

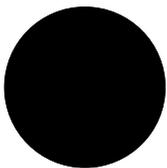
Biden urged to roll back COVID restrictions after FOUR Dem governors announced end to school masking

Many criticize calculations for not distinguishing between those who go to the hospital for COVID and those at the hospital for other reasons who test positive

The White House walked back on criticism of Democratic governors on Tuesday by claiming it's up to the states to decide their mask mandates for schools after refusing to endorse cases of blue state leaders lifting the rules.

'These states, I think it's important to note, they still allow for decisions to be made by local school districts,' President Joe Biden's Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters during her daily briefing.

'Our hope,' she continued, 'is that states' leaders will look at the science and data about what's going on. They'll make decisions about local school districts. Local school districts have always made these decisions. That remains the case.'



Districts, however, have not always held the power as state-wide mandates

required schools to keep their staff and students masked.

When asked for a timeline regarding new mask guidance, Psaki deflected to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

'You'll have to ask the CDC,' she said. 'The CDC moves at the pace of data and science.'

'I would note that our goal remains continuing to ensure that there is guidance that helps school districts stay open,' Psaki added.

The comments on Tuesday came after Psaki refused during Monday's briefing to endorse Democratic governors who announced they were lifting mask mandates for students, teachers and school staff amid massive case decreases.

COVID cases are continuing to fall in the U.S. – down 43 per cent over the past seven days – as the country starts to move past the Omicron surge. The nation is recording 267,765 cases per day, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, a far drop from the 469,770 cases a week ago.

The falling cases continue a near-month-long trend of COVID cases plummeting after peaking in mid-January. When Omicron first made its way to the U.S. it caused cases to explode nationwide with daily cases reaching a peak of around 800,000 per day on January 15.

Like it did in other countries, though, the variant quickly ran out of steam. Cases have fallen week-over-week for the past three weeks. The daily case total is now nearing the highs of around 250,000 per day set in last year's surge and is expected to fall even further.

Daily death totals often lag behind cases by a few weeks. The country is averaging 2,529 deaths per day, around even to the 2,452 average last

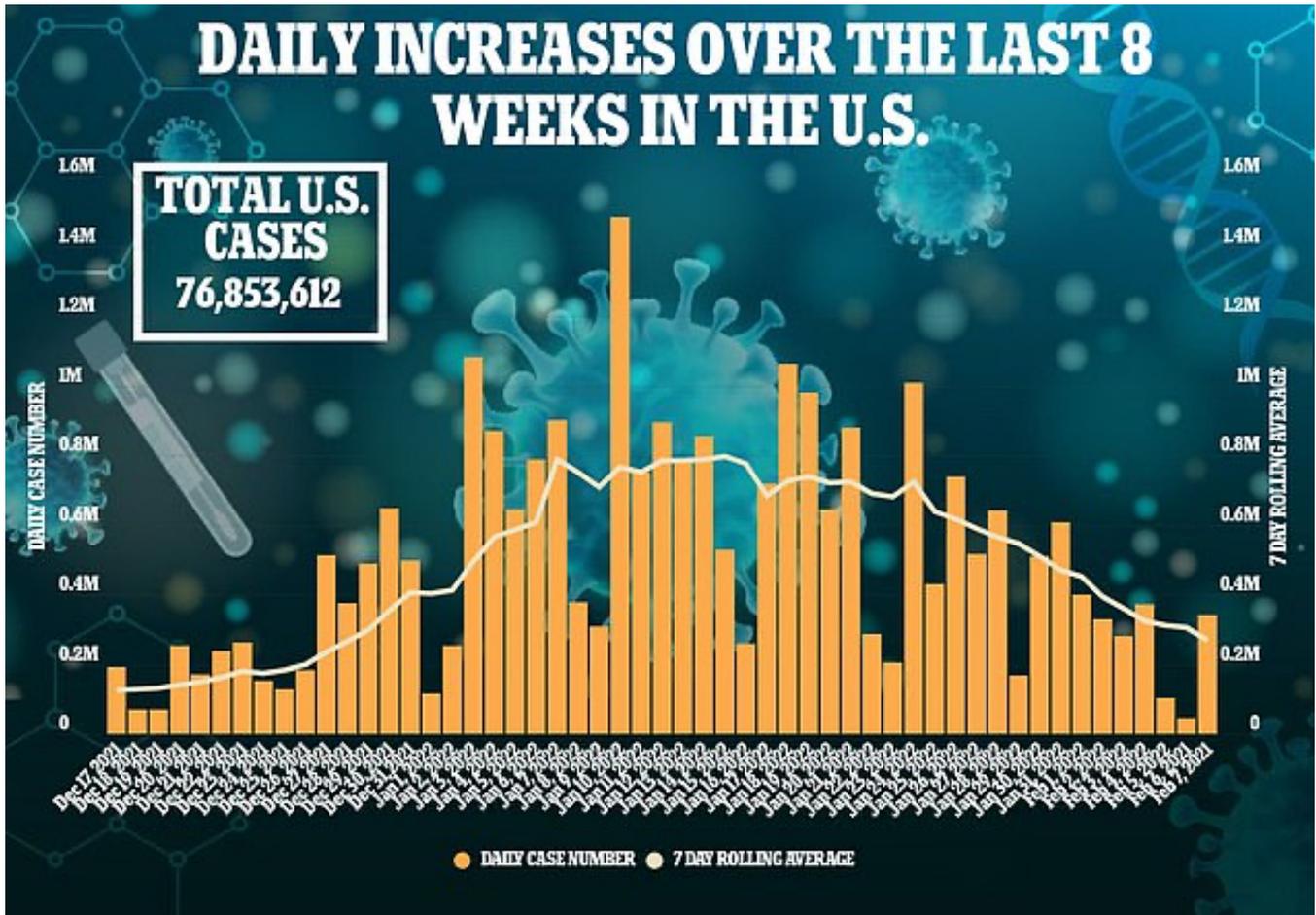
week.

Falling cases means that a sharp drop in deaths could occur in the near future, as well.

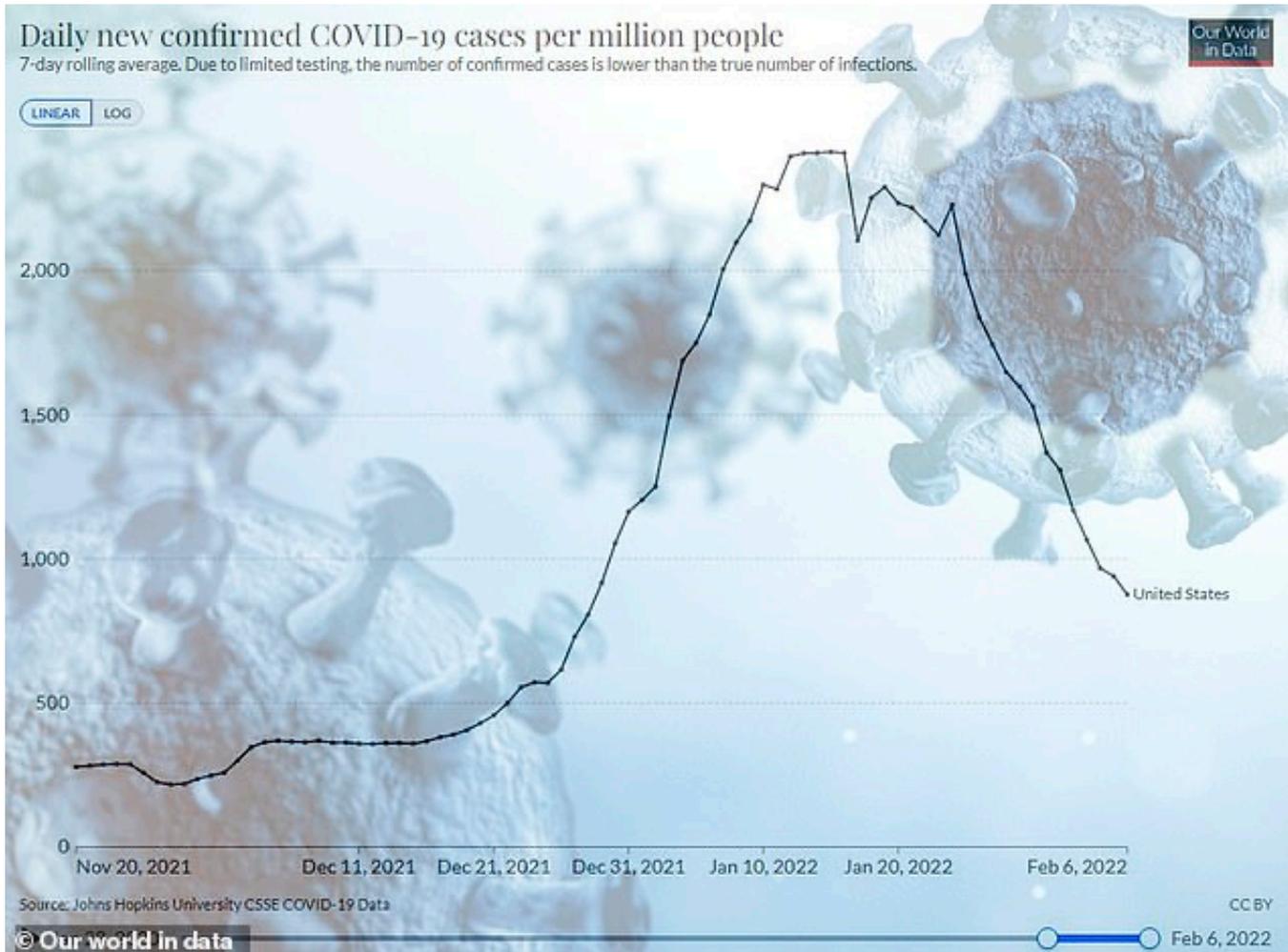
On Monday governors from Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey and Oregon all announced plans to phase out statewide school mask mandates – instead deciding to leave it up to the individual districts.



White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki on Tuesday had to walk back on her previous criticism of Democratic governors lifting mask mandates in schools after four did so on Monday. 'Our hope is that states' leaders will look at the science and data about what's going on. They'll make decisions about local school districts. Local school districts have always made these decisions. That remains the case,' she said in her briefing



President Joe Biden is facing increased calls for a return to normalcy from COVID-19 as even Democratic leaders lift restrictions as case rates continue to plummet



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House Democratic Caucus Chairman Hakeem Jeffries confusingly credited Biden for Democratic leaders lifting the mandates despite Psaki's comments the day prior.

'Job creation is up, wages are up, unemployment is down and the Omicron variant is in retreat,' Jeffries said during a briefing Tuesday.

'And that's not by accident,' he continued, 'that's because under President Biden's leadership, a public health infrastructure was put into place – beginning with the American Rescue Plan, without a single Republican vote,

to ensure that we can do everything possible to crush the virus, and that is what has been happening.'

The comments from Jeffries, who served as a representative in New York, came after reports emerged Tuesday that the state's Governor Kathy Hochul will renew the mask mandates for students and teachers.

It also comes as Biden faces increased calls for a return to normalcy from COVID-19.

The shift for in-school mask mandates in four Democrat-led states has put pressure on other blue states to follow suit.

The head of the nation's largest teachers union said Tuesday that a mask rollback should be dependent on student vaccination rates in certain states or districts.

'At what point do we just say, 'Okay, it's time to get rid of the masks?'' Morning Joe host Willie Geist asked. 'Isn't there enough science available already?'

'The real question becomes, how can we make sure people can plan for it?' American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten replied.

'And what are the measures so everybody knows — so it doesn't feel like it's based upon politics, it feels like it's based upon making sure there is no transmission in school?'

President Biden's Surgeon General Vivek Murthy insisted masks remain a 'helpful tool' to reduce spread of coronavirus. He specifically told Congress on Tuesday that schools with mask requirements have less instances of closures due to COVID cases.

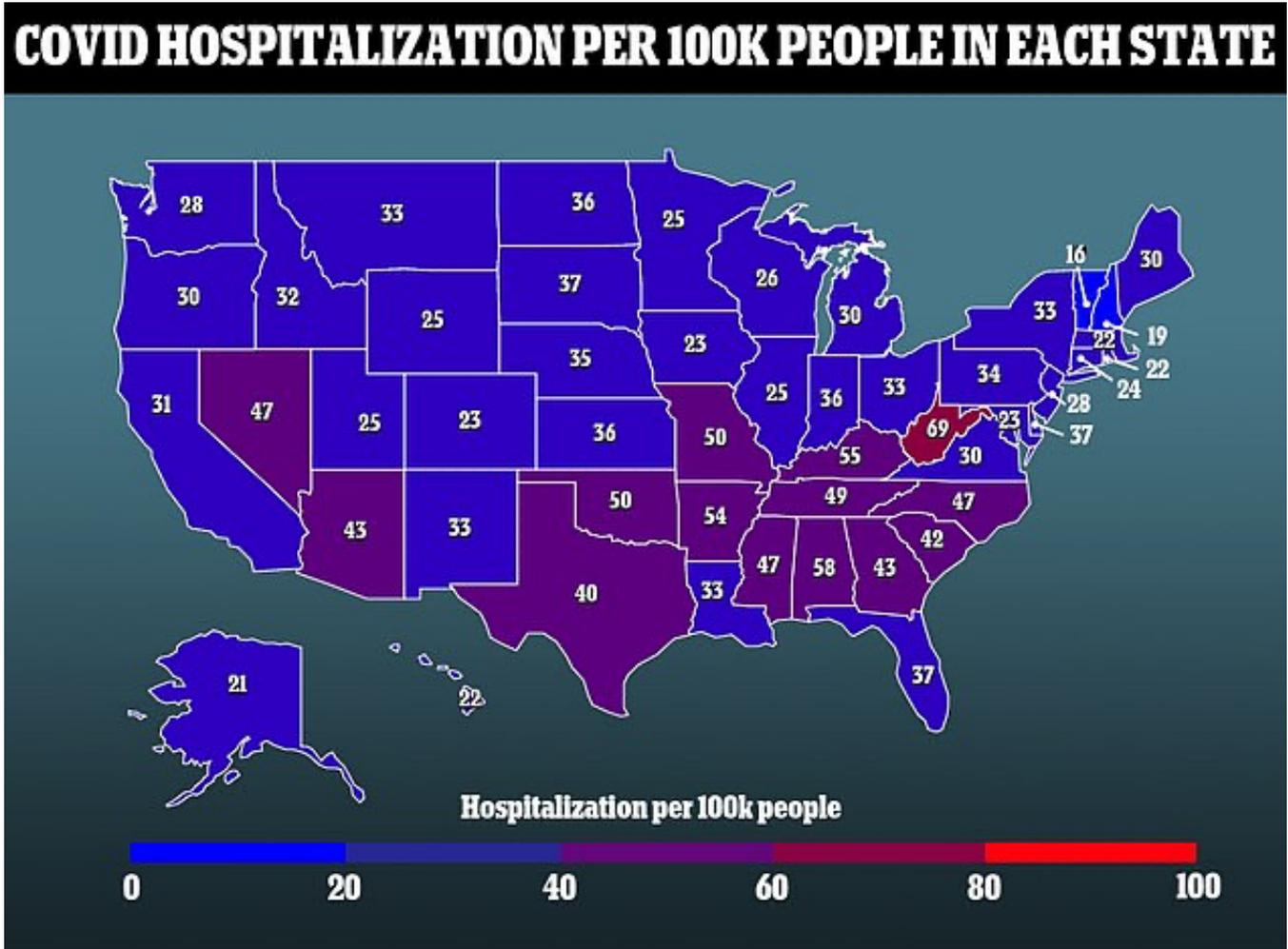
'Do parents, in an ideal setting, want their kids in masks? No parent would want a mask if it's not needed,' Murthy continued during an appearance before the Senate Finance Committee to discuss mental health in children and teens especially in the pandemic.

'I think our goal should be to get to a place where we can pull back on these types of restrictions,' he said.

The administration is also trying to get a more accurate read on [coronavirus](#) hospitalizations as Biden's team increasingly relies on these figures rather than case counts to determine its response to the pandemic and the effectiveness of vaccines.

A Health and Human Service (HHS) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) task force of scientists and data specialists are working with hospitals to improve reporting on COVID-19 cases and its impact, [according to Politico](#).

The recalculation of hospitalizations comes after controversy ensued over how the country is counting the continued severity of the nearly two-year pandemic when it comes to hospital counts.



The moves also comes as the administration put together a task force to recalculate the number of hospitalizations after controversy ensued over how the country is counting the continued severity of the nearly two-year pandemic. Many slam calculations for not distinguishing between those who go to the hospital for COVID-19 treatment and those who go to the hospital for other reasons but test positive for the disease when there









Four Democrat governors have announced they will lift their state's in-school mask mandates. New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy (top left) said he'll rescind his order on March 7; Delaware Governor John Carney (bottom right) announced his state's school mandates will expire March 31; Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont (bottom left) said his statewide mask mandate in schools and childcare centers will end on February 28; and Oregon Governor Kate Brown (top right) said her state's indoor and school-wide mandate will end March 31

The White House, [according to a recent CNN report](#), is 'thinking about' a plan for post-pandemic America, but the White House was unwilling on Monday to endorse Democratic governors de-masking plans for schools.

New Jersey's mask rule change has put pressure on neighboring New York City Mayor Eric Adams and New York Governor Kathy Hochul to lift

mandates on students and teachers.

New York's Health Commissioner Mary Bassett said Tuesday that 'no decision' has been made on when school mask mandates will end in the state.

Meanwhile, Democratic New York State Senator John Liu said it's getting hard to explain the continuing COVID-related restrictions to constituents when 'neighboring states are starting to lift their mask mandates.'

GOP Conference Chairwoman Representative Elise Stefanik from New York tweeted Monday: 'End the mask mandates – for New York's businesses AND schools. But Governor Hochul still continues to refuse to unmask our kids.'

A Long Island judge ruled last month against Hochul's statewide mask mandate because it amounted to 'a law that was promulgated and enacted unlawfully by an Executive branch state agency, and therefore void and unenforceable as a matter of law.'

The decision was immediately stayed when New York's Department of Health filed an appeal.

New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy said he'll rescind his controversial statewide order on March 7 now that only 1 per cent of students were actively testing positive for coronavirus.

Delaware Governor John Carney announced the universal indoor mask mandate will end Friday and school mandates will expire March 31;

How school mask mandates vary state-by-state

School mask mandates, like other pandemic restrictions, vary by state.

School mask mandates are in effect in California, DC, Hawaii, Illinois, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island and Washington.

Last month, Massachusetts extended its mandate through February. It remains unclear if the mandate will be extended again.

New York Gov. Hochul is expected to

Connecticut Governor Ned Lamont said his statewide mask mandate in schools and childcare centers will end on February 28; and Oregon Governor Kate Brown said her state's indoor and school-wide mandate will end March 31.

California Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom said Monday his state will lift its indoor mask mandate for vaccinated individuals next week.

'New Jersey and Connecticut are now ending school mask mandates. We're winning this fight,' South Carolina Representative Ralph Norman tweeted on Monday.

New York Representative Lee Zeldin also praised the move on Monday by tweeting: 'The month-long delay is absurd, but [Governor Murphy] ending NJ's school mask mandate is good.'

'The CDC recommends AGAINST wearing the cloth masks most kids have on, COVID is plummeting, & kids are at way lower risk for serious COVID illness. Enough! NY's mandate must also be lifted NOW!' he added.

Pressure is almost mounting for Illinois to end the classroom mandates.

extend the school mask mandate on February 9. It was set to expire later in the month.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy announced February 7 that his state's mandate will be lifted on March 7.

Delaware Gov. John Carney made a similar announcement February 7, saying the state's school mask mandate will lift March 31. He also said the general statewide indoor masks order will end on February 11.

Connecticut is set to end its statewide mask mandate on February 28.

Maryland, which still has a school mask mandate in effect, now allows local districts to remove masks if 80 percent of students and staff at a single school are fully vaccinated or 80 percent of the district's community population is fully vaccinated.

If neither of the vaccination thresholds are met, a local district can also choose to lift universal masking when the county or jurisdiction has reached 14 days of moderate or low transmission of COVID-19.

Louisiana and Pennsylvania have lifted their statewide school mandates.

Seven states - Arizona, Florida, Montana, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas and Utah - currently has legislation in effect banning school mask mandates.

Source: Center for Dignity in Healthcare for People with Disabilities, updated Feb. 8, 2022

Frustrated Chicago-area students walked out of school Monday after being told they were required to wear masks to attend class after an Illinois judge issued a temporary restraining order against the governor's statewide school mask mandate.

The maskless Vernon Hills High School students were denied entry into classrooms and escorted into the gymnasium, where they were instructed to either mask up, leave school and have a parent report the absence, or work on classwork isolated in the gym.

Video of the protest shows a throng of students exiting the gym before walking out the school's front doors where they are met with applause and positive remarks including: 'Good job, way to stand up for yourselves.'

The students, who were given a mental health day, are angered by the treatment, with one telling The Kerr Report: 'I've been denied access to education.'

Many Republican-led states have already lifted school masking mandates and others have even gone as far as to ban such rules being imposed on students, teachers and staff.

Case rates have been plummeting nationwide after the massive spike over the holidays with the emergence of the highly-contagious, but much less severe Omicron variant.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki signaled Monday that the White House does not approve of governors ending mask mandates for school children within their states.

'We recommend masking in schools. That is the recommendation from the CDC,' Psaki said during her daily briefing when asked about the decision

from Governors Phil Murphy and John Carney.

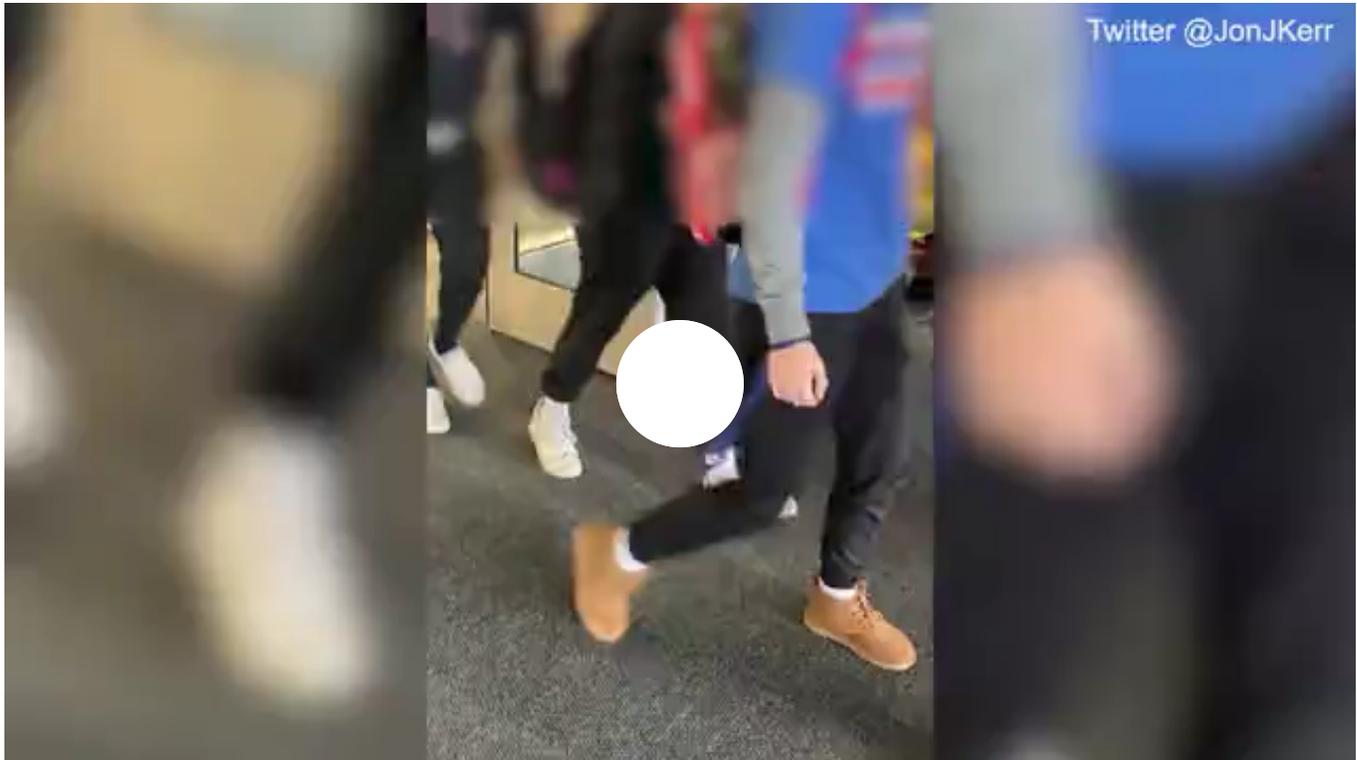


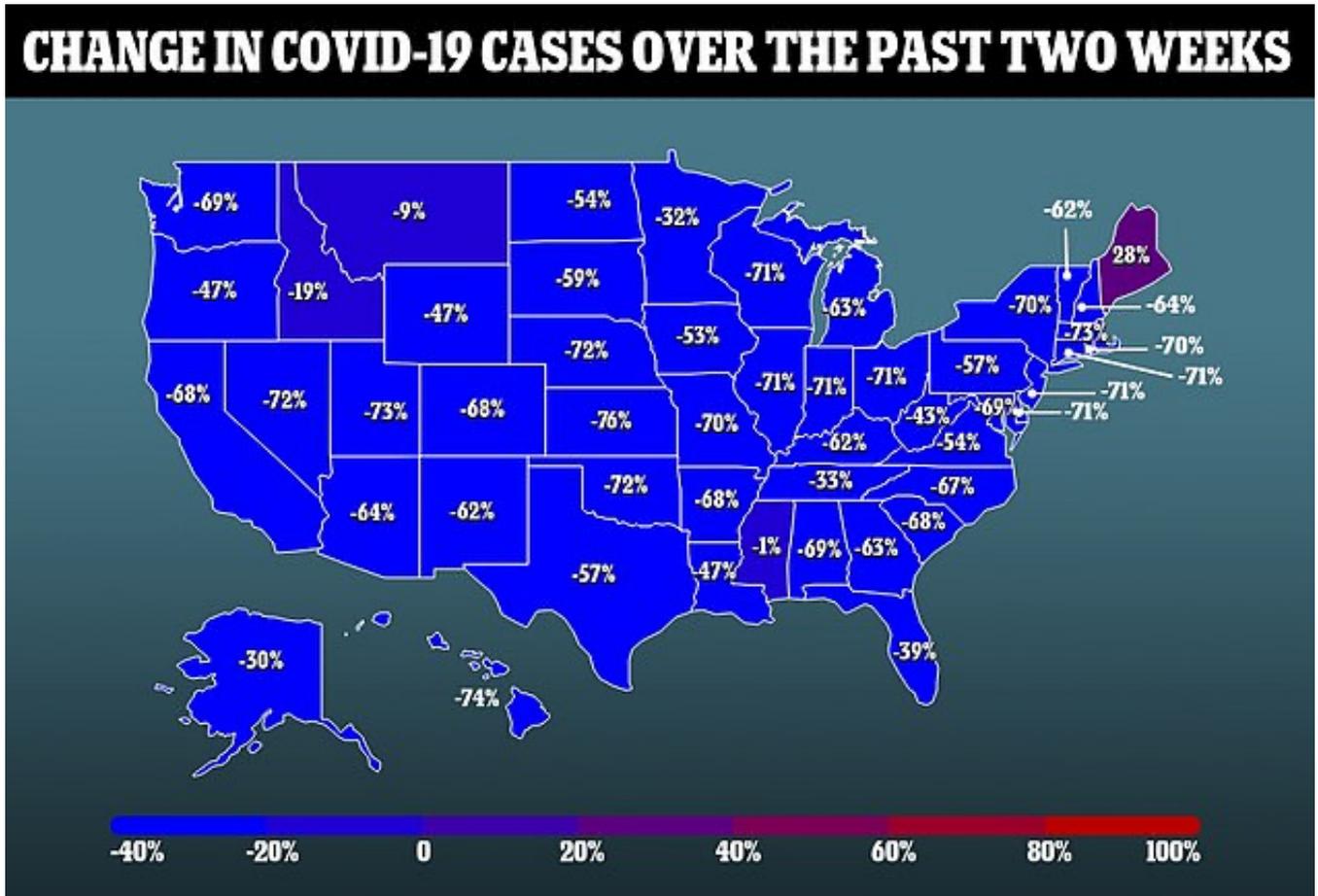
Frustrated Vernon Hills High School students walked out of their Chicago-area school Monday after being told they were required to wear masks to attend class

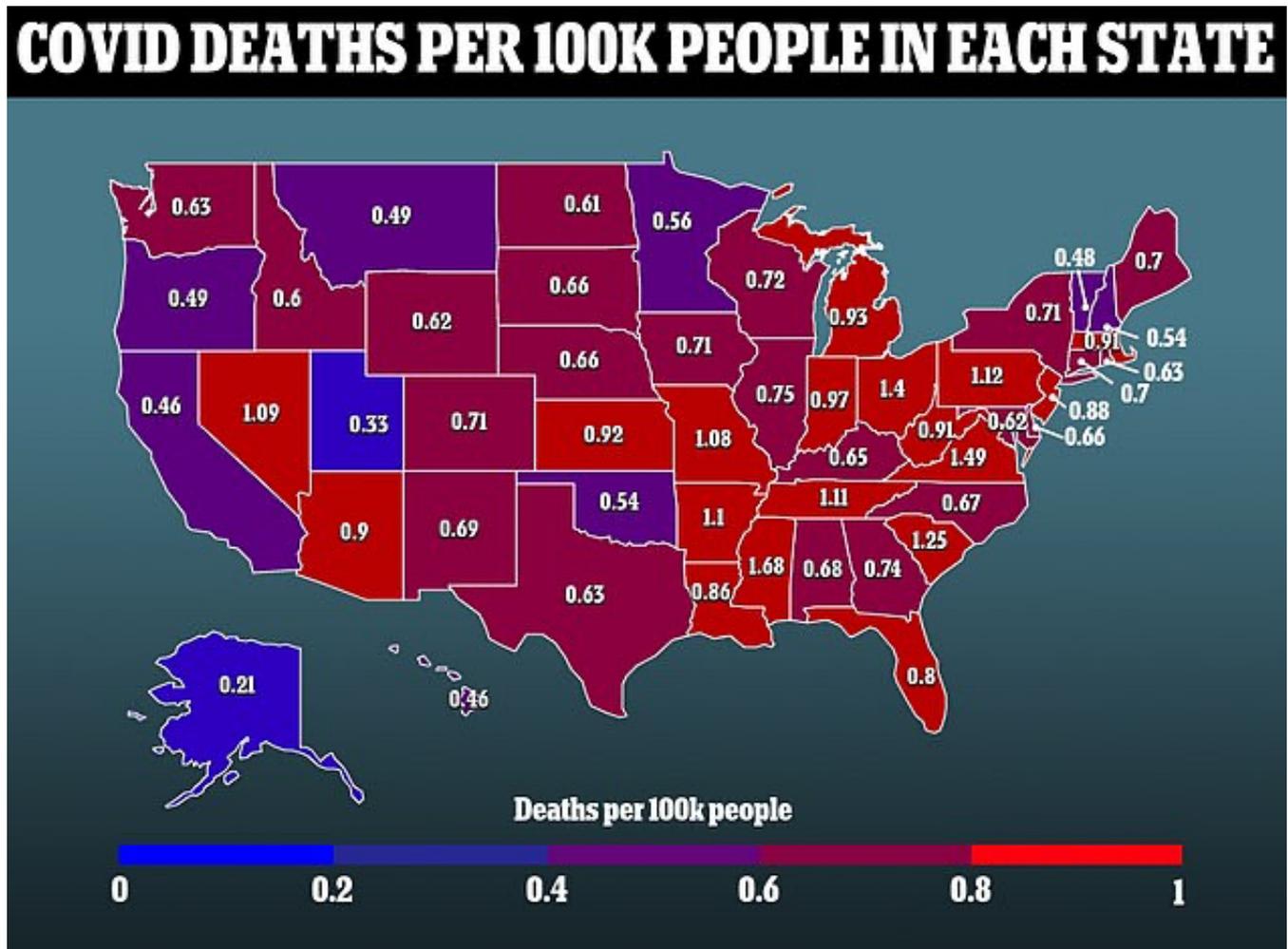


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Chicago school kids walk out over Governor's mask mandate







Connecticut and Oregon's decisions came later in the day Monday.

Still, the press secretary insisted that it is 'up to schools' whether or not they implement a mask requirement.

'Our advice to every school district is to abide by public health guidelines. It continues to be at this point that the CDC is advising that masks can delay or reduce transmission. There are also a number of other mitigation measures that we've put in place but that continues to be CDC guidance. it's always been up to local school districts to determine how they implement,' she continued.

Asked what it meant that a Democratic governor 'would get ahead of the medical experts,' Psaki said: 'It's always been up to school districts. That's

always been our point of view and that's always been our policy from here. Our policy from the federal government is to continue to advise everybody to abide by public health guidelines.'

'We certainly understand and have seen in polling that the public is tired of COVID. We understand that. So are we.'

Psaki spoke before a briefing room packed with masked-up reporters, back to full capacity for the first time since the White House Correspondents' Association reduced the number of journalists allowed in to only 14 amid the Omicron surge.



The White House on Monday refused to endorse the Democrat governors' latest moves to end masking in the classroom. 'We recommend masking in schools. That is the recommendation from the CDC,' Press Secretary Jen Psaki said in her daily briefing Monday (pictured)

Landmark study says children DO

New Jersey's statewide mandate for masks in schools to end March 7, while Delaware's indoor mask mandate for both public and private K-12 schools will end March 31.

Connecticut's school mask mandate will lift the soonest - February 28.

School districts in New Jersey will still be allowed to implement their own mask mandates to control any spike in infection.

The three governors' decisions, which came within hours of each other on Monday, are a sign that life in the United State can soon return to normal as cases continue to plummet nationwide.

The Garden State was one of the hardest struck states by the [Omicron](#) variant when it erupted along the east coast late last year. New Jersey saw its cases jump sevenfold in a matter of weeks in December, before peaking at around 32,000 cases per day. Infections have plummeted since, though, and the state is currently averaging 3,000 per day.

With cases starting to fall - the 305,944

find it more difficult than adults to recognize people wearing masks - and it could affect their ability to make friends

Parents and medical experts are demanding that US schools stop forcing children to wear 'ineffective' face masks as COVID-19 positivity rates continue to plummet and studies have shown mask mandates are detrimental to psychosocial health and academic success.

York University in the UK published a new study showing masks make it difficult for children to recognize faces and, in turn, could affect their ability to socialize and make friends, a fear that is echoed by parents worldwide.

The study comes as both New Jersey and Delaware announced the scrapping of state-wide mask mandates in schools. However, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki on Monday - when data showed COVID case numbers had again dropped 33% nationwide week-on-week - reiterated the CDC is still recommending universal masking in school and that 'still remains our recommendation'.

'It's always been up to school districts. That's always been our point of view and always been our policy from here,' she said.

Parents, including those who have previously toed the line on masking their children at school, are increasingly voicing their concerns about the detrimental impact masks have on their children and experts are joining the chorus.

The US has been accused of clinging to restrictions put in place at the height of the pandemic while other countries scale back mandates on masks and vaccine passports

infections recorded every day are a far fall from the peak of 800,000 cases per day reached in mid-January - the chorus of health officials and experts calling for mask and vaccine mandates to end is only growing.

Throughout the next two years, mandates have been enacted and receded depending on the Covid situation in many states. Dr Scott Gottlieb, former director of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and current board member at Pfizer, told [CNBC's Squawk Box](#) Monday morning that this kind of ebbing and flowing on mandates is the correct way to handle the pandemic.

'We should have always defined these kinds of mitigations as things we implement to deal with epidemic peaks,' Gottlieb said.

'The problem is they became frozen, they became provisions that lasted in perpetuity. That's when you lost the support of the population.'

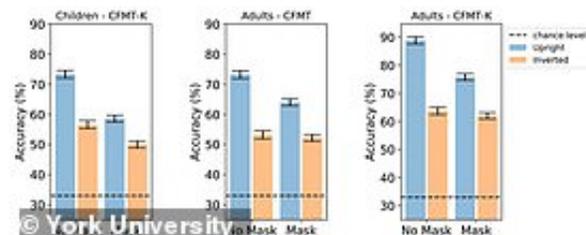
Gottlieb cites the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lifting indoor mask recommendations for fully vaccinated people last year. The move was maligned by some, even the nation's top infectious disease expert

to reflect the dropping infection rate.

Now, many parents are rallying their districts and demanding school leaders to follow the science, pointing to data that show there is 'a minimal reduction in COVID transmission with masks in schools' and very few deaths.

They also fear the longer term consequences of the prolonged mask mandates on their children, who they say are taking longer to learn and are struggling to develop empathy because they can't see their peers' facial expressions.

Tom Hadziyianis, the father of a teenage boy in Long Island, New York, told DailyMail.com on Monday that he feels that the mandates are less about the safety of the schoolchildren but instead seem to be administrators 'exercising power just to exercise it.'



The results showed that children had about a 20 percent impairment rate for recognizing masked faces. For comparison, previous research has shown that adults have about a 15 percent impairment rate

in Dr Anthony Fauci, last year.

Some even blamed the lifting of masks for the summer Delta variant-fueled surge that erupted last year. Covid thrives in summer and winter months and the highly infectious strain would likely have caused a surge anyways.

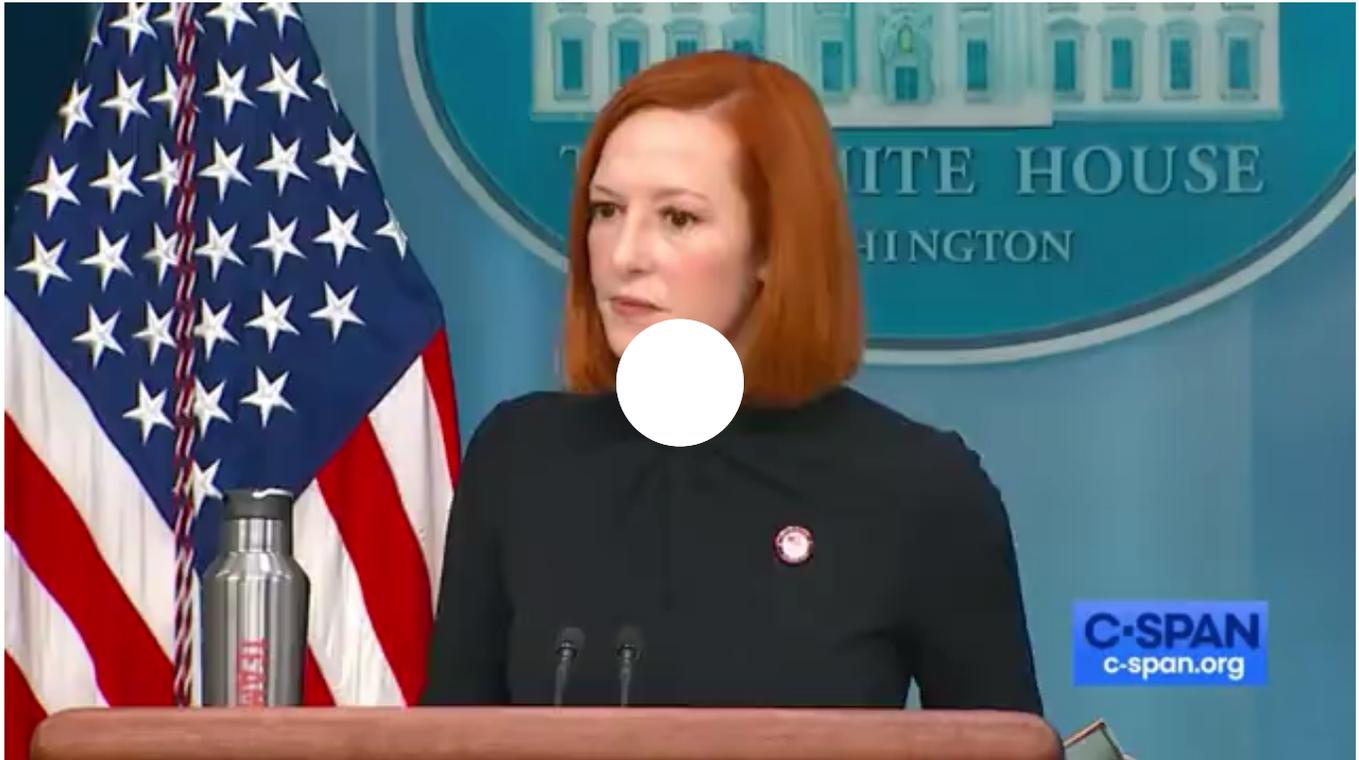
'The problem is going to be the pushback from the public health community - there is this perception the reason we had a delta surge last summer was because the CDC came out and said you didn't need to wear masks anymore. The two things were unrelated,' the former FDA chief added.

The move made by Murphy comes as calls for pandemic-related mandates to be dropped in the U.S. amid plummeting cases. While many of these restrictions are set at the state or county level, the CDC guidance usually advises these decisions. The CDC has been hesitant to change to change guidelines, though.

Meanwhile, parents and medical experts are demanding that US schools stop forcing children to wear face masks as COVID-19 positivity rates continue to decline and as studies have shown mask mandates are detrimental to psychosocial health and academic success.

York University in the UK released a new study revealing masks are making it difficult for children to recognize faces and, in turn, could affect their ability to socialize and make friends, a fear that is echoed by parents worldwide.

Psaki: Still our recommendation that kids wear masks in school



Psaki insisted that it is still Biden's advice that schools require children to wear masks

'They can never see their friends smile. They can never see their friends frown!' Stephanie Avanesian, a concerned Los Angeles mother, told [NPR](#). 'They're not developing empathy. It's taken six months for my fifth-grader to make friends because it's so hard to tell what people are doing.'

Tom Hadziyianis, a father of a high schooler on Long Island in New York, told DailyMail.com his son complains that masks negatively impact the learning environment.

'My son explained how, you're in the classroom and the desire to participate in discussion is stifled. It's uncomfortable to speak with a mask on,' he said. 'You have to constantly repeat what you're saying. Other students can't hear you and you can't hear them.'

The complaints from many parents, including those who have previously toed the line on masking, come as New Jersey and Delaware announced they will scrap their state mandates.

Last Wednesday, Dr Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, mentioned that Americans are 'anxious' to return to 'normal', but hospitalization and death data prevented her from pulling the trigger just yet.

'We really do have look to our hospitalization rates, and our death rates, to look to when it's time to lift some of these mitigation efforts,' she said.

Covid hospitalizations are own 23 percent over the past two weeks, with 121,600 virus-positive people receiving treatment every day.

Smell and taste-loss expert: Covid loss of smell symptom is common



The figure is misleading, though, since many people who are receiving treatment for another condition and test positive while present at the hospital are added to the tally.

Last month, Massachusetts health officials revealed that around half of the state's Covid hospitalization total was made up by people who were receiving treatment for something else.

Deaths, a metric that often lags a few weeks behind cases, have begun to stagnate as well. Daily deaths in the U.S. have steadied around 2,400 a day after peaking at the start of the month at over 2,500. The current average of 2,460 nearly the same as the 2,452 total last week.

European governments are only building pressure upon American officials by lifting measures in their own nations. Swedish Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson announced last week that her country would 'open' on February 9, with all pandemic related measures to be lifted soon.

'The pandemic is not over but has entered a totally new phase,' Andersson said during a news briefing Thursday morning.

Both Denmark and the UK, both nations that were struck hard and fast by the Omicron variant and the end of last year have opted to lift all pandemic related measures as well and declare the countries 'open' once again. Norway and Switzerland have both laid out reopening plans as well.

In the UK in particular, cases are down six percent over the past week, down to under 90,000 per day after peaking at over 180,000 per day in early January.

English officials are even planning on scrapping daily data collecting all together in the near future, as the figures may no longer be necessary in the nation as cases and deaths are expected to fall to extremely low numbers.

Squawk Box 

@SquawkCNBC



"The problem is going to be the pushback from the public health community--there is this perception the reason we had a delta surge last summer was because the CDC came out and said you didn't need to wear masks anymore. The two things were unrelated," says [@ScottGottliebMD](#).

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See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

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Covid cases are dropping rapidly among all the east coast states that were struck hard by the virus at the end of 2021, not just New Jersey.

Its neighbor, New York, was also slammed by Omicron in December and New York City emerged as a global hotspot for the variant. Daily cases erupted, jumping ten-fold, but have plummeted since their peak. The Empire state has recorded a 69 percent drop in Covid cases over the past two weeks.

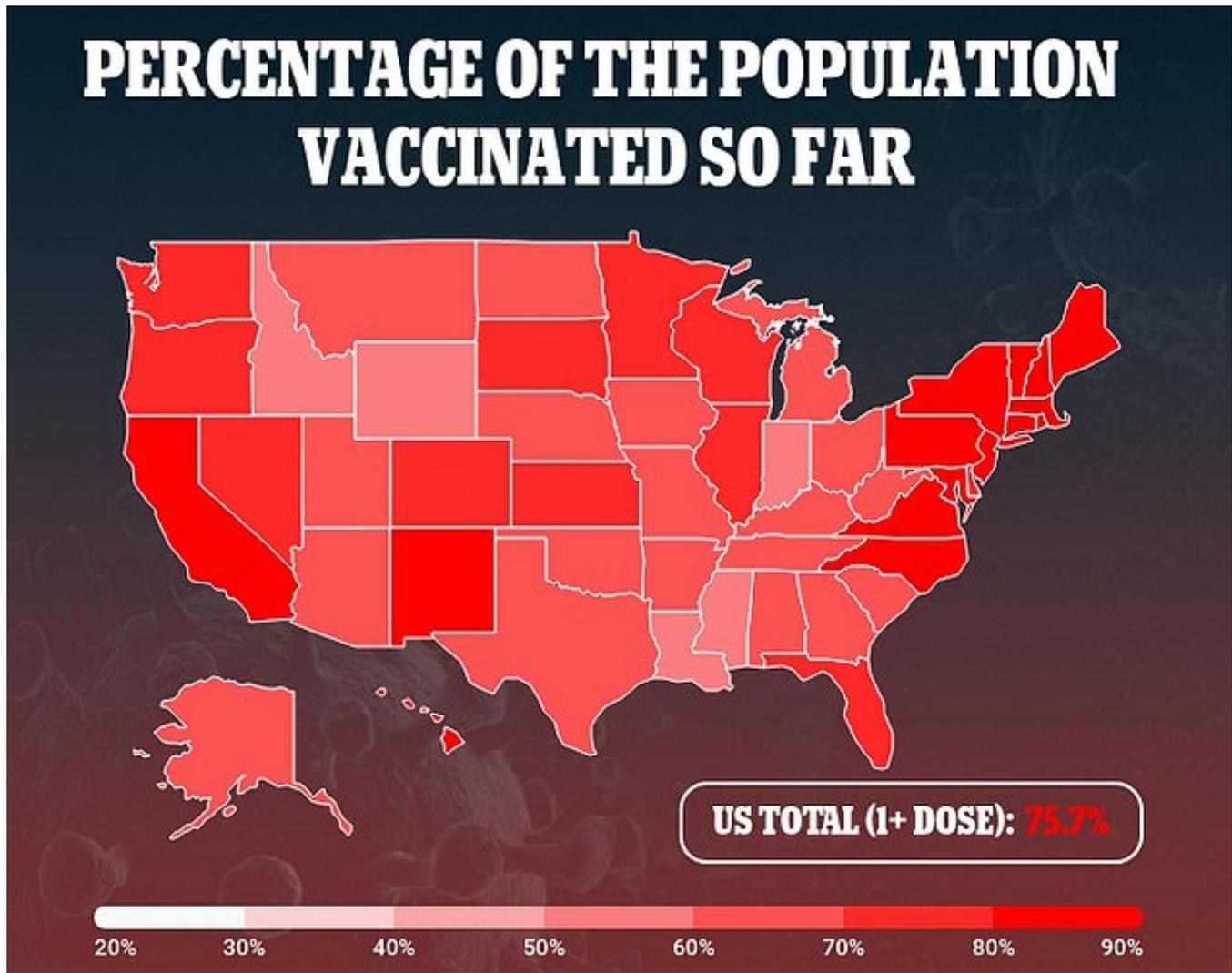
The plummeting of cases has spread beyond just the east coast, though. Only two states in the U.S. are recording increasing cases over the past two weeks - Maine and Montana. Maine is among the states with the lowest infection rates, though, so even small changes in case rates will have a massive effect on its case change rate.

Cases have slashed in half over the past two weeks in 38 of the 50 states. At some points in January, every single state was doubling its two-week case totals.

Wisconsin, which was the national leader in infection rate at one point last month, has experienced the largest decline in cases. The Badger state is averaging 78 cases per every 100,000 residents, a 79 percent drop over the past two weeks.

Also in the Midwest, Ohio (72 percent decrease over the past two weeks) and Illinois (67 percent) are among the leaders in case drops as well.

Another state that led the nation in infection rate for parts of January is experiencing a massive dip in cases as well, with Rhode Island recording a 74 percent drop over the past two weeks. Other nearby northeastern states like Delaware (72 percent), Maryland (71 percent), Massachusetts (71 percent) and Connecticut (70 percent) are among the leaders in daily case drops as well.



Alaska is still the nationwide leader in infection rate, with 243 of every 100,000 residents testing positive for the virus every day. No other state is recording more than 200 cases for every 100,000 members of the population.

Despite dropping cases overall, many southern states with lower vaccination rates are still leaders in infection rate. Mississippi, which has only fully vaccinated 50 percent of the population, and is currently recording 164 new daily cases for every 100,000 residents. The Magnolia state also is suffering the worst mortality rate in America, with 2.01 daily deaths per every 100,000 residents - by far the most of any state.

Other southern states like Tennessee (162 deaths per 100,000 residents), Kentucky (160), West Virginia (146), South Carolina (144) and North Carolina (132) are among the leaders as well.

Along with Mississippi, states with the lowest vaccination rates in America are topping the mortality charts as well.

South Carolina, with a 55 percent vaccination rate, is recording the second highest mortality rate with 1.46 of every 100,000 residents dying from Covid daily. Other nearby states like Tennessee (53 percent vaccination rate; 1.11 deaths per 100,000 residents) and Missouri (55 percent; 1.08). Other state with low vaccination rates like Ohio (57 percent; 1.4) and Nevada (59 percent; 1.07) are among the leaders as well.

