

BRIEF19

A daily review of covid-19 research and policy.

POLICY BRIEFING

New Inspector General report shows healthcare system on the brink.

The Office of the Inspector General (OIG) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has [released](#) an updated review on the state of the country's healthcare system. First conducted one year ago, this survey of hospital administrators across the country sought to understand how the pandemic was affecting hospitals. This new iteration focused on the greatest challenges hospitals had faced and the challenges used to overcome them, greatest concerns moving forward, and what the government can do to support the healthcare system.

Hospital challenges:

- Balancing complex covid-19 care with resumption of normal medical operations.
- Staffing shortages from sickness and physical, emotional exhaustion.
- Logistics of vaccine distribution and staff [hesitancy](#).
- Exacerbation of health [disparities](#).
- Hospital financial instability.

Future problems:

- Reduction of disparities in access to care and health outcomes.
- Widespread [vaccination](#).

Government support:

- Enhancement of knowledge and guidance on prevention and treatment.
- Development and maintenance of a more robust health [workforce](#).
- Continuing financial [relief](#), especially to rural and underserved centers.

Taken together, it is clear that much has been learned about the prevention and treatment of covid-19, but that there is a long way to go to perfect a robust healthcare system amidst resource drainage, staff limitation, and public perception. *Various*. [26 March 2021](#). —*Brief19 Policy Team*

US drops below 1,000 daily covid-19 deaths. But variants are taking over.

For the [first](#) time since November, daily covid-19 deaths have dropped below 1,000 in the United States. Nearly 70 percent of Americans 65 or older have received at least one dose of an authorized coronavirus vaccine in just the three months that vaccinations have been available. Many states plan to open vaccinations to all adults in the next few weeks if they have not done so already.

While new cases remain above 50,000 per day, causing some pause among policymakers, the situation in the United States is far more encouraging than that of countries such as Brazil or parts of Europe that are seeing increases in case counts as well as fatalities. However, the encouraging signs in the United States are not yet definitive evidence that the virus that causes covid-19 has been defeated, health experts warn. Many states have relaxed social distancing and masking ordinances and Americans are beginning to travel again with airports in the United States seeing more than 1 million travelers per day on average in the past week. Several large employers have also announced that they will be encouraging employees to return to physical office space soon as well. There are also concerns that the United Kingdom variant of the virus (B.1.1.7) which has been shown to be more contagious and slightly more deadly has now been found in all 50 states. [25 March 2021](#).

—*Jordan M. Warchol, MD, MPH*

CDC Director Warns the US Could See Another “Avoidable Surge”

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky warned on Monday that the United States could see “another avoidable surge” of covid-19 if mitigation measures such as mask wearing, physical distancing, and avoiding crowds or travel aren’t followed. Walensky said, “As I’ve stated before, the continued relaxation of prevention measures while cases are still high and while concerning variants are spreading rapidly throughout the United States is a serious threat to the progress we have made as a nation.”

While the Biden Administration marked 100 million coronavirus vaccine doses administered just 58 days into his presidency, the US is still averaging around 53,800 new cases per day, a slight increase from the previous seven-day average of cases nationwide. The CDC director said that the leveling off of cases following declines last month and that the spread of new contagious variants is “very concerning.” Walensky noted that “Increasingly, states are seeing a growing proportion of their COVID-19 cases attributed to variants.”

The Biden Administration is thus encouraging governors, as well as the private sector, to maintain or reimpose at least some coronavirus restrictions, with the relaxation of certain covid-19 restrictions seen as posing a particularly “serious threat” to the progress the US has made in containing the virus. Walensky’s remarks come after several states lifted mask mandates and allowed the reopening of businesses at full capacity. [23 March 2021](#). —Miranda Yaver, PhD

CDC updates school distancing guidance.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has [updated](#) its social distancing policy in schools based on community transmission rates and masking use. The new recommendations are based on a trio of studies [published](#) in the CDC’s *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* providing more data about the spread of SARS-CoV-2 in schools. The recommendations are as follows:

- For elementary schools, regardless of the community transmission, three feet of separation is recommended if there is a universal mask policy in place.
- For middle and high schools where community transmission is not high, three feet of separation is similarly recommended.
- In areas where community transmission is high, schools should attempt to cohort students and teachers to reduce contact between groups, and if not possible, middle and high school students should still maintain six feet of separation.

It is important to note that these updates only apply to students in classrooms with enforced *universal* masking policies. The CDC still recommends that adults maintain six feet of separation at all times, and that students similarly maintain six feet in common areas, when eating, during increased exertion, and in the community at large. *The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*. [22 March 2021](#).

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Brief19 is a daily executive summary of covid-19-related medical research, news, and public policy. It was founded and created by frontline emergency medicine physicians with expertise in medical research critique, health policy, and public policy.