

The Washington Times

States' early reopening decision vindicated by declining coronavirus hospitalizations

Alex Swoyer and Stephen Dinan
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Georgia led the way in reopening its economy as Gov. [Brian Kemp](#) defied critics, including President [Trump](#), by telling gyms and salons that they could do business again in late April. Six weeks on, Georgia is faring well: The number of hospitalizations has dropped from about 155 a day to about 110 a day and the new positive test rate remains about the same, even though many more are performed.

The same thing has happened in Florida, where another Republican governor, Ron DeSantis allowed his stay-at-home order to expire May 4. The state's positive test rate has ticked up, but the number of hospitalizations has dropped from about 160 a day on average to 130, according to a Washington Times analysis of state data.

Texas, which joined Georgia and Florida in leading to country to reopen, has more mixed results. Its positive test rate has risen significantly, and after weeks of little change, the number of COVID-19 hospitalizations spiked late last week. More than 1,800 cases were being treated Friday and Saturday.

But even with Texas' increase, each of the states is in good shape to handle outbreaks, with 10 times as many available hospital beds as COVID-19 patients. In short, experts say, they succeeded in bending the curve and preventing a surge in cases that might have overwhelmed their medical system, and cleared the path to reopening.

"It hasn't in any way reached a situation where we are worried we can't handle it," said Dr. Jeffrey Singer, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a practicing surgeon in Arizona. "Our health care system is more than adequately able to handle what is going on right now." Georgia, Florida and Texas were the biggest states to relax their rules early, and other governors took notice. All but seven states have abandoned, or in some cases never had, stay-at-home orders.

The Times focused on hospitalization data because it provides insight into the most severe cases. Death statistics typically reflect COVID-19 cases diagnosed weeks earlier. The number of positive tests is less calibrated because testing is far more robust now. In each case, The Times used a seven-day average to account for weekend lulls and other calendar-related spikes.

Dr. Robert Quigley, senior vice president and regional medical director for International SOS, a medical consulting company, said one month may not be enough to determine whether lifting stay-at-home orders will overwhelm health care systems.

He also questioned whether states are using the best measurements.

“Even though the data we both looked at that said Georgia didn’t have a spike after they released their lockdown, that may be because they are looking at the wrong metrics, and that’s where this becomes such a challenge,” he said, noting that some hospitalizations may be attributed to factors other than COVID-19.

Dr. Singer said he expects more cases as states relax their rules, though the reason for the shutdown orders was to flatten the curve of cases and prevent an immediate crisis that would have overwhelmed hospitals.

“The good news is we have learned in the intervening few months, it seems like if you are under the age of 65 or 70 and generally healthy, the odds of this doing you in is relatively small,” said Dr. Singer, noting that he tested positive recently for COVID-19 antibodies.

Predictions of doom were prevalent when Mr. Kemp, in late April, laid out his reopening plans. A New York Times article turned it into a racial issue by saying black residents of Georgia would suffer the most. NPR and the Center for Public Integrity, citing a confidential government memo, warned that the state didn’t have enough beds in intensive care units to handle a surge of patients.

Even Mr. Trump told Mr. Kemp he was moving too quickly.

“They can wait a little bit longer,” the president said. “Safety has to predominate.”

Mr. Kemp reopened the state anyway, saying he had to protect lives and livelihoods of residents. Mr. Trump did cheer Mr. DeSantis in Florida and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott when they reopened. Now he is pushing for even speedier action and calling for states to reopen schools.

Georgia residents were initially skeptical of Mr. Kemp’s pace of opening but are starting to accept it. A University of Georgia poll showed the share of people supporting the reopening plan went from 24% in April to 40% now, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported. Another 40% are still opposed.

The racial catastrophe The New York Times predicted hasn’t come to pass. Although the number of black Georgians testing positive for the coronavirus topped whites in early April, the number has reversed. Whites now outnumber blacks in positive tests, according to state data. Some signs still warn of a grim future.

The reproduction rate, a way of measuring whether the disease is on the path toward expanding or dying out, is moving in the wrong direction, according to trackers at the website Rt.live.

A rate higher than 1 means the disease is expanding. Georgia last week clocked in at a rate of 1.09, the third-highest among states and trailing only Alaska and Montana. Florida was fourth at 1.08, and Texas was 11th at a flat 1.

Four weeks ago, Georgia was in far better shape at 0.88 and Florida was 0.93. Texas was 1.03. Amira Albert Roess, a professor in epidemiology at George Mason University, said tracking positive COVID-19 cases is important to allow hospital systems to prepare for a possible influx in patients.

She said it is important to track numbers at the county level because some states may be able to reopen but need to leave some areas shut down.

“Counties that are especially hard hit may decide to stay closed. In that case, looking at state-level data can give you an incomplete picture of what’s actually happening,” she said.