

Reopening Snapshot May 4, 2020

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Although much of the world has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the hardest hit countries -- Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and Turkey -- have seen significant decreases in the number of new cases each day and are well below their peak caseload.

The United States is currently the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, with over 1,181,885 out of 3,607,469 confirmed global cases (as of May 5).ⁱ The U.S. has seen only a slight fall in the number of confirmed new cases and deaths in the last few weeks, even with social distancing measures implemented across states by late March.

At this time, more than half of the states (28 out of 50, excluding Washington, DC) have already begun or will shortly begin the reopening process by relaxing social distancing measures and opening businesses to the public. How states reopen, and how they make the decision to reopen, is important to understanding the future of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States. This is especially true given the uneven implementation of social distancing the United States has had until this point, likely a major underlying factor to America's failed attempt at bringing the COVID-19 caseload down as much as other countries.

To briefly explore the range of policies in different states, we here discuss the status of social distancing restrictions, reopening and communication about reopening plans in Maryland, Tennessee, South Carolina, and New York.

Maryland Snapshot

Maryland is on stay-at-home orders indefinitely, under the leadership of Republican Gov. Hogan. He has been very vocal in recent weeks, going as far as importing supplies and stockpiling them on private land to prevent confiscation from the federal government.ⁱⁱ

Maryland's plan, "Maryland Strong: Roadmap to Recovery,"ⁱⁱⁱ has been developed based on guidance from the federal government, Johns Hopkins Institution and the American Enterprise Instituteto guide Maryland in the reopening process. There are 4 essential building blocks outlined in the plan: 1) Expanded Testing Capacity, 2) Increased Hospital Surge Capacity, 3) Ramping Up Supply of PPE, 4) Robust Contact Tracing Operation.

The progress of these necessary steps to reopen are listed on the governor's website as "On Track" or "Ahead of Schedule." Though, **it is not clear by which metrics they are using to determine this process and what the ultimate concrete goals are.**

Since Maryland has yet to open, groups, such as Reopen Maryland, have now sued the Governor in federal court over lost revenue.^{iv} Hogan shows no sign of deviating from the aforementioned plan, at this current juncture.

Tennessee Snapshot

In Tennessee, Gov. Bill Lee, a Republican, recently began reopening most counties in the state in an accelerated fashion.

Restaurants began reopening on April 27th, retail stores on April 29th, and gyms and other non-essential businesses on May 1st, as the state's safer-at-home orders, already set to expire at midnight on April 30th, were not extended.^v

Gov. Lee explained his position for reopening the economy in his "Tennessee Pledge," a voluntary plan to help Tennesseans return to work in a safe environment. Gov. Lee cited that while "the direct threat to Tennesseans' health has been mitigated, the threat to their livelihoods has increased."^{vi}

Although the pledge noticeably failed to quantify the state's ability to respond to a potential increase in COVID-19 cases with increased testing and tracking, or even supply the total number of COVID-19 related cases and deaths at all, it did outline the hard facts of Tennessee's hurting economy, citing 413 thousand unemployment claims, \$870 million lost in net retail sales, and a 5 billion dollar decrease in the state's GDP.

The pledge attempts to outline universal business practices and expectations for employers/employees/consumers. However, **many of the guidelines** [e.g. "Sanitize all door handles, screens, phones, pens, keyboards and other areas of hand contact every two hours, at a minimum, and...sanitize all tabletop items, including condiments, after each table turns"] **may come off as unfeasible, even if they were to help prevent the spread of the virus.**

South Carolina Snapshot

After implementing stay-at-home orders in late March, South Carolina has begun the incremental loosening of restrictions. On May 4th, Gov. McMaster's stay-at-home orders expired, meaning there is no longer a \$100 fine for those outside of their home for reasons other than work, visiting family, exercising along or going to an essential business.^{vii}

First, Governor McMaster opened certain non-essential businesses (such as retail stores), beaches and waterways on April 21, 2020. Individual beaches were given jurisdiction over opening policies. Many beaches in the state opened and are now hosting visitors from out of state, without enforcement of social distancing in place.

Restaurants are soon to open outdoor seating options.

There does not appear to be any explanation of future steps in consideration, as there was in Maryland, nor are there metrics they seem to be following to ensure safe reopening.

Governor McMaster is confident as reflected in his statement: "We have a lot of people saying we are going too fast. Others say we are going too slow. I think we are doing it just right."^{viii}

New York Snapshot

On March 20th, 2020 at 8 pm, the Empire State was among the first to issue statewide stay-at-home orders under the leadership of Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo. New York City, the hardest hit city in America in terms of both total COVID-19 cases and deaths, has diligently been on lockdown since that time.^{ix}

A briefing in late April found Gov. Cuomo likely to extend his stay-at-home orders beyond May 15th in many parts of the state.^x However, he did acknowledge that restrictions may be relaxed in some regions, **pending sufficient hospital capacity** and

the meeting of other criteria. What the standards will be for lifting restrictions has yet to be detailed.

How are states doing?

Reviewing these four state reopening plans, it appears that there is a **lack of concrete goals** that must be met prior to reopening. Instead, governors, finding themselves in uncharted waters, appear to be making decisions (with data not always known apparent to the public) both independent from neighboring states and at odds with the federal reopening guidelines.

Maryland's plan contained the most detailed outline of goals that must be met prior to reopening, but there is still a lack of transparency on how these goals will be assessed and how they will inform future decision making.

Overall, economic considerations are cited by many states that are reopening as the main motivation for lifting restrictions, while states on lock-down worry about the devastation a second wave of cases could bring should restrictions be eased too early.

ⁱ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/>, as of May 5, 2020

ⁱⁱ <https://www.baltimoresun.com/coronavirus/bs-md-hogan-testing-20200420-atxs3grvbjdgphzzt4tfhuhnbm-story.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://governor.maryland.gov/recovery/>

^{iv} <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/maryland-governor-larry-hogan-sued-stay-at-home-order/>

^v <https://www.tn.gov/health/cedep/ncov.html>

^{vi} https://www.tn.gov/content/dam/tn/governorsoffice-documents/covid-19-assets/ERG_Guidelines_Deck.pdf

^{vii} <https://governor.sc.gov>, Executive Order 2020-28

^{viii} <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/article242463211.html>

^{ix} <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/us/states-reopen-map-coronavirus.html>

^x <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/nyregion/new-york-coronavirus-reopening.html>