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Trump and some top aides question accuracy of virus death toll

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Trump at a factory in Phoenix that makes N-95 masks. Photo: Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images

President Trump has complained to advisers about the way coronavirus deaths are being calculated, suggesting the real numbers are actually lower — and a number of his senior aides share this view, according to sources with direct knowledge.

What's next: A senior administration official said he expects the president to begin publicly questioning the death toll as it closes in on his predictions for the final death count and damages him politically.

- The U.S. death toll has surpassed 71,000, with more than 1.2 million confirmed cases, according to [the latest figures](#).
- Trump's engagement could amplify a partisan gulf we saw in this week's Axios-Ipsos Coronavirus Index over [believing the death statistics](#).

Reality check: There is no evidence the death rate has been exaggerated, and experts believe coronavirus deaths in the U.S. are being *undercounted* — not overcounted.

Behind the scenes: The official said Trump has vented that the numbers seem inflated and has brought up [New York's addition](#) of more than 3,000 unconfirmed but suspected COVID-19 cases to its death toll.

- Some members of the president's team believe the government has created a distorting financial incentive for hospitals to identify coronavirus cases, the official also said.
- A second senior official said they shared this concern.
- Medicare is giving hospitals a 20% bonus for their treatment of coronavirus patients as a way to help them make up for the money they're losing because they've had to postpone a lot of non-coronavirus care.
- Intentionally misdiagnosing patients with coronavirus would be fraud, and so far no one in the administration has publicly leveled such an accusation.

The other side: A senior White House official pushed back, saying this of the president's thinking: "Skepticism isn't the right way to frame it. The numbers have been revised up to

- "So he's expressed the need to properly convey that to American people so they're not startled by why numbers ticked up."
- Another senior administration official said this concern about the death count was not confined to Trump and was in fact shared by a number of his senior staff and has been a subject of discussion for weeks.
- "With something like this virus, where you've got this weird coagulation in the lungs ... we need more autopsies," the official said.
- "America's out of practice of how to deal with something like this and to report it accurately. ... We don't have uniform reporting standards in the United States or internationally. And we're not getting good data."

The number of people dying over the past few weeks, in many parts of the country, is a lot higher than average, suggesting that the official count of coronavirus-related deaths is still missing [tens of thousands of people](#).

Between the lines: Until mid-April, a person was only identified as having died from the coronavirus if they had tested positive for the coronavirus and then died.

- But testing in the U.S. has been inadequate. Many people who have the virus weren't able to get tested; those patients weren't recorded as official coronavirus cases, and therefore weren't counted as coronavirus deaths if they died.
- Last month, the Centers for Disease Control said it would include "[probable](#)" coronavirus deaths in the official tally — cases in which no formal diagnosis is available, but doctors believe a patient died from COVID-19.
- Some states do not report probable deaths to the CDC, but among those that do, the change did make a difference: Probable cases added roughly 3,700 people to New York's official death toll.

What they're saying: Experts believe the formal death count is inaccurately low because:

- Testing problems persisted for so long and still persist.
- Some states don't count probable deaths.
- There are still thousands of "excess deaths" even after accounting for probable coronavirus cases.



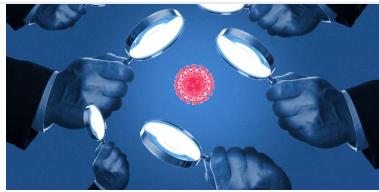
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U.S. coronavirus updates

California on Thursday projected a [\\$54.3 billion deficit](#) in its state budget as a result of the economic damage caused by the novel coronavirus, Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration said.

By the numbers: Jobless claims nationwide have swelled to roughly [33.5 million in the past seven weeks](#) since coronavirus-driven lockdowns began — and, even as states begin to open back up, workers are still losing their jobs at a staggering rate.



The U.S.' coronavirus recovery is way behind Europe's

Other countries — even some hit hard by the coronavirus — are beating back their outbreaks more successfully than the U.S.

Why it matters: The number of new cases every day is holding steady in the U.S., but it's not going down — a key benchmark many other countries achieved before loosening their lockdowns and social distancing measures.

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 Alayna Treene

White House coronavirus task force asked CDC to revise reopening guidelines

The White House coronavirus task force asked the CDC to revise a [17-page report](#) that detailed specific guidelines for how local leaders should begin reopening cities and businesses, but never received a revised copy, sources familiar with the documents tell Axios.

The state of play: The guidelines — which a task force official says were never cleared by CDC leadership — are now being tabled for the foreseeable future.

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