

October 21, 2020

Summary

The United States has 8,277,961 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 221,150 reported related deaths. In a report sent to state governors, the White House Coronavirus Task Force classified 31 states as “red zones,” meaning their COVID-19 positivity rate currently exceeds ten percent. Two studies documented declining mortality rates in hospitalized COVID-19 patients. NIH Director Collins said that he is “guardedly optimistic” that a COVID-19 vaccine candidate will prove safe and effective by the end of the year. Researchers at the Imperial College London announced plans to launch COVID-19 “challenge” trials next year in which researchers intentionally expose participants to COVID-19 to determine the efficacy of a COVID-19 vaccine candidate. Senate Majority Leader McConnell advised President Trump not to strike a pre-election deal on another coronavirus stimulus package with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

North Dakota, which has the most cases per capita of any state in the country, reported that it has only 20 open ICU beds left in the state. California governor Gavin Newsom named a group of medical and public health experts to the state’s COVID-19 Scientific Safety Review Workgroup, which will independently review the safety and efficacy of any FDA-approved COVID-19 vaccine. Delaware governor John Carney announced that COVID Alert DE, an app that alerts users whether they have had close contact with COVID-19 positive individuals, has surpassed 50,000 downloads. Florida governor Ron DeSantis announced the school closures “should be off the table” after two Jacksonville schools temporarily closed last week due to an increase in reported COVID-19 cases.

New York reported 12 deaths, 942 hospitalizations, and 194 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on October 20, 2020. Approximately 2,026, or 1.6% of the 124,789 tests administered in New York on October 20 were positive for COVID-19. New York State added Arizona and Maryland to the NY COVID-19 Travel Advisory. New York State eased targeted lockdown restrictions in certain New York City neighborhoods. Governor Cuomo announced that New York governments will face a \$59 billion revenue shortfall in their budgets over the next two fiscal years. New York City announced a phased vaccination distribution approach, similar to that proposed by the State earlier this week, that would provide doses of a COVID-19 vaccine to healthcare workers as early as November, and to the general public as early as the beginning of 2021. New York City announced a new, five-year plan to combat housing inequality in the City, with a specific emphasis on rooting out inequities caused by the disparate effects of the pandemic. Twenty-five percent of New York transit workers have contracted coronavirus, according to a study. Mayor de Blasio hopes to return 25% of the City’s employees to the office by the end of the year.

Presidential updates

- [President Trump and Senate Majority Leader McConnell Discuss Stimulus](#), October 21
 - The media reported that Senate Majority Leader McConnell privately advised President Trump not to strike a pre-election deal with House Speaker Pelosi regarding a second round of stimulus spending to address the economic damage caused the pandemic.
 - Pelosi and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin have been negotiating a stimulus package for several weeks.
 - Recently, President Trump has expressed willingness to approve as much as \$1.9 trillion in additional stimulus spending, but McConnell has repeatedly indicated that Senate Republicans are unwilling to pass such a large bill.
 - The Senate [failed](#) to pass a narrower \$500 billion stimulus package on October 21.

World Health Organization (WHO)

- [WHO COVID-19 Updates](#), October 21
 - The United Children's Fund (UNICEF) [announced](#) it plans to stockpile 520 million syringes by the end of 2020. It will also partner with WHO to map out existing cold-chain equipment and storage capacity around the globe to ensure the organizations are prepared to rapidly distribute and properly store COVID-19 vaccines once they are ready.
 - WHO Director General Tedros once again [emphasized](#) the importance of equitable vaccine distribution throughout the world, explaining that equitably sharing vaccines is the fastest way to safeguard high-risk communities, stabilize health systems, and drive a truly global economic recovery.

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

- [CDC Publishes Data Regarding Excess Deaths During the Pandemic](#), October 20
 - CDC reported that there were 299,028 excess deaths in the United States between January 26 and October 3.
 - Excess deaths are defined as the number of persons who have died from all causes, in excess of the expected number of deaths for a given place and time. CDC calculates excess deaths by examining death rates from prior years.
 - Certain racial and ethnic groups, including Hispanic people, saw disproportionate increases in excess deaths. Individuals aged 22-44 also saw a disproportionate increase in excess deaths.
 - At least 198,081 of the 299,028 (66%) of the excess deaths were attributed to COVID-19. CDC explained some of the rest of the excess deaths may also have been directly or indirectly related to the virus. For example, CDC noted that some may have been caused by disruptions in the delivery of health care caused by the pandemic.

New York State

- [New York State COVID-19 Updates](#), October 21
 - New York reported 12 deaths, 942 hospitalizations, and 194 COVID-19 patients in intensive care on October 20, 2020.
 - Approximately 2,026, or 1.6% of the 124,789 tests administered in New York on October 20 were positive for COVID-19.
 - New York State [added](#) Arizona and Maryland to the NY COVID-19 Travel Advisory. The State did not remove any states from the advisory.
 - On October 21, Governor Cuomo [eased](#) some lockdown restrictions in certain hotspots in New York City, but warned that surges in neighboring states threatened to reverse improvements. The initial restrictions were put in place on October 6.
 - The Governor's Office [announced](#) that New York governments and authorities are projecting a \$59 billion revenue shortfall through 2022. New York estimates that it has lost \$14 billion in revenue this fiscal year, and projects that it will lose another \$16 billion next fiscal year. Transportation authorities expect to earn \$15 billion less in revenue due to decreased ridership. Local governments expect to face \$13.5 billion in shortfalls over the next two years. Governor Cuomo has pleaded for relief from the federal government, arguing that the state's deficit "was caused by the federal government's negligence."

New York City

- [New York City COVID-19 Updates](#), October 21
 - New York City [announced](#) a phased approach to administering vaccine along similar lines as announced by New York State earlier this week. Phase 1 of the distribution will provide a limited number of doses to healthcare personnel, frontline workers, and other vulnerable groups as early as November. Phase 2, which could occur as early as 2021, is intended to provide vaccinations to the general public.
 - The City [released](#) the final [Where We Live NYC Plan](#), a more than 30-agency effort to produce a five-year plan to address housing disparity in New York. The plan is the City's response to an Obama administration housing regulation that requires cities to "affirmatively further" the goals of the Fair Housing Act. The plan intends to provide resources and protections to combat housing discrimination, promote development to open up communities to low-income families, and preserve low-cost housing throughout the city, among other goals. The City updated the plan to specifically address the economic impact COVID-19 has had on low-income families.
 - A study [concluded](#) that as many as 25% of Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) workers have contracted coronavirus during the pandemic. The study's conclusion represents an increase from New York State's May assessment, which concluded that 14% of a sample of transit workers had tested positive for virus antibodies. An MTA spokeswoman casted doubt on the findings, citing a low participation rate and that only 7.3% of transit workers had taken leave due to infection.
 - Mayor de Blasio [intends](#) to have 25% of the City's government workers return to their offices by the end of the year. Most City employees have worked remotely from home since March. The City employs 325,000 people according to a fiscal watchdog agency.

Other Related Updates

- [*Studies Point to Big Drop in COVID-19 Death Rates*](#), October 20
 - Two new peer-reviewed studies are showing a sharp drop in mortality among hospitalized COVID-19 patients. The drop is “seen in all groups, including older patients and those with underlying conditions, suggesting that physicians are getting better at helping patients survive their illness.”
 - One [study](#), which appeared online as a preprint in August and will be published in the Journal of Hospital Medicine next week, looked at more than 5,000 hospitalizations in the NYU Langone Health system between March and August.
 - Researchers found that changes in demographics and severity of illness at presentation accounted for some, but not all, of a decline in unadjusted mortality from 30.2% in the first two weeks to 3% in the last two weeks.
 - Another [study](#), conducted by researchers at the Alan Turing Institute in the U.K., analyzed 21,000 hospitalized cases in England and showed a nearly 20% drop in unadjusted mortality rate among hospitalized patients between March 1 and May 30.
 - Researchers suggest the drop results from a combination of several factors, including faster recognition of dangerous COVID-19 symptoms, superior treatments, and a lower critical care burden at hospitals.
- [*U.K. Researchers Announce Human Challenge Trial*](#), October 20
 - Scientists at Imperial College London [announced](#) plans for a human challenge trial, where they will deliberately infect individuals to determine the minimal amount of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, needed to cause an upper respiratory tract infection.
 - Beginning in January, healthy young adults quarantined at the Royal Free Hospital in London will have a purified, laboratory-grown strain of the live virus blown into their noses. The participants will then be tested daily, or even hourly, over two to three weeks.
 - The first round of volunteers will include up to 90 healthy adults, ages 18 to 30.
 - Once researchers determine the lowest dose of virus needed to reliably infect volunteers, a second phase of the study will test volunteers who are given a vaccine and then intentionally exposed to this calibrated dose of the virus.
 - Though human challenge trials have been used for decades to test vaccines, critics argue previous challenge trials involved diseases that could be cured. COVID-19 has no known cure.
- [*Three Studies Yield Mix Results on Use of Tocilizumab for COVID-19*](#), October 20
 - Three studies conducted in three different countries reached mixed conclusions on the effectiveness of tocilizumab, a humanized monoclonal antibody that acts against the interleukin-6 receptor, to treat COVID-19.
 - U.S. researchers retrospectively [compared](#) 430 critically ill patients who received intravenous tocilizumab within two days of ICU admission against 3,500 ICU patients who did not receive the drug in that time frame. After multivariable adjustment, the study associated a nearly 30% reduction in mortality risk.

- A randomized [trial](#) in Italy studied 125 patients hospitalized with COVID-19 pneumonia who were assigned to tocilizumab or standard care. The primary endpoint—clinical worsening within 14 days—did not differ significantly between the groups.
 - Another randomized [trial](#) in France assigned roughly 130 COVID-19 patients with moderate-to-severe pneumonia to tocilizumab or usual care. One primary outcome, clinical progression at day 4, was not improved with tocilizumab. The other primary outcome, death or need for high-flow oxygen or ventilation at day 14, favored tocilizumab (24% vs. 36%). By day 28, there was no mortality difference.
 - An editorialist [summarized](#) the trials by saying the findings to date, “do not support the routine use of tocilizumab for COVID-19 in most settings.”
- [NIH Director Collins Comments on COVID-19 Vaccine Timeline](#), October 20
 - During an interview with the press, NIH Director Collins said that he and Dr. Fauci are “guardedly optimistic” that one of the COVID-19 vaccine candidates currently in clinical trials will prove safe and effective by the end of the year.
 - Collins noted that FDA could issue an emergency use authorization (EUA) for a COVID-19 vaccine by late November.
 - Last week, Pfizer [said](#) that it will apply for an EUA in mid-November at the earliest.
 - This week, Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel [said](#) that his company’s COVID-19 vaccine candidate could be approved for emergency use in December.
 - Clinical trials of AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson’s vaccine candidates remain [paused](#) for safety reviews.
 - [FDA COVID-19 Updates](#), October 21
 - Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Federal Trade Commission jointly issued a warning [letter](#) to For Our Vets LLC d/b/a Patriot Supreme for selling CBD products with misleading claims that the products can mitigate, prevent, treat, diagnose, or cure COVID-19.
 - FDA issued a consumer [update](#) entitled Advisory Committees Give FDA Critical Advice and the Public a Voice, describing how FDA relies on many advisory committees to help it make sound decisions based on the best science available.

Other recent events covered in detail elsewhere:

- [HHS Provider Relief Fund Opens Portal for Phase Three General Distribution](#), October 8
- [House Funding Bill Proposes Repayment Relief for Medicare Accelerated and Advance Payment Programs Participants](#), October 1

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