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COVID-19 in the USA: protests, riots, and prisons

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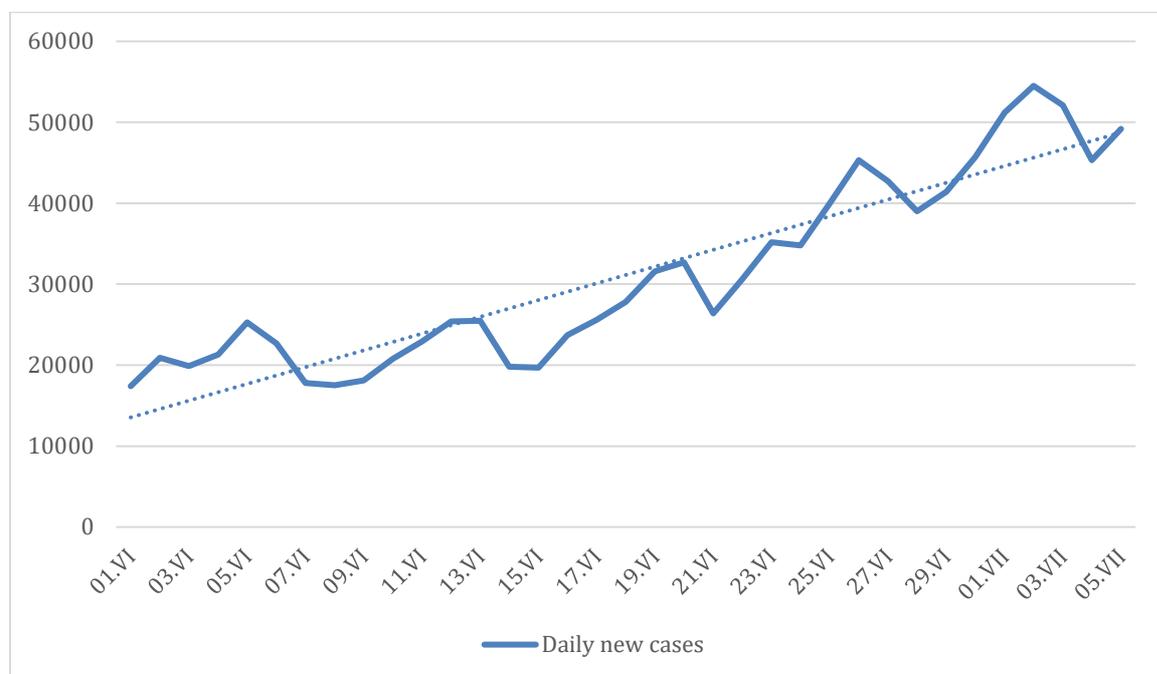
COVID-19 in the USA: protests, riots, and prisons

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The current coronavirus situation in the US is an enigma to say the least. Some states, like New York and Washington, are seeing a decrease in new cases while others, like Arizona and California, are seeing an increase. At this point, all 50 states had attempted to reopen to some extent and, the number of new cases per day was going down for a while.¹ While the pandemic is continuing, it is no longer at the centre of attention in much of the country. The spotlight has been taken by the ongoing protests and riots across the country in response to police brutality and racism. These gatherings started occurring on May 26th and are still ongoing in many parts of the US today. The US is starting to see an increase in the number of new COVID-19 cases as a result of the mass gatherings and poorly timed reopenings. Additionally, another problem has arisen that not many may be aware of: outbreaks in prisons.

Situation

Figure 1: Daily new cases of COVID-19 in the USA in June with trendline



Source: John Hopkins University²

There are over 2,800,000 total cases of coronavirus in the US, roughly 7,121 per 1 million of population, and 129,947 people have died. Throughout the month of May, the situation overall was improving in the US, the number of weekly new cases had gone down 4.7% by

¹ Canipe, Chris and Lisa Shumaker. “Where U.S. coronavirus cases are on the rise” Reuters, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-usa-trends/where-u-s-coronavirus-cases-are-on-the-rise-idUSKBN2321WY>

² John Hopkins University. *COVID-19 Dashboard by CSSE*. 2020, <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>

May 31st.³ However, mid-June has seen the trend swing upwards. June 19th and 20th both saw more than 30,000 new cases of COVID-19 in the US; the first time since May 1st that this has happened, and several days have seen over 40,000 or even 50,000 new cases. Three weeks ago, the average new cases per day was 21,129, the daily average for this previous week (ending on July 5th) was 47,025.⁴

The US is also leading the world in the number of tests performed with 26.78 million⁵, but the rate of testing is far from the top. The US is 26th in the world for number of tests per million population, but President Trump has called for a reduction in testing. At his June 20th rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma the President said, “here’s the bad part when you do testing to that extent, you’re going to find more people, you’re going to find more cases. So, I said to my people ‘slow the testing down, please’”⁶. The White House has called this statement a joke and not to be taken seriously, but the President would contradict this and say “I don’t kid”⁷. This is not the first time he has said something along these lines, as just 5 days earlier on June 15th he said “if we stopped testing right now, we’d have very few cases if any”⁸. This is obviously misleading. If the US were to stop testing, there would be less confirmed cases, but people infected with COVID-19 would still be infected with COVID-19 whether they know it or not. Object permeance is important in this scenario.

Protests

Since May 26th there has been widespread rioting, looting, and general destruction across the US. It all started in Minneapolis, Minnesota, following a video that showed a man named George Floyd dying as a police officer knelt on his neck while Floyd told him he could not breathe. From there, protests began in Minneapolis which quickly turned into riots and looting. This has spread across America, and there have now been protests in all 50 states and in Washington D.C. Moreover, the riots and protests have spread outside of the US. Several cities in Canada along with London, Manchester, Amsterdam, Prague, Copenhagen, Paris, and Berlin to name a few have all had large protests, some with well over 1000 people in attendance.⁹

Decades of pent up frustration caused by police misconduct and racism have surfaced and erupted. In the US, the participants are protesting racism and police brutality. The protests in the other parts of the world are in support of the protestors in the US, with many are being

³ Canipe, Chris and Lisa Shumaker. “Where U.S. coronavirus cases are on the rise” Graphic. Reuters, 2020, <https://graphics.reuters.com/HEALTH-CORONAVIRUS/USA-TRENDS/dgkvlgkrkpb/index.html>

⁴ Adelina, Stephanie, Hanzhang Jin, Connie, Hurt, Alyson, Talbot, Ruth, Wilburn, Thomas, and Daniel Wood. *Tracking The Pandemic: Are Coronavirus Cases Rising Or Falling In Your State?* NPR, 2020 <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/03/16/816707182/map-tracking-the-spread-of-the-coronavirus-in-the-u-s>

⁵ CDC. *Testing Data in the U.S.* 2020 <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cases-updates/testing-in-us.html>

⁶ Santucci, Jeanine. *White House adviser says Trump’s call for less coronavirus testing was ‘tongue in cheek’.* 2020, USA Today <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/06/21/trump-adviser-navarro-says-call-slow-testing-tongue-cheek/3232683001/>

⁷ Sergers, Grace. *Trump says he wasn’t joking about testing slowdown: “I don’t kid”.* CBS News, 2020 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-slow-down-testing-coronavirus-i-dont-kid/>

⁸ CGTN. *Trump: If U.S. ends test, we’d have very few cases’.* 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gr81b-A_Tjo

⁹ Kirby, Jen. *George Floyd protests go global.* 2020, Vox <https://www.vox.com/2020/5/31/21276031/george-floyd-protests-london-berlin>

held in front of US embassies, or are inspired by the protests in the US and are against police brutality and racism in their own countries.¹⁰

The most obvious impact these riots could have on the pandemic, not just in the US, is the large gatherings of people. The world has spent the last four months trying to avoid large gatherings as much as possible, and now there are groups of hundreds if not thousands of people crowding together. Having thousands of people so close together in major cities, some like New York, London, Montreal, and Berlin, that were or still are very seriously affected by the coronavirus, is the perfect opportunity for the virus to spread even further.

The mayor of Atlanta, Georgia Keisha Lance-Bottoms said “if you were out protesting last night, you probably need to go get a Covid test this week... We already know what’s happening in our community with this virus. We’re going to see the other side of this in a couple of weeks”¹¹. Georgia saw the number of weekly new cases in the state drop 20% before the protesting and riots started to take place, but they have risen 78.2% since then.¹² Georgia is not alone in this regard, only 6 states have seen the number of weekly new cases decrease.

Table 1: Weekly new cases in the US states that saw the number of new cases increase by more than 25% for the week ending on June 28th

State	Number of new cases	Weekly increase over previous week
Washington	3179	181.3%
Idaho	1313	116.3%
Louisiana	6458	104%
Florida	43784	101.6%
Nevada	3955	94.6%
Georgia	12509	78.2%
Arkansas	4168	57.8%
Texas	37127	56.3%
Ohio	5501	50.3%
California	37419	49.9%
South Carolina	8627	46.3%
Kansas	1479	46.1%
Wisconsin	3092	35.9%
Michigan	2235	34.9%
Mississippi	3605	30.1%
Arizona	21518	28.9%
Pennsylvania	3766	28.4%
Colorado	1673	25.6%
USA	267870	45.6%

Source: Reuters¹³

¹⁰ Kirby, 2020

¹¹ Luscombe, Richard. *Fears of US coronavirus surge from George Floyd protests*. The Guardian, 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/31/fears-grow-of-surge-in-us-coronavirus-cases-from-george-floyd-protests>

¹² Canipe et al, 2020

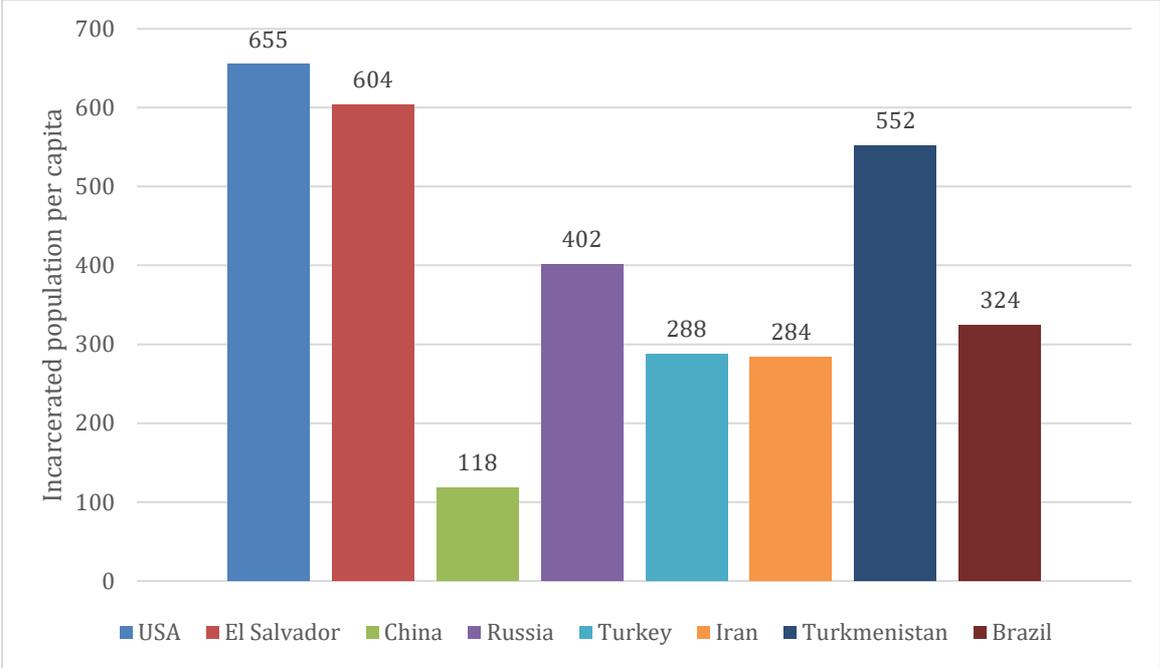
¹³ Canipe et al, 2020

There is also the possible consequence of hospitals becoming overwhelmed again. If the riots and looting become more violent, hospitals will have to dedicate more resources to these injuries by spreading out resources that may have already been thin to begin with. Tim Walz, the governor of Minnesota commented that too many protestors were without masks and ignoring social distancing. He then added, “we still have hospitals on the verge of being overrun with COVID-19”¹⁴. Now the hospitals that were close to being overrun with COVID patients will have to deal with the injuries from the riots and protests as well.

Prisons and coronavirus

The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world at 655 per 100,000 people. In second place is El Salvador at 604 per 100,000. The incarceration rate in the US becomes even more shocking when looking at individual states. If each US state was its own country, they would occupy top 31 highest incarceration rates in the world. Three states, Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Mississippi have incarceration rates above 1 per 100 people. The US state with the lowest incarceration rate is Massachusetts at 324 per 100,000, which gives the state the 59th highest rate in the world.¹⁵

Figure 2: Incarcerated population per capita in the USA compared to select countries



Source: Institute for Criminal Policy Research¹⁶

This high incarceration rate has led to a problem of coronavirus spreading rapidly through prisons. The prisons are so crowded, that social distancing is not possible. Presently in the US, there are 10 large clusters. A large cluster is defined as 1000 or more cases that can traced back to a single location. Of these 10 large clusters, 8 of them are prisons/jails, the 5

¹⁴ Allen, Nick. *US riots could lead to new coronavirus outbreak, experts warn*. Telegraph, 2020 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/01/us-riots-could-lead-new-coronavirus-outbreak-experts-warn/>
¹⁵ Prison Policy Initiative. *World Incarceration Rates if Every U.S. State Were A Country*. 2018, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/graphs/2018.html>
¹⁶ Walmsley, Roy. *World Prison Population List 12th edition*. ICPR, 2018 https://www.prisonstudies.org/research-publications?shs_term_node_tid_depth=27

largest of the large clusters are all located in prisons/jails.¹⁷ There are over 68,000 COVID-19 infections in prisons¹⁸, this puts the rate of infections in prisons at 29,500/1 million which is 4x higher than in the US as a whole.

This high rate of infections in prisons and jails is not just a problem for the prisoners and employees, but also for the rest of the country as well. Jails are usually meant for people awaiting trial, being booked, or serving less than one year. As such, people are constantly entering and exiting prisons. The Marshall Project estimates that 200,000 people enter, and leave, jails each week in the US.¹⁹ 200,000 people each week enter a location where statistically speaking they are 4x more likely to get infected with coronavirus than if they were on the outside, and 200,000 people leave from this same location and go back into the general public and with them they bring a high risk of infection.

Election campaigns

Seeing as 2020 is an election year, incumbent President Trump and democratic nominee former Vice President Joe Biden are set to campaign and hold events. Biden's rally was in Darby, Pennsylvania to a small crowd of around 20 people who were hand selected by the Biden campaign team. Everyone wore masks and were seated apart from each other to encourage social distancing.²⁰

President Trump's first rally was in Tulsa, Oklahoma on June 20th. 1 million people reportedly registered, although this was due to a social media movement (primarily on TikTok) to have as many people register as possible and mess with the President. The venue where Trump's event was to take place could hold up to 19,000 people. The President also planned to hold an event outside of the arena to an anticipated 40,000 more people. Much to the President's dismay, only 6,200 people showed up.²¹

These 6,200 people were all seated very closely together in this arena to make it seem like the arena was full for the cameras. Additionally, very few if any people were wearing masks as President Trump had said early that he believes many Americans are wearing masks not to prevent the spread of the virus, but as a message of disapproval of him as president.²² This discourages his supporters from wearing masks, as they do not want to appear to disapprove

¹⁷ Merelli, Annalisa. *There are more COVID-19 cases in some US prisons than in entire countries.* Quartz, 2020 <https://qz.com/1868445/there-are-more-covid-19-cases-in-some-us-prisons-than-in-entire-countries/>

¹⁸ Griesbach, Rebecca, Seline, Libby, and Timothy Williams. *Coronavirus Cases Rise Sharply in Prisons Even as They Plateau Nationwide.* New York Times, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/16/us/coronavirus-inmates-prisons-jails.html>

¹⁹ Flagg, Anna and Joseph Neff. *Why Jails Are So Important in the Fight Against Coronavirus.* The Marshall Project, 2020 <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2020/03/31/why-jails-are-so-important-in-the-fight-against-coronavirus>

²⁰ Lerer, Lisa. *What Joe Biden's Event Was Like.* New York Times, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/17/us/politics/joe-biden-campaign-event.html>

²¹ Haberman, Maggie and Annie Karni. *The President's Shock at the Rows of Empty Seats in Tulsa.* New York Times, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/us/politics/trump-tulsa-rally.html>

²² Sheth, Sonam. *Trump says he thinks some Americans are wearing masks to show they disapprove of him and not as a preventive measure during the pandemic.* Business Insider, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-americans-wearing-masks-show-disapproval-not-as-preventive-measure-2020-6>

of him. 8 members of Trump's teams have tested positive for the virus, 6 of which happened right before the rally during set-up; the other 2 were detected after the rally.²³

Trump's second rally was held in Phoenix, Arizona on June 23rd. Again, there was no social distancing and very few people wearing masks. The day before, June 22nd Arizona saw its highest single day increase in COVID-19 cases with 3,593.²⁴ Taking a look at Table 2 above, we see that the one of the states where Trump has held rallies (Arizona) has seen one of the highest increase in new COVID-19 cases over the past week.

These rallies are very irresponsible, especially considering that the number of new cases in the country is on the rise. If these rallies must be held, and there is no other option but to have them take place, masks must be made available and preferably made mandatory to attend in an attempt to minimise the potential spread of the virus. Of course, this is not likely to happen. Wearing masks has become a political issue in the US. Numerous photos, memes, and videos have been posted online depicting people refusing to wear masks because they believe it violates their rights as American citizens. No matter how much evidence is presented in favour of masks, and how many countries have proven masks to be effective, the political divide in the US is so great that the simple issue of having to wear a mask inside a store has become a heated debate topic.

Conclusion

After a month of improvement, the situation US has regressed. The fact that the coronavirus has become a political issue in the country does not help. Those he advocate for social distancing, wearing masks, and closing of non-essential businesses in order to curb the spread of the virus are accused of being anti-American socialist (socialism in the US is often equated to dictatorial communist regimes) oppressors. The idea of personal freedom is one of the most important for many Americans and being told to do something they do not want to do is seen as a great affront.

As the protests and riots continue, as do election campaigns, we also passed the 4th of July: American Independence Day. President Trump held his 4th of July celebration at the White House where he vowed to defeat the radical left. In addition to the *2020 Salute to America* in D.C, millions of Americans across the country celebrated at home with their friends and family once again going against the idea of social distancing.

The mass public gatherings are a large reason the number of cases in the US is on the rise again. May was a great month for the country in recovering from the virus, but at the end of May the protests started. The combination of the protests with the untimely reopening in a number of states, has led to the situation has reverting to what it was like pre-May and the large gatherings continue as if there was no pandemic at all.

Recommendations

- Follow through with Attorney General Barr's April request to expand which prisoners qualify for early release. Additionally, release those being held in jail that have not yet

²³ Managan, Dan. *Two Trump campaign staffers who attended Tulsa rally test positive for coronavirus*. CNBC, 2020 <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/22/coronavirus-2-more-trump-campaign-rally-staffers-test-positive-for-covid-19.html>

²⁴ Higgins-Dunn, Noah. *Arizona reports record single-day increase in coronavirus cases ahead of Trump's visit*. CNBC, 2020 <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/23/arizona-reports-record-single-day-increase-in-coronavirus-cases-ahead-of-trumps-visit.html>

been convicted of a crime but could not afford to pay bail. This will help reduce the spread of coronavirus through prisons and jails.

- States should make masks mandatory. Masks have been proven to work in numerous countries, and the idea that wearing a mask is some sort of political statement is simply not true.
- Do not slow down testing. With the increase in large gatherings in the form of protests, riots, and President Trump's election campaign rallies, testing is needed just as much now as ever. Ignoring the problem does not make it go away



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