

Of Course the Protests Contributed to The COVID-19 Surge

by Noah Rothman

7-9 minutes

In Florida, the bars and beaches are closing down again. Texas, too, is imposing new prohibitions on commerce and social gatherings. Even relatively strict states such as California, which had only just begun to loosen restrictions on services, are re-imposing limitations on social conduct. Amid a new surge of COVID-19 infections in places many assumed had escaped the worst of the coronavirus's ravages, the bad old days of early March are back.

But this stage of the pandemic is different. New positives are rising dramatically, and that is not entirely attributable to increased testing, but hospitalizations and intubations have not increased proportionately. Unlike in the early spring, the most vulnerable populations are not significantly represented in this new surge. Today, it's primarily young people who are contracting and spreading the disease.

"There are certain counties where a majority of the people who are tested positive in that county are under the age of 30," said Texas Gov. Greg Abbott last week. In Lone Star State counties with [major urban centers or sprawling universities](#), young people account for a staggeringly large increase in the relative percent of the infected population. The story is the same in Florida, where the [surge in new cases](#) is attributable to younger people south of the I-4 corridor.

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Two out of every three people who contracted the disease in Washington state in June are under the age of 29. In Arizona, more than half of new infections are being seen in people between the ages of 20 and 44, mostly in and around Phoenix. Last week, [a study](#) found that 44 percent of new COVID-19 cases in California were confirmed in people 34-years-old and younger, up from 29 percent one month ago. Even in Minnesota, where the increasing caseload is [rising but not exploding](#), people age 20–29 represent nearly [40 percent](#) of all new infections.

What's happening here? "Is it the governor's reopening?" one Texas-based public health expert asked in an interview with the [New York Times](#). "Is it Memorial Day? Is it the George Floyd demonstrations? Is it going to the beach?"

"We don't really know," he shrugged, "but it is probably all of those things that are contributing."

That's a rational conclusion. If this pandemic has taught us anything, it should be humility. The conditions and social behaviors that allow this virus to spread are as myriad and complicated as humanity itself. The variables that contribute to its transmission are too numerous to predictively model. But there are some behaviors we know to be riskier than others, and they were all on display for several weeks in early June. What's more, the demographic cohorts primarily engaging in this unsafe conduct are those now coming down with milder and, therefore, vastly more transmissible forms of this disease.

It should be intuitive that leading young people into the streets to crowd each other and issue spittle-flecked screams of outrage into the air contributed to the virus's resurgence as much as any other social behavior. Of course, it *is* intuitive, and you have to labor to convince yourself otherwise. Unfortunately, too many in national media outlets are invested in doing just that.

"There is no evidence yet that the wave of Black Lives Matter protests across the U.S. sparked COVID-19 outbreaks in the more than three weeks since they began," [NBC News reported](#) last week, citing the National Bureau of Economic Research. That is reassuring enough until you get to the following paragraph. "Rather, as the protests went on," the dispatch continued, "people who were not participating increasingly stayed at home." In other words, whatever risk of infection posed by these protests was

offset by the number of people avoiding them. That rather straightforward portrayal of the facts was filtered through the game of telephone that is the Internet until the garbled message on the other end of the line became the unsupportable conclusion that social-justice activism somehow immunized the demonstrators against COVID-19.

People magazine reproduced the same study tracking cellphone data to determine if protests had an impact on infection rates. “No association was found,” they [determined](#) falsely. “That suggests that people were able to practice their rights to free speech and assembly without contributing to the ongoing pandemic,” Vox’s German Lopez [affirmed](#). Indeed, we were told that small businesses, not thousands of people in the streets, are more likely transmission vectors.

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As one study of contrasting social engagements in Idaho claimed, “going to bars, not going to protests, is causing COVID-19 spikes,” the youngish foodie website Eater [reported](#). “Parties—not protests—are causing spikes in Coronavirus,” NPR [confirmed](#). Though the rise in COVID cases correlates with the protests, “don’t be fooled into thinking that it’s necessarily a related trend,” [Business Insider](#) reported. “Instead, much of the current uptick appears to spring from an [sic] American business reopening...”

What evidence supports the claim that the protests—some of which devolved into outright rioting and physical scuffles with law enforcement—were so full of responsible people that they avoided the risk of infection? Anecdotes.

“If you watch a lot of the protests or saw them on TV,” the Dean of the Morsani College of Medicine, Dr. Charles Lockwood, told a [Florida-based Fox affiliate](#), “you see a lot of these younger folks are wearing masks.” Kirsten Bibbons-Domingo, chair of Epidemiology and Biostatistics Department at the University of California, San Francisco, agreed. “What I saw on television—many people, most people were wearing masks,” she confidently asserted. But this anecdote is offset by the statistics. For all the claims that the only people resistant to public masking are Trump-backing culture warriors in the hinterlands, a May survey conducted by the [Centers for Disease Control](#) found that people age 18-29 were the least likely to “always” “wear a cloth face covering when in public.”

Honestly, what did we expect? For three months, the nation committed to shuttering most economic and social activity, the [hardships of which](#) fell disproportionately on minorities, young people, and low-income households. Then, suddenly, the politicians and public health experts who were once the most committed enforcers of the stigma around violating social-distancing guidelines [performed an about-face](#). They not only embraced mass gatherings but actively encouraged them. What followed was a great exhale—literally—from young people who took to the streets, both to solemnly protest and to dance, celebrate, and reconnect in forms that were now socially acceptable.

Indeed, the cities that are host to a resurgent COVID-19 outbreak are also scenes of [massive marches](#) in favor of [progressive social causes](#). It is abundantly clear that, as long as you’re advocating political activity of which Democrats approve, you will be spared the [scorn and legal jeopardy](#) to which all other Americans who flout social-distancing guidelines are exposed.

It would have been shocking if these sustained mass gathering had no impact on the national pandemic. But they contributed, at least to some extent, to the resurgence of this virus in states that had not seen a substantial outbreak. It remains to be seen whether those who abdicated their responsibilities to the public and encouraged this reckless behavior will acknowledge their roles in this event.