

Issue: AZ - Healthcare

## Hot, Hot, Hot: How Arizona Became the World's Hottest COVID Hotspot

### COVID-19: A Midsummer Nightmare

If Arizona were a country, it would have been the world's hottest COVID-19 hotspot in early July, with more confirmed cases per million residents than even the hardest hit third-world nations.<sup>1</sup> What's more, with a positive test rate of more than 25%—five times the recommended maximum of 5%—even the dismal numbers reported likely underrepresent the state's coronavirus cases,<sup>2</sup> which by early July threatened to overwhelm Arizona's healthcare system.<sup>3</sup> How did this Sunbelt state, famous for the majesty of the Grand Canyon, the desolate grandeur of the Sonoran Desert, and the splendor of world-class golf resorts, attain the notorious distinction of suffering the most widespread coronavirus outbreak on the planet?

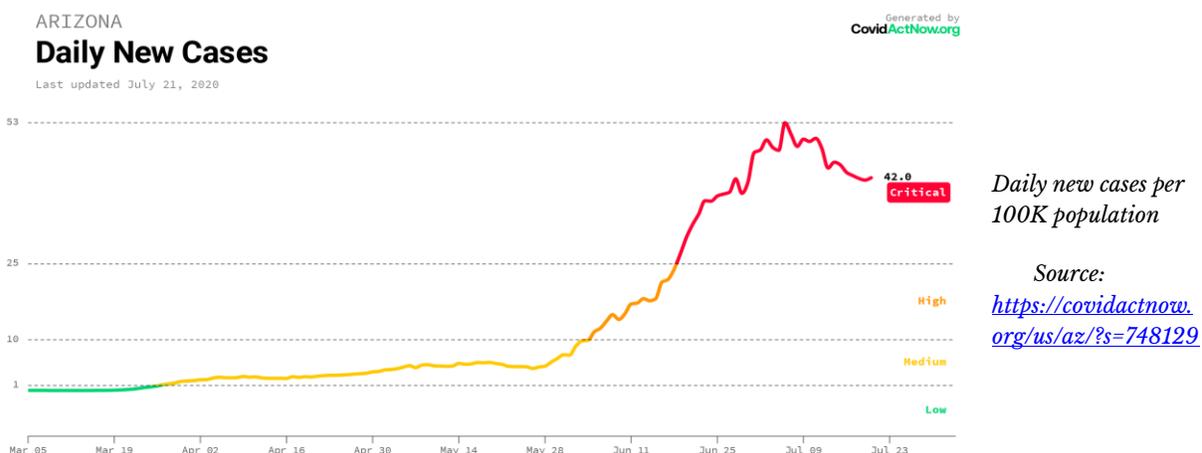
It really comes down to three misguided, critical actions/inactions:

- Republican Governor Doug Ducey waited too long to respond to the pandemic.
- When his response finally came, it was too little, too late, comprising a set of loosely-defined “guidelines” with no compliance expectations or enforcement mechanisms.
- Governor Ducey reopened all levels of activity too early, without the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)-recommended indicators of sustained, lowered incidence of positive test results.

Ironically, although the nation hoped the virus would wane in the warmer, summer months, triple-digit temperatures drove Arizonans indoors to escape the blazing heat, where COVID-19 is more likely to spread.

### Early Indicators and a Failure to Act

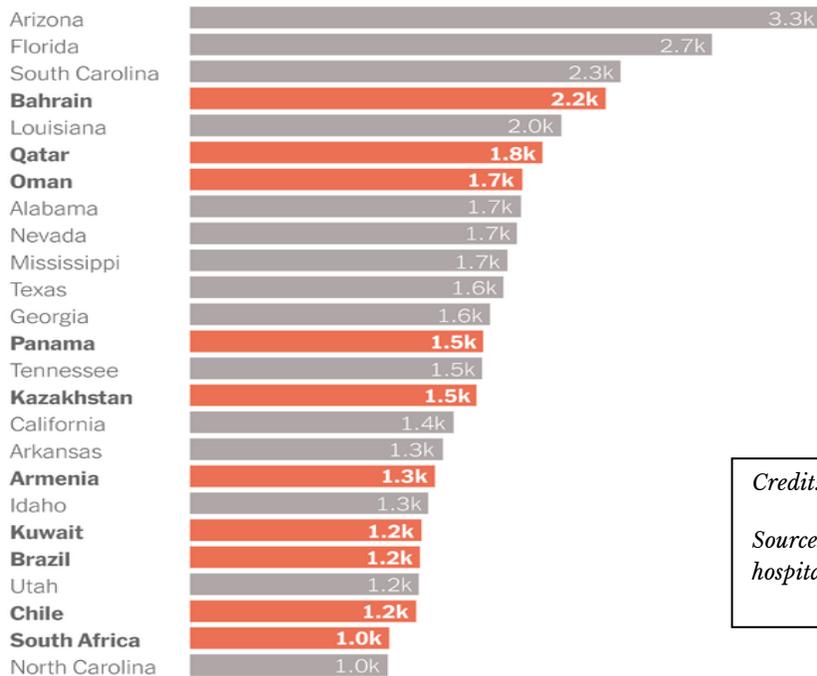
The first known case of COVID-19 reached Arizona in January 2020. By March 12, the state reported nine confirmed cases. Over the next week, the number would nearly quintuple to 44. Yet Governor Ducey took no action. In contrast to stay-at-home orders mandated in other states across the country, Governor Ducey's March 23 executive order listed businesses that would remain *open*, including hair and nail salons, spas, payday lenders, and gun dealers.<sup>4</sup>



U.S. Senator Krysten Sinema (D-Arizona) publicly rebuked the state for its failure to respond to the growing epidemic. Democratic Mayors Regina Romero of Tucson and Kate Gallego of Phoenix announced emergency measures, ordering many businesses in their jurisdictions to close on March 17. It was not until March 20 that Governor Ducey finally placed limitations on some higher-risk business—gyms, hair and nail salons, and restaurants—and then, only in the six counties with confirmed COVID-19 cases. The Governor’s stay-at-home order was not issued until March 30.<sup>5</sup>

### World's Worst Outbreaks

Places with the most new coronavirus cases per million residents, last seven days



*Credit: The New York Times, July 8, 2020*

*Sources: State and local health agencies and hospitals, Johns Hopkins University*

Note: Bars with similar labels may be different lengths due to rounding.

Experts say the 12-day difference between neighboring California’s stay-at-home order on March 19 and Arizona’s, which took effect March 31, was significant. The number of cases statewide can double within 24 to 72 hours, so days and weeks matter.<sup>6</sup>

By the beginning of April, Arizona Director of Emergency Management Wendy Smith-Reeve resigned in protest, giving a blistering appraisal of the governor’s crisis management which ignored the state’s emergency management plan.

Five short weeks later, the day before President Trump traveled to Phoenix to tour the Honeywell mask plant, Governor Ducey triumphantly announced the state would reopen.<sup>7</sup>

## Initial Reopening: Missing the Mark

Arizona never attained the flattening of the curve that the CDC recommends for phased reopening, but Governor Ducey began moving forward with reopening the state in early May. When his stay-at-home order expired on May 15, he chose not to renew it. Three weeks later, Arizona was essentially business as usual, with high-risk, high-contact establishments like bars and restaurants, gyms and salons back in nearly full-swing operation. Photos of Memorial Day Weekend celebrations showed an

absence of social distancing and mask wearing that appalled the rest of the country. And cases were soaring, up 70 percent, coinciding with the critical two-week end of the stay-at-home order.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps more damaging, Governor Ducey's reopening orders prohibited cities and counties from implementing local requirements more stringent than the state's, such as mandatory masks in public spaces, six-foot social distancing policies, and other known preventive measures recommended by the CDC.<sup>9</sup> His preemption of localities basically tied the hands of local officials who longed to do more to protect Arizonans.

As cases spiraled out of control over the next several weeks, Governor Ducey authorized overwhelmed hospitals to turn away COVID-19 patients they deemed too old or too sick to recover.<sup>10</sup> Now frontline medical professionals were put in the untenable position of judging who they would try to save, and who would be left without health care.

## Testing Challenges

By June 3, the state was failing to reach the CDC benchmarks for effectively managing the coronavirus. Arizona had demonstrated neither 14 days of declining positive coronavirus tests, nor 14 days of declining positive tests as a percentage of total tests performed.<sup>11</sup> But Governor Ducey persisted in reopening the economy.

In late June, as more and more Arizonans experienced symptoms and sought COVID-19 tests, drive-up test center lines extended three miles long when they opened at 7 a.m. Some waited in their cars as long as 13 hours in hundred-plus-degree heat in hopes of a test, then waited days and sometimes weeks for results, as laboratories were inundated with more than twice the number of samples they could process. Arizona's largest lab, Sonora Quest, received 12,000 coronavirus samples in a single day—twice its maximum capacity. Delays in test results contribute to the spread of the disease: until patients receive positive test results, they don't know to isolate themselves.

Besides beating down on waiting patients, the oppressive heat adversely affected healthcare workers staffing outdoor, drive-up testing sites. Banner Health, the state's largest hospital system, reduced the number of its outdoor testing sites from five to one. It was simply too hot to relegate staff to collecting samples outdoors all day in the heat.

In the absence of a federal testing strategy, states are still competing with each other for testing supplies, lab equipment, and qualified staff. As more states reopen, the demand for tests only grows—for essential workers, for those experiencing symptoms, and for those working in health facilities like nursing homes who need to be tested on a regular basis.<sup>12</sup>

## Mocking Masks

On April 3, both the CDC and the White House Coronavirus Task Force recommended wearing face masks in public to slow the spread of COVID-19.<sup>13</sup> But in Arizona, Republican officials thumbed their noses at the guidance, protesting the universally-recognized public health guideline as an infringement on personal freedom.

As late as the end of May, Governor Ducey was still downplaying the need to wear masks, declaring, "It's safe out there."<sup>14</sup>

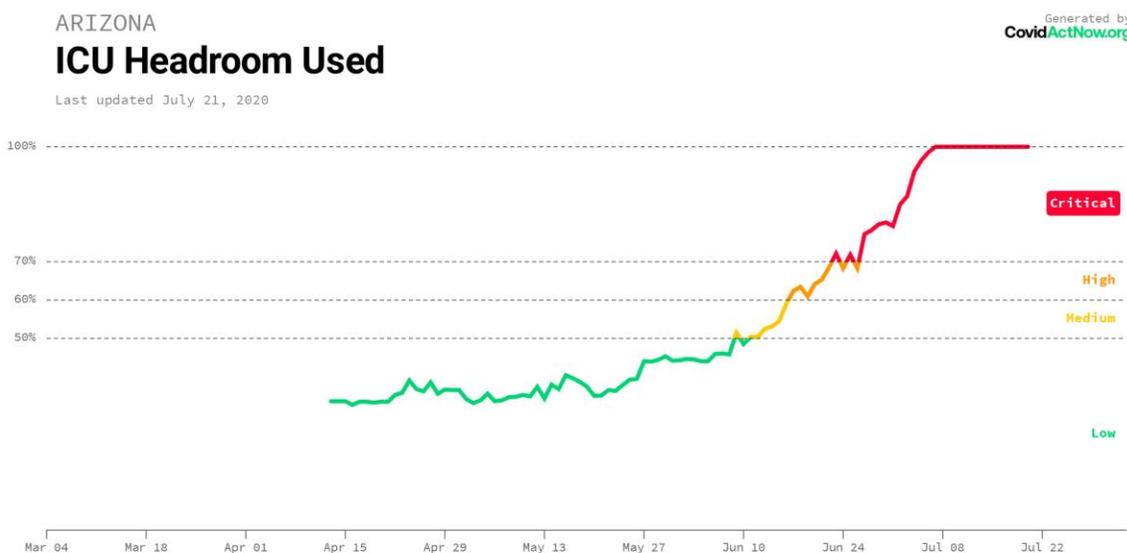
At a well-publicized rally, a masked Republican City Councilman from Scottsdale yelled, “I can’t breathe! I can’t breathe!” before he ripped off his mask—a mocking reference to the last words of George Floyd, an African American who died May 25 at the hands of a white Minneapolis police officer, sparking nationwide outrage.<sup>15</sup>

In combination with the refusal of President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence to wear masks, these similarly conservative Republican officials communicate the disinformation that the pandemic is not a serious threat. Sadly, too many Arizonans have followed this line of thought. Their careless and selfish behavior has put themselves and others in peril.

## Throwing Caution to the Wind Led to Easily Anticipated Disaster

By July 7, fewer than 150 ICU beds remained available in all of Arizona, as COVID-19 cases were spiking, with new record numbers logged every day.

About half of Arizona’s 1,695 ICU beds are occupied by non-COVID patients. Of the 851 ICU beds remaining, 886 are needed by COVID patients. That is more than all of the available ICU beds in the state. Arizona’s hospitals simply do not have the capacity to care for the emerging coronavirus caseload. An aggressive intervention is needed care for the many critically ill patients hit by the pandemic.<sup>16</sup>



Source: <https://covidactnow.org/us/az/?s=748129>

With a positive test rate five times the CDC’s recommended maximum positive rate for states to reopen, Governor Ducey had little choice but to close down gyms, theaters, water parks, and salons again on June 29.<sup>17</sup>

ARIZONA

## Positive Test Rate

Last updated July 21, 2020

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**CovidActNow.org**

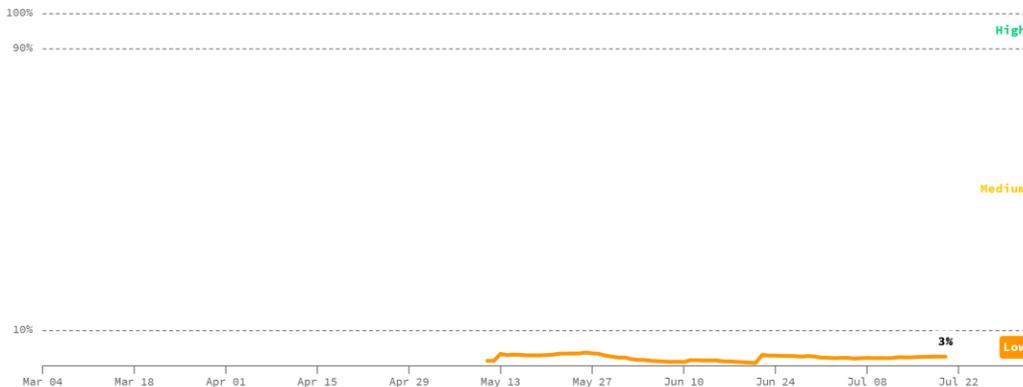
 Source: <https://covidactnow.org/us/az/?s=748129>

As the pandemic endures, contact tracing is another critical piece of the puzzle. Sadly, Arizona's record in this regard is dismal. To date, Arizona is able to trace only 3% of new COVID infections within 48 hours. Such low tracing rates indicate a new outbreak could be lurking—a serious threat to the public health. About 12,000 more staff are needed to do this critical public health work.<sup>18</sup>

ARIZONA

## Contacts Traced

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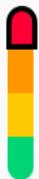
## Conclusion

There is no roadmap for how to manage a pandemic the scope and scale of COVID-19, especially in the absence of federal leadership. But many states have not suffered the catastrophic results that Arizona has. Why? Governors who began monitoring the virus when they first learned of it in January, who closely adhered to CDC guidelines—ending large public gatherings, establishing six-foot social distancing policies, recommending and modeling the use of face masks in public, and, when it became necessary, issuing stay-at-home orders—these states have fared far better, with lower COVID-19 cases per capita, fewer hospitalizations, and lower death rates. Arizona’s coronavirus risk is at a critical juncture, and leadership must step up to reverse the trend.

## Arizona

SHARE

RECEIVE ALERTS



COVID THREAT LEVEL

### Active or imminent outbreak

Arizona is either actively experiencing an outbreak or is at extreme risk. COVID cases are exponentially growing and/or Arizona’s COVID preparedness is significantly below international standards.



UPDATES

### New key indicator added

We added daily new cases per 100k population. [Learn more](#)

### DAILY NEW CASES

● **42.0** PER 100K

Dangerous number of new cases

New Indicator

### INFECTION RATE

● **0.93**

COVID is still spreading, but slowly

### POSITIVE TEST RATE

● **23.4%**

Indicates dangerously little testing

### ICU HEADROOM USED

● **100%**

High risk of hospital overload

Beta

### CONTACTS TRACED

● **3%**

Too many cases and too little tracing

Beta

Source: <https://covidactnow.org/us/az/?s=748129>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/08/briefing/arizona-mary-trump-facebook-your-wednesday-briefing.html?searchResultPosition=8>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/7/8/21311347/arizona-coronavirus-pandemic-covid-outbreak>  
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/us/virus-arizona.html?searchResultPosition=1>  
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/us/virus-arizona.html?searchResultPosition=1>  
<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19\\_pandemic\\_in\\_Arizona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic_in_Arizona)  
<sup>6</sup> <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/7/8/21311347/arizona-coronavirus-pandemic-covid-outbreak>  
<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/us/virus-arizona.html?searchResultPosition=1>  
<sup>8</sup> <https://www.12news.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/no-doubt-about-it-covid-rebounding-in-arizona-did-state-reopen-too-soon/75-811d24e7-b248-494b-adc1-7244648073a0>  
<sup>9</sup> <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/7/8/21311347/arizona-coronavirus-pandemic-covid-outbreak>  
<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/us/virus-arizona.html?searchResultPosition=1>  
<sup>11</sup> <https://www.12news.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/no-doubt-about-it-covid-rebounding-in-arizona-did-state-reopen-too-soon/75-811d24e7-b248-494b-adc1-7244648073a0>  
<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/25/upshot/virus-testing-shortfall-arizona.html?searchResultPosition=7>  
<sup>13</sup> [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6928e3.htm?s\\_cid=mm6928e3\\_x](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6928e3.htm?s_cid=mm6928e3_x)  
<sup>14</sup> <https://ktar.com/story/3201303/arizona-gov-doug-ducey-qa-on-further-reopening-of-state-economy/>  
<sup>15</sup> <https://www.vox.com/future-perfect/2020/7/8/21311347/arizona-coronavirus-pandemic-covid-outbreak>  
<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gq.com/story/arizona-republican-face-mask>  
<sup>17</sup> <https://covidactnow.org/us/az/?s=748129>  
<sup>18</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/less-150-icu-beds-left-all-arizona-coronavirus-cases-spike-1516365>  
<sup>19</sup> <https://covidactnow.org/us/az/?s=748129>