on March 7—the lowest total since October 2020. The country is consistently vaccinating over 2,000,000 people per day, with New Mexico, North Dakota, and Wisconsin reporting the highest inoculation rates among the states. Some states are beginning to ease COVID-19 restrictions, with both Texas and Arizona now allowing businesses to operate at 100% capacity.

New York reported 64 deaths, 4,830 hospitalizations, and 1,005 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, March 7. Approximately 5,309, or 3.62% of the 146,456 tests administered in New York on March 7 were positive for COVID-19. As of March 7, New York has received 4,227,090 first doses of the vaccines and administered 3,746,905 first doses to patients. New York State has received 2,314,020 second doses of the vaccines and administered 1,893,801 second doses to patients. Beginning March 19, restaurants outside of New York City, which have been operating at 50% indoor capacity, can increase maximum indoor capacity to 75%. On March 6, Governor Cuomo announced that Empire Pandemic Response Reimbursement Fund will make \$29 million available to essential workers and first responders for their qualifying, out-of-pocket expenses throughout the pandemic. On March 5, both New York State Senate and Assembly passed legislation that prevents the governor from issuing new emergency directives related to the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 7, Governor Cuomo signed the bill into law.

U.S. Government Updates

- [*The Senate Passes Biden's \\$1.9 Trillion COVID-19 Relief Package*](#), March 6
 - On Saturday, the Senate voted 50-49 to pass Biden's \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief plan, following more than 24 hours of debate.
 - The plan, called the America Rescue Plan Act, includes: \$1,400 per-person payments to individual earning up to \$75,000 and couples earning up to \$150,000; an extension of \$300-per-week federal unemployment benefits through September 6, of which the first \$10,200 will be non-taxable for households with incomes under \$150,000; [\\$160 billion](#) for vaccines and testing programs; \$800 million for tackling youth homelessness; [\\$350 billion](#) in aid for state and local governments; and increases to the child tax credit.
 - The House must vote on the final version of the bill before Biden can sign it into law. This vote is expected on [Tuesday](#).
 - [Biden](#) greeted the news by saying, "This plan puts us on the path to beating the virus. This plan gives those families who are struggling the most the help and the breathing room they need to get through this moment. This plan gives small business in this country a fighting chance to survive."

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

- [*COVID Data Tracker Weekly Review*](#), March 5
 - CDC summarized key COVID-19 disease indicators for the previous week.
 - The number of new cases reported in the United States for the week was 65,424. The seven-day average number of daily cases reported as of March 2 is 62,555. This is a 5.7% decrease compared to the previous week's average and an overall 74% decrease compared to the national peak on January 11, 2021.
 - As of March 4, 82.6 million vaccine doses have been administered in the United States. Overall, approximately 54.0 million people in the United States (16.3% of the population) have received at least one dose of vaccine. Approximately 27.8 million people (8.4% of the population) have received two doses of vaccine. The seven-day average number of reported vaccine dose administrations was 2 million per day, a 36% acceleration compared to the previous week.
 - The number of new hospital admissions on March 2 was 5,390. The current seven-day average of new hospitalizations is 5,490 per day, a decrease of 14.8% compared to the prior week's average.
 - The total number of deaths reported on March 3 was 1,947. The current seven-day average of reported deaths is 1,921 per day, a 6.7% decrease compared to the prior week's average. Overall, 517,224 COVID-19 deaths have been reported.
- [*Interim Public Health Recommendations for Fully Vaccinated People*](#), March 8
 - CDC [released](#) its first set of public health [recommendations](#) for fully vaccinated people.
 - The guidance [instructs](#) that people who are fully vaccinated—meaning two weeks have passed since receiving their last dose of vaccine—should still take standard precautions like social distancing and wearing a mask while in public. However, they may now visit with other fully vaccinated people indoors without masks or distancing, visit unvaccinated but low-risk people from a single household without masks or distancing, and refrain from testing and quarantining after known exposure to COVID-19 if asymptomatic.

- The report cites evidence suggesting that vaccinated people are less likely to have asymptomatic infection and may be less likely to transmit the virus to others.
- [*Association of State-Issued Mask Mandates and Allowing On-Premises Restaurant Dining with County-Level COVID-19 Case and Death Growth Rates*](#), March 5
 - CDC studied state- and county-level masking and in-person restaurant dining policies from March 1 to December 31, 2020.
 - Wearing [masks](#), the data shows, is linked to fewer infections and deaths in counties across the United States. Similarly, counties that [opened](#) restaurants for on-premises dining (indoor and outdoor) saw a rise in daily infections about six weeks later and an increase in death rates about two months later.
 - According to CDC, the data supports a [conclusion](#) that “[m]ask mandates and restricting any on-premises dining at restaurants can help limit community transmission of COVID-19 and reduce case and death growth rates.”

New York State

- [*New York State COVID-19 Updates*](#), March 8
 - New York reported 64 deaths, 4,830 hospitalizations, and 1,005 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on Sunday, March 7, 2021.
 - Approximately 5,309, or 3.62% of the 146,456 tests administered in New York on March 7 were positive for COVID-19.
 - As of March 7, New York has received 4,227,090 first doses of the vaccines and administered 3,746,905 first doses to patients. As of March 7, New York has received 2,314,020 second doses of the vaccines and administered 1,893,801 second doses to patients.
 - Beginning March 19, restaurants outside of New York City, which have been operating at 50% indoor capacity, can [increase](#) maximum indoor capacity to 75%. In justifying this change, Governor Andrew Cuomo claims data shows that restaurants can operate safely, and in accordance with strict health protocols, at 75% capacity. However, New York City indoor dining capacity will remain at 35%.
 - On March 8, Governor Cuomo [announced](#) that New York will establish 10 additional state-run, mass vaccination sites. Final details—including appointment scheduling information, starts dates, and hours of operation—will be released in the coming weeks.
- [*Governor Cuomo Announces \\$29 Million Available to Support Essential Workers and First Responders*](#), March 6
 - On March 6, Governor Cuomo announced that Empire Pandemic Response Reimbursement Fund will make \$29 million available to support essential workers and first responders. This program will be coordinated by New York’s Office of Children and Family Services.
 - The program is designed to reimburse eligible workers for their out-of-pocket childcare, transportation, lodging, and other expenses that enabled them to perform their duties throughout the pandemic. The funding for this program largely comes from private donations and charitable trusts.
 - Eligible workers can receive reimbursements for up to \$1,000 per household, with a cutoff for those who earn more than 500% over the federal poverty level.

- [*New York State Lawmakers Move to Limit Gov. Andrew Cuomo's Covid-19 Pandemic Powers*](#), March 5
 - On March 5, both New York State Senate and Assembly passed legislation that prevents the governor from issuing new emergency directives related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
 - Governor Andrew Cuomo's prior directives will remain in effect temporarily; however, their renewal now requires a written explanation (certified by New York State health commissioner) and will be subject to commentary from lawmakers (which the governor must [respond](#) to).
 - On March 7, Governor Cuomo [signed](#) the bill into law.

New York City

- [*New York City COVID-19 Updates*](#), March 8
 - Beginning March 22, New York City public high schools will [reopen](#) for in-person learning after more than two months of virtual instruction. According to New York State Department of Education, about half of public high schools will be able to serve "all or most" of their students five days a week, and the number will continue to increase in the coming weeks. High school staff will return to buildings on March 18 and 19 to prepare for the reopening.
 - On March 4, New York City [opened](#) a mass vaccination center in Co-Op City, New York, which Mayor de Blasio hopes will eventually vaccinate 1,000 people per day. Currently, the site inoculates around 200 residents per day, using Johnson & Johnson's vaccine.

Vaccines and Therapeutics

- [*Baxter Strikes Deal to Help Moderna Manufacture 60 to 90 Million COVID-19 Vaccines This Year*](#), March 8
 - Illinois-based health care company Baxter International has [agreed](#) to help manufacture about 60 to 90 million doses of the vaccine developed by Moderna.
 - Pursuant to the agreement, Baxter will use its 600,000-square-foot campus in Bloomington, Indiana, which employs more than 700 people, to fill vials with vaccine and finish packaging the product before it ships.
 - Last year, Moderna contracted with Catalent to help support filling and packaging. But in February Moderna said that it was nevertheless [experiencing](#) "short-term delays" in the final stages of production.
 - Baxter has also partnered with Novavax to provide manufacturing services for its vaccine candidate, which could be [authorized](#) for emergency use as early as May.
- [*Guillain-Barré Syndrome and COVID-19: Causation or Coincidence*](#), March 4
 - Early during the COVID-19 pandemic, reports suggested that Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), a rare [disorder](#) in which one's immune system attacks the body's nerves, may be associated with COVID-19 infection. Researchers in the U.K. conducted studies to investigate whether this association is causal or coincidental.
 - The results of the studies [suggest](#) that there is no causal association between COVID-19 and GBS. In fact, GBS incidence in the U.K. decreased during the first months of the

pandemic compared to previous years, possibly due to lockdown measures implemented by the government.

- [*Black Churches Have Become Indispensable in Covid-19 Vaccination Effort*](#), March 8
 - Black churches in the U.S. are making significant contributions to the effort to vaccinate people against the COVID-19 virus.
 - Black people have been infected with the virus at a disproportionately high rate and are now receiving vaccines at an alarmingly low rate. This is likely due to the concurrent concerns of lack of access and lack of trust in the vaccine because of past abuses of Black people by medical professionals.
 - Black churches are playing a role in dismantling both barriers by setting up vaccination centers in so called “pharmacy deserts” and by providing community members with educational resources about the COVID-19 vaccines and encouragement to receive one.

International

- President Bashar al-Assad of [Syria](#) and his wife have tested positive for COVID-19. His office said both are experiencing only mild symptoms.
- [Afghanistan](#) received 468,000 AstraZeneca vaccine doses through the Covax initiative.
- [Vietnam](#) began its immunization campaign on Monday by distributing the AstraZeneca vaccine to health care workers.
- The [Dalai Lama](#) received his first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and encouraged others to “have courage to take this injection.”
- After eight people in [South Korea](#) who had received AstraZeneca’s vaccine died, an investigation found no evidence linking the vaccine to the deaths. Other countries’ investigations into the company’s vaccine have similarly have found no evidence the vaccine is not safe for use.
- Some [British](#) companies plan to give employees a choice: get vaccinated or lose their jobs. Labor rights groups have argued such policies will lead to racial and socioeconomic discrimination.

Other Updates

- [*California Set to Open Ballparks, Arenas, and Theme parks in April*](#), March 5
 - California will open stadiums, ballparks, and theme parks beginning on April 1.
 - The openings will be at reduced capacity and contingent on county-level COVID-19 infection rates. For counties with the highest virus transmission rates, outdoor sports and live performances will be limited to 100 people. The events must also employ reservations, and there can be no concessions. Counties with lower infection rates can host these events at 20% or 33% capacity, depending on the exact rates. Similarly, theme park capacity will depend on county infection rates, and masks will be required inside all parks.
 - Counties with the highest transmission rates are home to 87% of Californians and most of the State’s major amusement parks, including Disneyland, Six Flags Magic Mountain, Sea World, and Universal Studios.
- [*Nearly One-Third of Parents May Choose Remote Learning for Their Children*](#), March 5
 - An NPR/Ipsos poll queried parents about the pandemic’s effects on their children.

- Half of parents surveyed said their children are learning virtually, one-third said their children are attending school in-person, and the remaining respondents said their children are participating in hybrid learning.
- 65% of Black parents and 57% of Latino parents said their children are learning entirely remotely, as opposed to only 38% of white parents.
- No matter how their children are attending school, 48% of parents said they are concerned their children have fallen behind in school.
- About 75% of parents expect schools to fully re-open next fall. However, 29% of parents said they will likely stick with remote learning indefinitely. Many school districts across the United States are exploring remote public school options.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [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
- [Nine Key Takeaways for Providers as Illinois Returns to Phase 4 of the “Restore Illinois” Plan](#), February 11

Send questions to:

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