Capstone Final Report – COVID-19 Cases in the US

I.   Executive Summary

The surge of COVID-19 cases in the United States has caused widespread fear and uncertainty. Over the last 1.5 years, the pandemic has affected millions of lives and is still at the forefront of the nation's problems. To get ahead of the issue, it is extremely important to determine the main causes of the spread and analyze viable solutions for their efficacy. This project aims to focus on the effect that vaccinations have on the number of new cases in the US. Of course, there are many other factors that affect the number of cases, like mask mandates, lockdown policies, and more recently, Delta and other variants. But if we can show that vaccinations have some effect on the number of COVID-19 cases, we can determine that this is indeed a viable solution to stopping the pandemic.

II.   Data

The datasets for this project were taken from Kaggle – one is a list of daily total cases per state, and the other is a list of daily vaccinations per state.[1] After some cleaning and wrangling, the two datasets were combined into one and null values interpolated. Two additional columns, number of new cases and population were calculated from the existing data.[2]

A quick EDA of our data shows the trend of new cases over the past year had a steep incline at the end of 2020, and then a slow decline early 2021.

Figure 1 – Trend of Number of New Cases per State
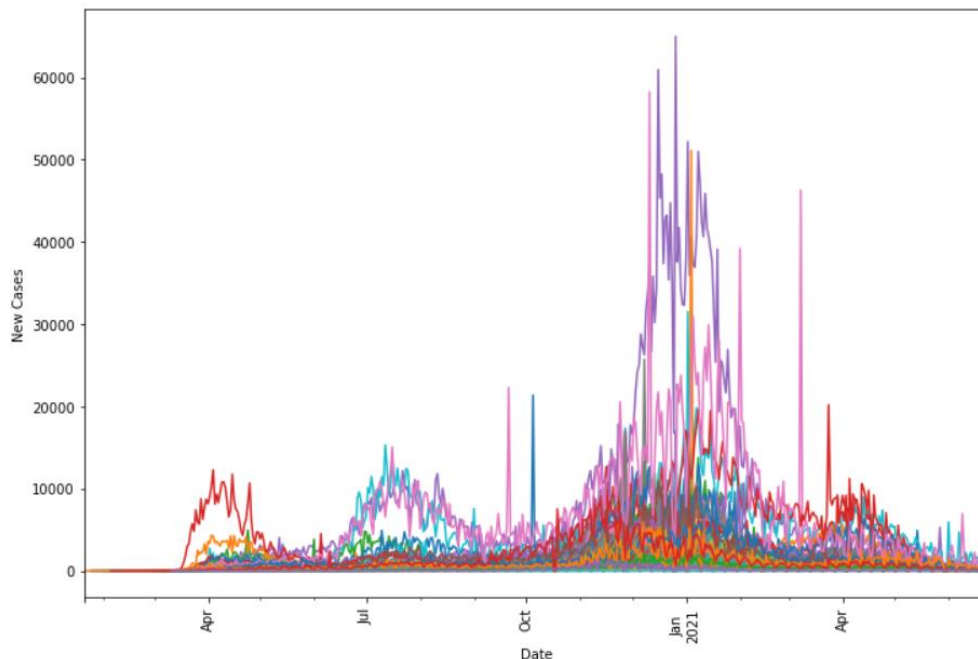
This is roughly when vaccination data begin to emerge, so we will build a model that tries to show a correlation between the decline in new cases and the increase in vaccinations.

Because of the varying populations per state, we will normalize the number of cases and vaccinations by dividing by the population of the state. Exploring the data for one day, we plot people vaccinated per 100 against new cases per population:

Figure 2 – Scatterplot of People Vaccinated to New Cases for One Day
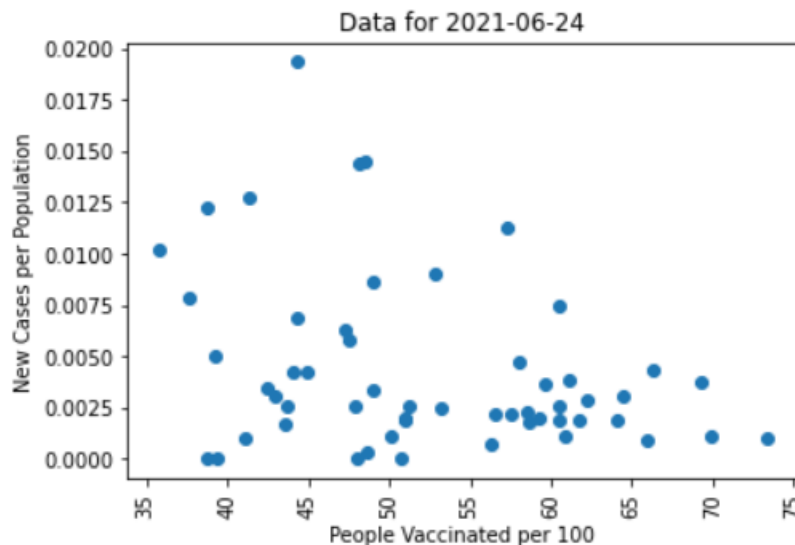
Although the scatterplot is quite random, there is an overall slight negative correlation between number of people vaccinated and new cases.

To prepare the DataFrame for modeling, we extract only 4 columns: date, state, people_vaccinated_per_hundred, and new_cases_per_hundred.[3] Now, we are ready to build a time series model using these features.

III. Model

This project takes a multivariate time series and converts it into a supervised learning problem to predict the number of new cases based on vaccinations, with a 7-day lead time. The data used is the daily number of new cases per state, as well as the daily total number of people vaccinated per state. This dataset is transformed into a supervised learning model with input features[4] of:

1. Number of new cases 7 days behind
2. Rolling average of new cases 14 to 7 days behind
3. Rolling average of new cases 10 to 7 days behind
4. Total number of people vaccinated 7 days behind

With the shifted data, we can remove the date and state identifiers from the model data since they have no effect on model performance.

The data is split into training and testing sets, with the training set starting from the first datapoint until the 100th day of vaccination data, and the testing set as the remaining data. These features are then fit to various regression models[5] to find the one that results in the lowest MAE (mean absolute error).

IV. Results

We found that the Gradient Boosting Regressor model resulted in the lowest MAE when predicting the number of new cases at time t with the above features. We further decreased this value with hyperparameter tuning[6], resulting in a model that produced a MAE of 0.003137 cases/hundred. The feature importance of the number of people vaccinated was 1.7%. Although this percentage is low, it still has some significance when predicting the number of new cases.

Plotting the predicted vs actual values of new cases using our model, we obtain a slope of 0.78, showing that the relationship between the actual and predicted values has a positive correlation.

Figure 3 – Actual to Predicted New Cases with Regression Line of GBR Model
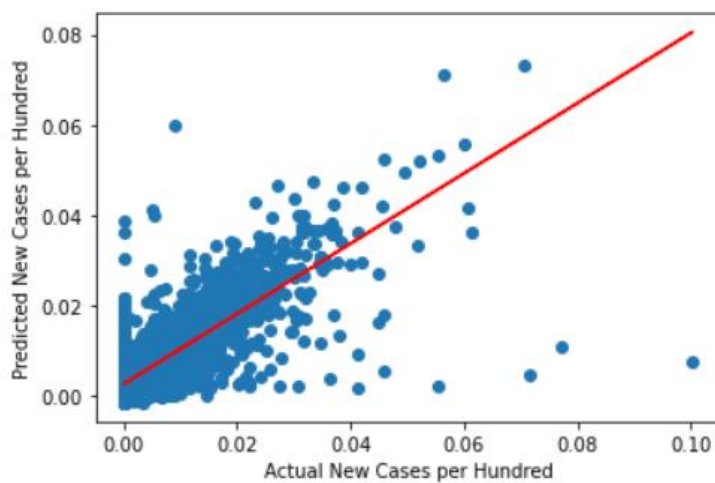
When we plot the distribution of the error between actual and predicted values of new cases, we see that it is centered around 0, with some outliers on either side of the x-axis.

Figure 4 – Distribution of Error (Actual – Predicted) of GBR Model
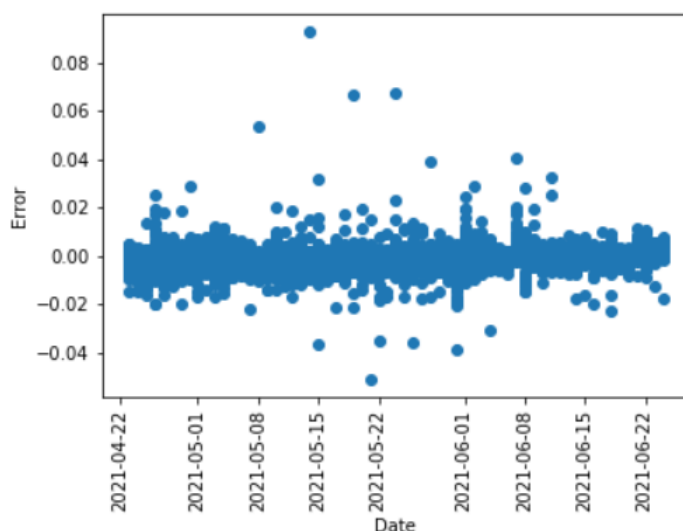
As a baseline model, we assumed new cases at time t is equal to new cases at time (t-7). This baseline model results in a MAE of 0.003288, meaning that our machine learning model improved the error by approximately 4.6%.

If we want to isolate the effect of vaccination data on our model, we look at a second baseline model, with all the same features as our machine learning model except that we exclude people_vaccinated_per_hundred. This model results in a MAE of 0.004211, which shows that vaccination data decreases our error by 25.5%.

The average new cases per hundred in the test dataset is 0.00805, so error rates are relatively high with even our best model. This can be due to the fact that there are many other factors that affect the number of daily cases that have not been accounted for in the model.

V.   Conclusion

From our Gradient Boosting Regressor model, we see that there is in fact a correlation between the number of people vaccinated and the number of new cases in the United States. Comparing the two baseline models to our best performing model, we see a significant improvement when vaccination data is added. Although overall error values are high, this can be due to the various factors that determine the number of new cases that we did not account for in this project. Our findings conclude that vaccinations do have an effect on the number of Covid-19 cases in the United States.

VI. Appendix

1. Datasets from Kaggle:

    Coronavirus (Covid-19) Data of United States (USA):
    https://www.kaggle.com/joelhanson/coronavirus-covid19-data-in-the-united-states

    USA COVID-19 Vaccinations: https://www.kaggle.com/paultimothymooney/usa-covid19-vaccinations

2. The 2 new columns are calculated as follows:

    Number of new cases [new_cases] = total cases at time t minus total cases at time t-1. For any negative value, we set new cases of time t equal to new cases of time t-1.

    Population [population] = total number of people vaccinated on a particular day / people vaccinated per hundred on the same day * 100. This is done once for each state and added to a dictionary, then filled into the DataFrame based on state.

3. The four columns used in the modeling portion of the project are:

    Date: the date of the datapoint
    State: the state that the datapoint belongs to
    People_vaccinated_per_hundred: total number of people vaccinated in that state on that date divided by population multiplied by 100

New_cases_per_hundred: the number of new cases that day in that state divided by population multiplied by 100

4. The engineered features that our final model takes in are:

    Number of new cases 7 days behind: shifted new_cases_per_hundred column by 7 days (t-7)
    Rolling average of new cases 14 to 7 days behind: average of new_cases_per_hundred column from (t-14) to (t-7)
    Rolling average of new cases 10 to 7 days behind: average of new_cases_per_hundred column from (t-10) to (t-7)
    Total number of people vaccinated 7 days behind: shifted people_vaccinated_per_hundred column by 7 days (t-7)

5. Regression models from sklearn that were tested in this project:
    -   KNeighborsRegressor
    -   DecisionTreeRegressor
    -   ExtraTreeRegressor
    -   SVR
    -   AdaBoostRegressor
    -   BaggingRegressor
    -   RandomForestRegressor
    -   GradientBoostingRegressor

6. The following hyperparameters were tested for the Gradient Boosting Regressor model, with the parameter in **bold** as the best performing:
    -   Max_Depth = [**3**, 10, 1000]
    -   Min_samples_leaf = [1, 50, **100**]
    -   N_estimators = [**500**]