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THE COVID STATES PROJECT:
A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY
REPORT #41: THE TRAJECTORY OF
HEALTH-RELATED BEHAVIORS IN NEW JERSEY

USA, March 2021

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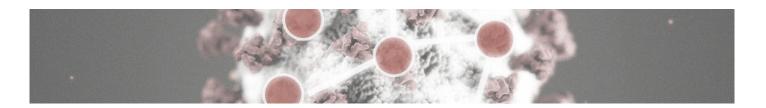Ata A. Uslu, Northeastern University

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Report of March 5, 2021, v.1

The COVID States Project

From: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States

A joint project of:
Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

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COVER MEMO

Summary Memo — March 5, 2021

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From*: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States*

Partners: Northeastern University, Harvard University/Harvard Medical School, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

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From April 2020 through January 2021, we conducted multiple waves of a large, 50-state survey, some results of which are presented here. You can find previous reports online at covidstates.org.

Note on methods:

Over 16 survey waves, we polled 239,012 individuals across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. The data were collected between April and March 2021 by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with state-level representative quotas for race/ethnicity, age, and gender. In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas.

For this report, we split our 9th survey wave, collected from October 23 to November 4, 2020, into its October and November responses, and included them in our October and November waves, respectively. The periods covered by each of the final 9 survey waves used in this report are as follows: Late April Wave: 4/17/20-4/26/20, Early May Wave: 5/2/20-5/15/20, Late May Wave: 5/16/20-5/31/20, Late June Wave: 6/12/20-6/28/20, Late July Wave: 7/10/20-7/26/20, August Wave: 8/7/20-8/26/20, September Wave: 9/4/20-9/27/20, October Wave: 10/2/20-10/31/20, November Wave: 11/1/20-11/23/20, December/January Wave 12/16/20- 1/11/21, and February Wave: 2/5/21 - 3/1/21.

The trajectory of health-related behaviors in New Jersey

New Jersey is similar to other states in the northeast, in that it had its initial spike in COVID-19 cases during March and April 2020, with a second wave that peaked in December 2020 and January 2021. This report presents an overview of key trends in the behavior of New Jersey residents since the first months of the pandemic, with respect to following health guidelines aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19.

Findings

Residents of New Jersey closely followed the social distancing guidelines in the spring of 2020, but progressively relaxed their adherence to health recommendations over the summer and early fall of 2020. People once again became more careful about social distancing as COVID-19 case counts increased towards the end of 2020. Our most recent data indicate that as case numbers decreased in 2021, behaviors relaxed as well.
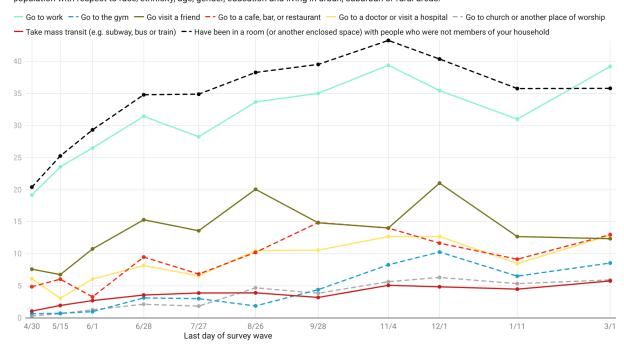
In *Figure 1*, we show trends in 8 different activities outside of the home that people reported engaging in within the 24 hours prior to taking our survey. The activities include going to work, to the gym, to a bar or café, to a place of worship, to the doctor, visiting a friend, taking mass transit, or being in a room with people who live outside one's household.

The data show a notable uptick in all of these behaviors from April to mid-November. We observed a similar trajectory for each of the eight activities: low points in spring 2020, followed by high points in the fall, declines in the early winter, and finally a recent increase in February 2021. For instance, there was a large surge in people going to work outside of their home from late April to mid-November 2020 (19% to 40%), a subsequent drop to 31% in January 2021, and then a jump to 39% in February 2021.

The percentage of New Jersey residents who reported having been in a room with people other than members of their household more than doubled from late April to mid-November 2020 (21% to 45%) and was at 36% in February 2021. Reports of most other indoor activities also increased from late April to mid-November, although less dramatically. The percentage of people who reported going to a cafe, bar, or restaurant jumped from 5% to approximately 12%, the percentage that indicated going to a doctor or hospital increased from 7% to 11%, and the percentage taking mass transit rose from 1% to 7%. Visiting a friend represents a minor exception: such reports increased between April and late August, decreased until mid-November, and then peaked in early December.

In the last 24 hours, did you or any members of your household do any of the following activities outside of your home?

Percentage of respondents for New Jersey across 11 survey waves. The data is reweighted using demographic caracteristics to match the New Jersey population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education and living in urban, suburban or rural areas.
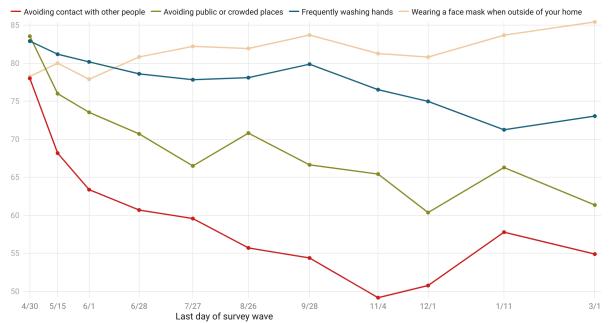
Figure 1.

Figure 2 examines the trajectory of adherence to recommendations from public health officials including handwashing and mask wearing. Avoidance of crowded spaces and contact with other people dropped precipitously from the spring to early fall 2020 and increased in late fall/early winter. Avoiding crowded places was at its peak level in our first round of data collection in April, at 83%, and dropped to 60% by December 1st; then, as cases surged, the rate jumped up to 66% in January, and as cases declined, dropped back down to 61% in February. In contrast, handwashing has somewhat steadily declined since the spring. Finally, mask-wearing increased since the spring (albeit by a small amount), perhaps reflecting the public awareness of medical expert consensus that the transmission of COVID-19 is largely respiratory.

In the last week, how closely did you personally follow the health recommendations listed below?

Percentage of respondents for New Jersey answering "very closely" across 11 survey waves. The data is reweighted using demographic caracteristics to match the New Jersey population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education and living in urban, suburban or rural areas.

Figure 2.

New Jersey Sample: N1 = 476 (04/16/20 - 04/30/20), N2 = 541 (05/02/20 - 05/15/20), N3 = 529 (05/16/20 - 06/01/20), N4 = 500 (06/12/20 - 06/28/20), N5 = 391 ("07/10/20 - 07/27/20), N6 = 515 (08/07/20 - 08/26/20), N7 = 470 (09/04/20 - 09/28/20), N8 = 618 (10/02/20 - 11/04/20), N9 = 478 (11/04/20 - 12/01/20), N10 = 466 (12/16/2020 - 1/11/2021), N11 = 432 (02/05/2021 - 03/01/2021)

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) www.covidstates.org
 • Created with Datawrapper

Conclusion

While adherence to health and safety guidelines in general decreased slightly since spring 2020, spikes in caseloads near the end of the year may have contributed to higher rates of social distancing, safer behaviors outside of the home, and stricter following of public health recommendations in New Jersey. The critical question for the moment is how residents of the state will respond to the current situation, wherein: (1) case counts have gone down, (2) vaccination rates have gone up, but (3) more transmissible and [likely more deadly variants](#) of COVID-19 are spreading around the country. Do New Jerseyans let down their guard because of the apparent reduced levels of risk, or do they maintain their vigilance in the face of an uncertain third wave of the virus? At present, our data suggest that they are relaxing some of their adherence to social distancing.

Appendix: Report Data

The data for this report are available through an [interactive web application](#). The online dashboard displays state-by-state information about behaviors and policy attitudes during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also includes data about public adherence to health guidelines like hand washing, mask wearing, and social distancing.

The application also provides access to data and charts showing public attitudes about federal, state, and local government policies aimed at limiting the spread of COVID-19. Additionally, the dashboard offers access to metrics on approval of the way the president and state governors are handling the pandemic.

Users of the dashboard can select states to explore data and generate graphics that can be downloaded in PDF or PNG format. All the data that used in the dashboard can be found on the home page and downloaded in a comma separated values (CSV) format.

State behavior dashboard: [lazerlab.shinyapps.io/Behaviors_During_COVID](#)