

Where, and how, are schools reopening in the United States?

This report provides a high-level overview of shifts in school closures policies in 50 US states, Washington D.C., and the Virgin Islands using data from the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker.

Indicator	C1 - School Closures
Country	United States
Date Range	September 15 to September 30
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Executive summary

As the US emerges as an epidemiological and political focal point of the COVID-19 pandemic, the beginning of fall K-12 and university school years marks an important next stage in US COVID-19 policy. This report summarizes OxCGRT data gathered on US states, DC, and the US Virgin Islands to assess trends in school reopenings from September 15-30. Key findings include:

- School reopening levels continued to see convergence among states in the second half of September, with little changes in policy across states.
- Targeted required closures at some levels (2T) remain the most common policy during the period of September 15-30.
- 5 states further reduced school-related containment policies in September, with the states scattered across the West, Midwest, and Northeast.

These preliminary findings are highly relevant as October school reopenings continue in the US and around the world. This policy note is the last in a series of biweekly publications tracking school reopenings

Fall School Reopenings by State



Figure 1. September 15 and September 30 OxCGRT school closure policy levels

Context

A decentralized education system

US education is highly decentralized, with control resting primarily with states and local districts [1]. Schools are stratified by K-12 levels covering ages 5-18, and higher education. Schools are further divided by public (tax-funded) or private (tuition-funded) status, with students at all levels more commonly attending public institutions [2]. Universities are more autonomous than K-12 school districts, though public universities especially are subject to state oversight [3]. The US school year generally begins in August/September with a spring break in March and summer break beginning May/June. Summer courses do take place, though only a small portion of students attend.

August reopenings concentrated in the South and West, with September reopenings seeing more convergence

August reopenings were concentrated in the Southern and Western US, with wide regional variations partially due to typical features of school reopening dates. Notably, the 20 states that experienced school stringency reductions from August 1 to August 22 accounted for less than half the US population (45%) but more than half of August's new cases (55%). Universities led August reopenings, with almost all states reporting universities as holding some in-person instruction. As a consequence of this earlier opening period and university-specific features such as the clustering of students on and off campus, some universities experienced a cycle of reopening, COVID-19 outbreaks, and closures earlier on than have K-12 levels.

Reopenings in the first half of September saw more convergence among states than the variations observed in August. K-12 school opening policies were the driving force in the decrease in the school reopening policy stringency, with 10 states experiencing school stringency reductions between September 1 and September 15. In addition to school reopenings, universities continued to generate interest with campus reopenings leading to COVID-19 clusters which subsequently led to universities closing again.

Ongoing policy and health debates

The second half of September saw specific debates about school reopenings concerning the reporting methods of COVID-19 cases, feasibility of campus protocols to mitigate cases, college student behavior on and off campus, and delaying college sport seasons. Parents of students attending in-person classes at local school districts have urged school boards to increase transparency about cases among the student body. Reporting data about cases varies across districts and testing for young children may not be accessible in some areas [4]. Varying degrees of transparency in reporting cases also applies to universities and colleges—some started to track campus outbreaks as early as March while others began in September. By the end of September, more than thirty-five (35) colleges had reported at least 1,000 cases since the start of the pandemic, of which more than 42,000 new cases have been reported in September alone [5]. The OxCGRT database recorded several policies and actions intended to address these

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concerns, such as South Carolina's Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) reporting weekly updates of COVID-19 cases among public schools, and the Ohio Department of health publishing a school case dashboard [6].

Colleges and universities establish their own rules and protocols regarding reopening campus and classes during the global pandemic. Aside from university responses, student behavior off campus (i.e. going to bars, parties, and socializing in large groups) has posed an ongoing challenge for higher education institutions. In late September, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) stated that high COVID-19 transmission among college-aged adults is likely leading to higher transmission within their wider communities [7].

Another critical debate among colleges and universities is whether to reverse course on decisions to halt or postpone college sports for the semester. One significant expression of this came from the Big Ten conference, which faced pressure from the White House [8] to restart college football and which faced potential steep financial losses worth billions of dollars if the season was paused or canceled completely. The lost revenue would likely be acutely felt among the college town economies. The Big Ten's fourteen member universities and those in other Power Five networks, such as the Southeastern Conference, are now set to begin fall sports in October as usual, albeit with more rigorous health and testing protocols for COVID-19 [9].

Little change in policy stringency in second half of September

From September 15 to 30, 5 states showed a reduction in OxCGRT's 4-point ordinal school closure indicator (C1), with 4 experiencing an ordinal reduction valued at one or more (see appendix for further explanation of calculations). Within the 52 subnational jurisdictions, the most commonly coded level was of targeted, required closures at some levels, with the number of states reporting

this code decreasing from 30 to 29. The majority of states retained the same policy stringency level throughout the period of September 15-30. On September 30, six states (Arkansas, Florida, Montana, Nebraska, South Dakota, and West Virginia) had reached the lowest identified level of stringency, with no restrictions on school openings.

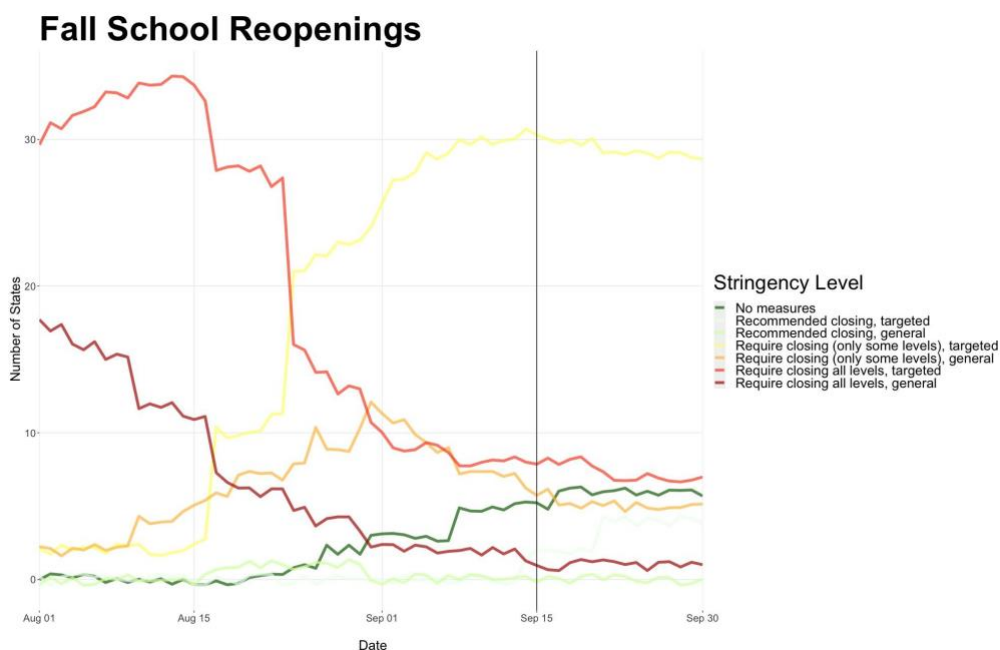


Figure 2. OxCGRT school closure policy levels over time

There continues to be variation within coded levels, with some states coding at similar levels nonetheless varying significantly in their methods and extent of reopening. For example, at the most commonly coded level of targeted, required closing of only some levels, some states such as Oklahoma have been reported by OxCGRT and external databases such as that of Education Week as having significant quantities of in-person courses among the largest K-12 school districts, while others such as Oregon are dominantly remote instruction only [10].

Reduction in School Policy Stringency Are Few and Are Scattered Across The Country

The 5 states that showed lessened stringency in school closure policies were scattered across the Midwest (1), West (1), and Northeast (3) of the US. As was the case in the first half of September, it was primarily K-12 reopenings that led to the reduction in policy stringencies in the second half of September. An exception to this is Ohio where large, public Miami University reopened on September 21, whereas several of the largest K-12 school districts still conduct classes virtually [11].

Fall School Reopenings by State

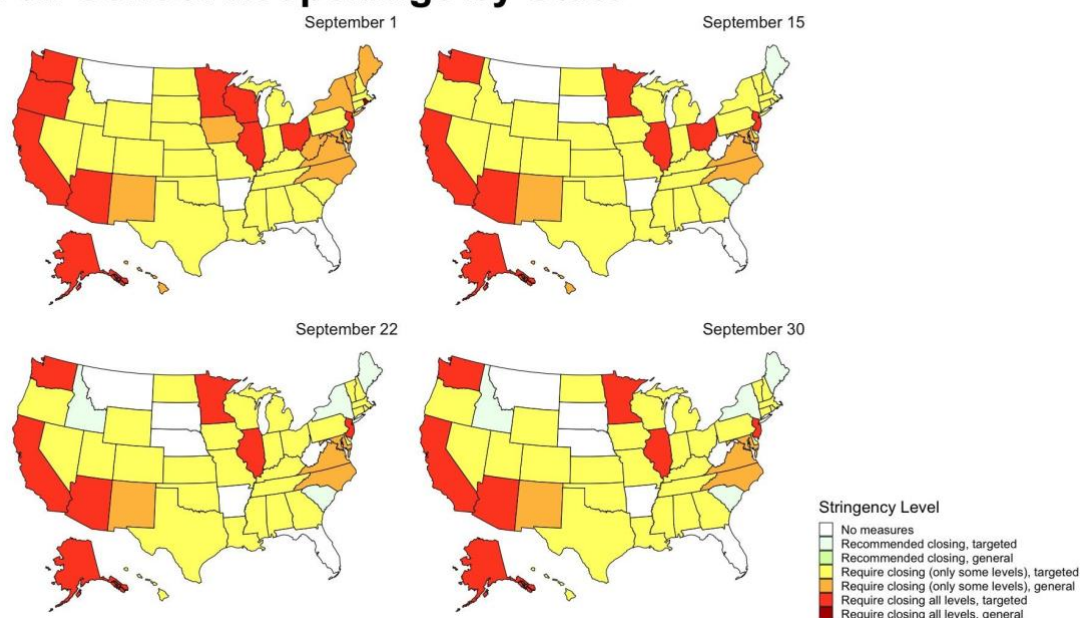


Figure 3. September 1, September 15, September 22, and September 30 OxCGRT school closure policy levels

Low state involvement, but more K-12 oversight than universities

Almost all states experienced university re-openings in September, with no active state policies specifically requiring university closures (though a few states such as Massachusetts, have introduced state guidelines and protocols for university reopenings). K-12 school reopenings have continued to display more state-level planning, with states commonly offering reopening guidance such as phased reopening plans or public health scenarios in which different learning models are most appropriate. These protocols have guided returns to online-only learning in states like New Hampshire as districts respond to a rising number of COVID-19 cases among students. While most states left final reopening decisions to localities, some states did have stricter, centralised requirements, described below.

Reopening framework	Description	Examples
Mandatory state order	States have ordered that in-person instruction for districts is not allowed before a certain date or pending further orders OR states have ordered that in-person instruction for districts is required or otherwise compelled	<u>New Mexico</u> The governor has prohibited in-person classes through September 8 [12]. <u>Texas</u> The governor stated local officials cannot prevent schools from reopening, with the Texas Attorney General previously stating that districts who do not reopen within 8 weeks (and do not receive a waiver) may lose funding [13, 14].

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	reopenings.	
State approvals required	State governments provide centralized mandatory criteria for reopenings, or schools must otherwise apply to the state to gain reopening approval.	<p><u>California</u> Districts can reopen only once their counties meet state public health metrics and remain off of a central 'watchlist' [15].</p> <p><u>Rhode Island</u> Districts can reopen only once their counties meet state public health metrics [16].</p>
Education agency guidance	The relevant state education agency/department approves or denies district reopening plans	<p><u>New Jersey</u> Districts can open for in-person teaching if they fulfil the Department of Education's reopening guidelines. If they do not meet them, schools can request to start the year with remote learning and lay out plans for how they plan to meet the guidelines as the school year progresses [17].</p>

Table 1. K-12 reopening governance models

Continued reopening adaptations: masks, testing, distancing, and more

While OxCGRT does not systematically track school-specific policies, data collectors recorded a variety of adaptations used across K-12 and university reopenings, with some of the most common reported Table 2.

Public Health Measures	Academic Year Scheduling	Online/In-Person Choice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandatory face coverings Social distancing measures (staggered schedules, desk spacing, cohorts) Symptom screenings (temperature checks, visual checks) Enhanced sanitation Contact tracing (check-in apps, sign-in sheets) 	<p>K-12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moving up school start dates to allow for phased reopening Delay of in-person school start dates (though states may limit deferrals) 	<p>K-12</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents offered choice of in-person or online models
	<p>University</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Moving up school start dates to allow for an end of in-person teaching after Thanksgiving, at which point students will remain home through winter break. Delay of school start dates (or starting online) Movement to online following case spikes Quarantine of off-campus student groups (ex: Greek life houses) 	<p>University</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Option to take all online classes (students) Option to teach all online classes (professors) Enhanced/expanded online course options (percentage of online offerings as a subset of total offerings varies by university)

Table 2. Common reopening adaptations

Additional K-12 Adaptations

At-risk and vulnerable students were a particular concern of K-12 school reopening policies. Throughout the states, in-person learning was commonly first opened to special needs students,

even where the rest of the district would be learning primarily online. School districts and states also included provisions for technology access. Schools in areas where reopening plans remain uncertain chose slightly unconventional approaches. The San Diego school board approved in-person sessions to assist younger, at-risk students cope with learning losses. Some schools in New York and Wisconsin integrated learning pods in their reopening plans, where small groups of students would be able to physically socialize and learn even if schools were operating online [18, 19].

Additional University Adaptations

Universities' unique position as residential institutions added additional considerations to reopening policies. In addition to previously-described measures, universities allowed for single-occupancy dorm rooms, staggered meal timings in cafeterias, closed shared facilities (water fountains, gyms, etc), and most non-residential buildings off-limits. Testing and contact tracing protocols are common among universities, including surveillance and preemptive testing, mandatory questionnaires, as well as dedicating dorm space for quarantines. Some universities have established "quarantine dorms" for students who have tested positive, while others have contracts with local hotels and inns [20]. These measures also hold importance to the college towns and countries surrounding universities with low non-student populations and COVID-19 case counts dependent on student activities outside of campus. A few universities pivoted to online instruction only, but the vast majority remains open with a hybrid model in place. Since universities rely on students' self-discipline, a few universities with increasing case counts resorted to swift disciplinary action; Northeastern, Pennsylvania State and the University of Denver are among the few institutes that announced and enacted suspensions, fines, and even removal from on-campus housing in case of extreme violations of safety guidelines [21].

Notable reopening examples

Nationwide, a number of school districts and universities have started in-person classes for the new academic year, with several gaining significant media interest.

- **Providence College (Higher Ed)** | The Rhode Island college opened with a hybrid approach for classes on August 31 but announced on September 17 that after seeing a spike in positive tests of over 80 students that the college would shift to total remote learning. A stay-at-home order took effect for all students through September 26, including those living off campus. The college anticipates "full resumption of in-person classes" on October 12, with rigorous testing protocols and other safety measures in place [22, 23].

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- **State University of New York Oswego (Higher Ed)** | SUNY Oswego notified the campus community on September 18 that a two week "temporary pause" of in-person learning would go into effect as a precautionary measure as the university neared infection rate thresholds [24]. The SUNY Oswego campus implemented all actions recommended by the New York State Pause guidance. On September 25 the SUNY Chancellor Jim Malatras implemented a new policy across all SUNY campuses that set standard sanctions for COVID-19 safety violations, including dismissal and suspension [25].
- **University of Michigan (Higher Ed)** | On September 8 the University of Michigan's Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) began a strike to protest the re-opening plan of the university, which began in-person and remote classes on August 31 [26]. The strike ended on September 16 when GEO voted to accept the University of Michigan's offer to expand daycare funding, increase graduate employees' ability to enforce classroom safety measures, and outlined a plan for approving requests to work remotely [27]. Resident assistants at the university also engaged in a strike from September 8 to September 23, thus gaining access to priority testing and additional PPE [28]. The university continues to offer in-person, remote, and mixed instruction classes; cases increased in the last two weeks of September [29].
- **Florida State University (Higher Ed)** | Florida Governor Ron DeSantis suggested on September 23 that Florida may create a "student bill of rights" to protect college students who do not follow health and safety measures from being reprimanded by college administrations [30]. On September 25 police broke up an off-campus party at Florida State University that had over 1,000 attendees [31]. FSU offers in-person, remote, and hybrid classes and reported 104 positive cases September 20-October 3 [32].
- **New York City public schools (K-12)** | Schools in New York City reopened starting September 21, for part in-person, part remote teaching, after a ten-day delay. Pre-K classes and students with advanced special needs were first to return, with elementary, middle, and high school students set to start school in the following two weeks [33, 34]. During the first weekend of October Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that some public and private schools would close again in Brooklyn and Queens, following increased cases in those zip codes, though cases within schools themselves remained low [35].

Selected State Summaries

A summary of reopening policies for selected states is presented below. We focus on:

- The 5 states with highest total case counts from September 15 to 30
- The 5 states with the highest ratio of cases to population from September 15 to 30
- Two of the most and least stringent states in terms of OxCGRT school closure policies

The above categories overlapped among states, resulting in 10 total selected for summary.

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State	State context	K-12 openings	University reopenings	CHI ¹	Cases ²
Arkansas	One of least stringent states in September school reopenings	Yes, an August 5 order by the state Education Secretary required schools to open 5 days a week for part-time or full-time in-person instruction starting from August 24 [15] There has been no changes throughout September.	Yes, despite outbreaks in colleges and universities, major public universities remain open to at least some in-person instruction.	44.70 44.70	83,697
California	One of highest total case count, one of most stringent states in September school reopenings	Some. A state ordered regional closure is in effect; in-person instruction may only resume if the county remains off the state watchlist for 2 weeks.	Some. Limited campuses reopening with in-person classes though most of the California State University system remains remote (UC Berkeley, UCLA, USC offering online classes for most courses).	63.26 66.29	819,115
Florida	One of highest total case counts, one of least stringent states in September school reopenings	Full-in person learning required following a state reopening order in early-August. Exceptions included the three largest school districts in the state with more critical outbreaks, However, in late September, these three school districts were ordered to reopen earlier than planned, and thus all public schools will be reopened by mid-October [36, 37].	Yes, major public universities reopened to at least some in-person instruction (University of Miami, Florida State University, University of Florida).	45.83 39.02	706,516
Iowa	One of highest cases per population ratios in September	Governor Reynolds mandated that students receive at least half their classes inside classrooms. Des Moines Public Schools started school 100 percent remotely, however, thus defying the governor's order [38] They plan on implementing a hybrid teaching style starting October 12 [39].	No new reopenings. Three major universities (University of Iowa, Iowa State University, University of Northern Iowa) opened in August.	28.79 28.79	89,247
Illinois	One of highest total case counts, one of most stringent states in September school	Some. Schools in some districts reopened in late-August. Public schools in Chicago (high case count area) are entirely	Yes, large public universities reopened to a blend of in-person, and online instruction. Northwestern remains open to limited in-person instruction.	51.89 51.89	295,720

¹ Values as of September 15 and September 30 in OxCGRT database. CHI calculation described in Appendix.

² Cases as of September 30 in OxCGRT database as reported by Johns Hopkins University.

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	reopenings	online.	Officials announced that a resurgence in coronavirus rates in northwest Illinois that includes Rockford and Northern Illinois University will result in a return to tighter restrictions aimed at curbing the disease's spread [40].		
Missouri	One of highest cases per population ratios in September	Yes, the department of Education has released guidance for schools to decide whether to re-open.	Universities across Missouri remain open. On September 15 it was reported that two university students were expelled for knowingly violating health and safety measures [41].	49.62 49.62	126,715
South Dakota	One of highest cases per population ratios in September	Yes, a majority of schools reopened in mid- to late-August, with some districts delaying reopening to early September.	Many universities are offering in-person classes, while others are offering a mix of in-person and remote classes. Re-closures have not yet been announced despite cases on the rise.	19.70 15.15	22,389
Tennessee	One of highest cases per population ratios in September	Some, several schools in Maury County, TN, temporarily closed due to COVID-19 case increases. Two of them have since reopened [42, 43].	The University of Tennessee has instituted more strict preventative measures due to rising cases rates. In-person classes continue, with gatherings restricted. These were in effect through most of September [44].	47.73 47.73	196,139
Texas	One of highest total case counts	Yes, though the largest school districts (Austin, Dallas, Houston) push back reopening dates. Austin and Houston plan reopenings for in-person learning in October.	Yes, most public universities reopened for at least some in-person instruction. In August, the New York Times reported that Texas had the most university COVID-19 cases in a single state. With cases starting to drop, UT-Austin operates with a hybrid model but with most classes taking place online [45].	51.14, 51.14	773,019
Wisconsin	One of highest cases per population ratios in September	Many schools in major cities and counties have partially reopened. As of September 11th, 40 schools in Milwaukee were allowed to reopen [46].	By September 2, four out of five largest colleges (UW-Madison, UW-Milwaukee, Madison Area Technical College, and Milwaukee Area Technical College) in Wisconsin had reopened. UW-Madison resumed in-person instruction on September 26 after switching to 100% remote learning on September 10 [47].	45.83 45.83	122,274

Table 3. Selected state examples of September 15-30 reopenings with OxCGRT closure and containment index and case values.

Universities remain focus of school reopening concerns and guidance

Universities remain in the spotlight as COVID-19 hotspots, with over 130,000 cases linked to more than 1,300 colleges and universities as of September 25 [5]. A recent working paper indicated universities reopening for in-person classes were linked with more than 3000 additional cases per day in the US [48]. This study, along with a new CDC report confirming the link between students' return to campuses and new COVID clusters, pushed the issue of universities to the forefront of policy making in late September [53]. The CDC recommends that universities enhance measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19 which includes reducing residential density, banning student gatherings, and enforcing facial covering- and social distancing rules [49].

Another concern raised in late September is that of transparency - with no national tracking system, case counts depend on university reporting. The New York Times, which has been tracking COVID-19 infections connected with universities since July, includes a caveat that some colleges refuse to disclose case information or otherwise minimize numbers associated with increasing case rates [5]. A new tool published by a team of public health experts, the 'We Rate COVID Dashboards', aims to offer a snapshot of how transparent different universities are. This rating is based on universities' online 'dashboards' which are official publications of COVID-related information. The factors determining the ratings include frequency of updates, data presented, readability, and testing rates [50]. Of the 223 universities included so far, only 21 have a grade of A or higher [51].

School reopenings show continued fragmentation of US COVID-19 response

The divide between federal, state, and local responses continued to be an issue into late September. Amid further reports that the White House pressured the CDC to downplay the risks posed by school reopenings for political advantage [52, 53], the White House announced that it would distribute millions of rapid test kits to states, and urged them to use the tests to help with reopening K-12 schools. It is up to the governors and state health departments to allocate these tests [54].

On September 15, the CDC for the first time released precise indicators for policy makers to use in determining when to reopen K-12 schools for in-person instruction, weeks after schools began reopening [55]. In the previous absence of CDC guidance, some states had issued their own threshold recommendations for school districts. Many others left the decision-making authority entirely to the districts. Thus far, the release of the guidelines has not affected policy making at the state or local level to a significant degree. For example, while Virginia's Department of Health has integrated the CDC metrics into its reopening advice, it continues to maintain and publish its own distinct metrics as well [56]. Furthermore, the lack of clear guidance has led to lawsuits between school districts and state governments, as well as lawsuits directed at school districts and state governments from parents of school children [57, 58].

Appendix

About OxCGRT

The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) provides a systematic measure across governments and across time to understand how government responses have evolved over the full period of the disease's spread. In addition to covering around 180 countries and Brazilian states and capital cities, as of August 6 OxCGRT includes data for the 50 US states, as well as the District of Columbia and the US Virgin Islands from January 1, 2020 to the present. The project tracks governments' policies and interventions across a standardized series of indicators and creates a suite of composite indices to measure the extent of these responses. Data is collected and updated in real time by a team of over one hundred Oxford students, alumni, staff, as well as external collaborators. More than 50 trained volunteers have contributed to the collection and review of US data.

US state data are presented in OxCGRT outputs in two main modes 1) data with imputed values from the national level to reflect all policies affecting a jurisdiction, and 2) data representing only the state government level and below. The latter, non-imputed OxCGRT data was the focus of this

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analysis to better highlight differences between US states and territories. This data is continually updated on the OxCGRT USA Covid Policy GitHub. Data collection is ongoing and provisional.

About the School Closure indicator

US state data is collected in line with the OxCGRT Codebook to ensure standardization across national and subnational entities. School closures (indicator C1) are coded across four ordinal levels with the option of a targeted/general binary flag. A general flag refers to an additional halfpoint value in calculations (3T=3, 3G=3.5) For the purposes of this brief, listed below are each code and example scenarios warranting their application in US subnational data collection.

3G: State order closing K-12 and university levels OR state order + indirect university closures (ex: gatherings) OR state recommendation with specific dates for closing K-12 + indirect university closures (ex: gatherings)

3T: All K-12 and universities are closed in some parts of the state

2G: One level is generally fully closed or open across the state.

2T: One level is fully closed only in certain areas in the state.

1G: Widespread reopenings, but significant public health restrictions imposed by local/state levels that inhibit reopenings

1T: Widespread reopenings, but significant public health restrictions imposed by local/state levels that inhibit reopenings

0: Widespread in-person teaching across all levels

For consistency, volunteers' coding for the OxCGRT C1 indicator focuses on public school districts and public four-year residential university systems as a baseline, though additional school types may be discussed in coding notes. This choice was made because US students are more likely to attend public than private educational institutions, and because state oversight extends to these educational levels. Public four-year universities are particularly relevant to reflecting impacts of less stringent US school closure policies, as the Chronicle of Higher Education reports that these institutions are more likely to allow in-person instruction [59].

About the Containment and Health Index

OxCGRT's containment and health index (CHI), shows how many, and how forceful the measures to contain the virus and protect citizen health are. This combines 'lockdown' restrictions (including school closures), with health measures such as testing policy and contact tracing.

September 15-30 reopening summary table

Level	September 15	September 30
No policy	5	6

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1T	2	4
1G	0	0
2T	30	29
2G	6	5
3T	8	7
3G	1	1
Total	52	52

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