

Big city, big worry: New Yorkers fret as bustling city slows

March 13 2020, by Michael Hill, Jennifer Peltz and Jim Mustian



A pedestrian wearing a face mask stops in Times Square, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday he will announce new restrictions on gatherings to halt the spread of the new coronavirus in the coming days. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

New Yorkers awoke Friday to find the coronavirus had left their famously bustling city with no Broadway, no basketball games, no big gatherings, and a populace unnerved by an ever-worsening crisis.

A dizzying series of temporary coronavirus-related closures announced Thursday included some of the [city's](#) cultural jewels: The Metropolitan Opera, Metropolitan Museum of Art, the American Museum of Natural History and Carnegie Hall.

It wasn't just high culture. The St. Patrick's Day parade will not step off next week. Concerts were canceled. NBA games were scuttled. CBS News, which temporarily shut down its city headquarters Wednesday after two employees tested positive, continued to air its local Thursday night broadcast—from Los Angeles.

Restaurants, subway cars and sidewalks were noticeably emptier. Without a flake of snow, the city began to take on the thinned-out look it gets after winter blizzards, with people telecommuting to work or avoiding [public places](#). Colleges across the city were closed or having students attend class online.

"People are scared to come outside," said Justin Rahim, a tour guide at Manhattan's Central Park, who said several of his pedicab drivers—reliant on tourists for their living—quit Thursday to drive for Uber's food delivery service. "It's crazy. How am I going to survive this?"



A mask-wearing costumed character in Times Square looks through bills during a lull in activity Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York. Earlier Thursday, Gov. Andrew Cuomo banned gatherings of 500 or more people. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

The virus, as of Thursday afternoon, had been confirmed in more than 320 people in New York state, including 95 in the city, and had caused one death in the metropolitan area.

But after weeks of assuring residents that fear of the virus had outstripped the actual danger, New York's governor and mayor abruptly shifted course.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced Thursday that in an attempt to stop the

virus from spreading, gatherings with more than 500 people would temporarily be banned in the state, starting in most places at 5 p.m. Friday, though evening shows on Broadway were called off a day sooner.

Many gatherings in smaller event spaces would have to cut capacity in half.

The restrictions, imposed by an emergency order, don't apply to schools, hospitals, nursing homes, shopping malls and mass transit, and there were exceptions for other types of businesses, like casino floors.



A commuter wears a face mask while riding the a nearly empty subway car into Brooklyn, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday he will announce new restrictions on gatherings to halt the spread of the new coronavirus in the coming days, but he hopes to avoid

closing all public events such as Broadway shows. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

People are also still free to go to work. Mayor Bill de Blasio, while pointing out the outbreak could last six months or longer, counseled against giving up.

"The city has to keep going," de Blasio said on Fox 5 news Friday morning. "We need people to have their livelihoods. We need folks to show up at work. We need our public servants to be where we need them to be to take care of folks—hospitals schools, first responders."

Yet it was clear the slowdown would be painful for a city that relies on the economic engines of tourism, entertainment and Wall Street.

Restaurants and nightspots around the city are reporting drop-offs of 20-80% over the last week, particularly in the tourist-friendly area around Times Square, said Andrew Rigie, the executive director of the NYC Hospitality Alliance.

David Turk, who owns a Manhattan catering business, said the fallout for him started a week ago. First, one big event was nixed. Within a week, everything booked through May was either canceled or postponed.



Members of the New York National Guard help to organize and distribute food to families on free or reduced school lunch programs in New Rochelle, N.Y., Thursday, March 12, 2020. State officials have set up a "containment area" in the New York City suburb, where schools and houses of worship are closed within a 1-mile radius of a point near a synagogue where an infected person with coronavirus had attended events. State officials stress it is not a lockdown. The vast majority of people recover from the new coronavirus. According to the World Health Organization, most people recover in about two to six weeks, depending on the severity of the illness. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

Turk remembers the dark days after 9/11, but "that had a beginning and an end to it. This has no foreseeable end to it," he said. "It's the uncertainty that's really driving the fear for a lot of us running small business."

Throughout the day Thursday, New Yorkers' sense of unease was compounded by false rumors, spread on social media, that an even larger clampdown was in the works, involving mass quarantines, bans on private vehicles and a cancellation of train service.

"It's just not true," Cuomo said on 1010 WINS radio in the early evening. "This is all crazy rumors now. Anxiety is high, I understand it. People are nervous about the coronavirus. But no, subways are not closing down. Roads are not closing. New York City is not closing down."

Lines stretched around the block at supermarkets on Thursday as New Yorkers prepared to hunker down and wait out the virus. Empty shelves greeted shoppers seeking toilet paper and other staples.



Pedestrian uses her phone while wearing a face mask in Herald Square, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday he will announce new restrictions on gatherings to halt the spread of the new coronavirus in the coming days, but he hopes to avoid closing all public events such as Broadway shows. For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. For some it can cause more severe illness. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

Parents citywide fretted about whether New York City's public school system, with its 1.2 million pupils, might be shut down, as happened in nearby New Rochelle, a suburb that has been an epicenter of the outbreak in the U.S.

De Blasio said he hopes to avoid a closure of either the schools or [mass transit](#). He said health care workers and first responders on the front lines of the crisis would face hurdles in getting to work without the transit system and with children home from school.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The vast majority of people recover.

Still, the total number of people with the illness in the city is unknown due to the relative scarcity of tests. And for some, the danger is all too real.



Shoppers wear masks while carrying their groceries out of a supermarket, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in the Brooklyn borough of New York. Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday he will announce new restrictions on gatherings to halt the spread of the new coronavirus in the coming days, but he hopes to avoid closing all public events such as Broadway shows. The vast majority of people recover from the new coronavirus. According to the World Health Organization, most people recover in about two to six weeks, depending on the severity of the illness. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

On Tuesday, John Brennan, a New Jersey resident and a horse trainer at Yonkers Raceway, just north of the city, was killed by the virus.

Two days later, a close colleague at the track, Standardbred Owners Association President Joseph Faraldo, said he was quarantined in his

New York City home waiting for his own test results.

"He could have infected the entire paddock, because he had contact with everybody," said Faraldo, who fell ill himself a week ago. He said he was tested Wednesday at a medical facility in Queens and expected to get the results back by Friday.

"I think I was pretty lucky," he said. "I wasn't there more than 40 minutes. They asked a whole series of questions and I told them I was in the company of a person who had died from this. They were very nice."

The institutional closings come amid signs that New Yorkers are acting on their own to avoid crowds. Ridership on the subway and commuter rail lines has plunged, state officials said.



A pedestrian wears a face mask while crossing West 34th Street in New York on Thursday, March 12, 2020. Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday he will announce new restrictions on gatherings to halt the spread of the new coronavirus in the coming days, but he hopes to avoid closing all public events such as Broadway shows. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)



People embrace inside a coffee shop as a U.S. flag is reflected by the store's window Thursday, March 12, 2020, in Times Square in New York. Broadway theaters were shuttered Thursday after New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo banned gatherings of more than 500 people amid a rise in coronavirus cases. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)



Brooklyn resident and waitress Casey Stewart peers out from a ski mask she adapted to protect herself from coronavirus after riding the subway to Times Square, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York to see for herself the virus outbreak's effect on the city. She is also wearing a protective mask beneath the ski mask. Stewart, who works at two restaurants, said she's definitely noticed a drop in the number of customers. She's also concerned because at least one of the places she works may have to close for at least a week or possibly longer. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)



A man checks his cellphone near shelves at a New York City Trader Joe's market in disarray, Thursday, March 12, 2020. Coronavirus fears have some New Yorkers stocking up on essentials as uncertainty grows over what would be available and whether they would be able to leave home to get what they need. (Sarah Vaynerman via AP)



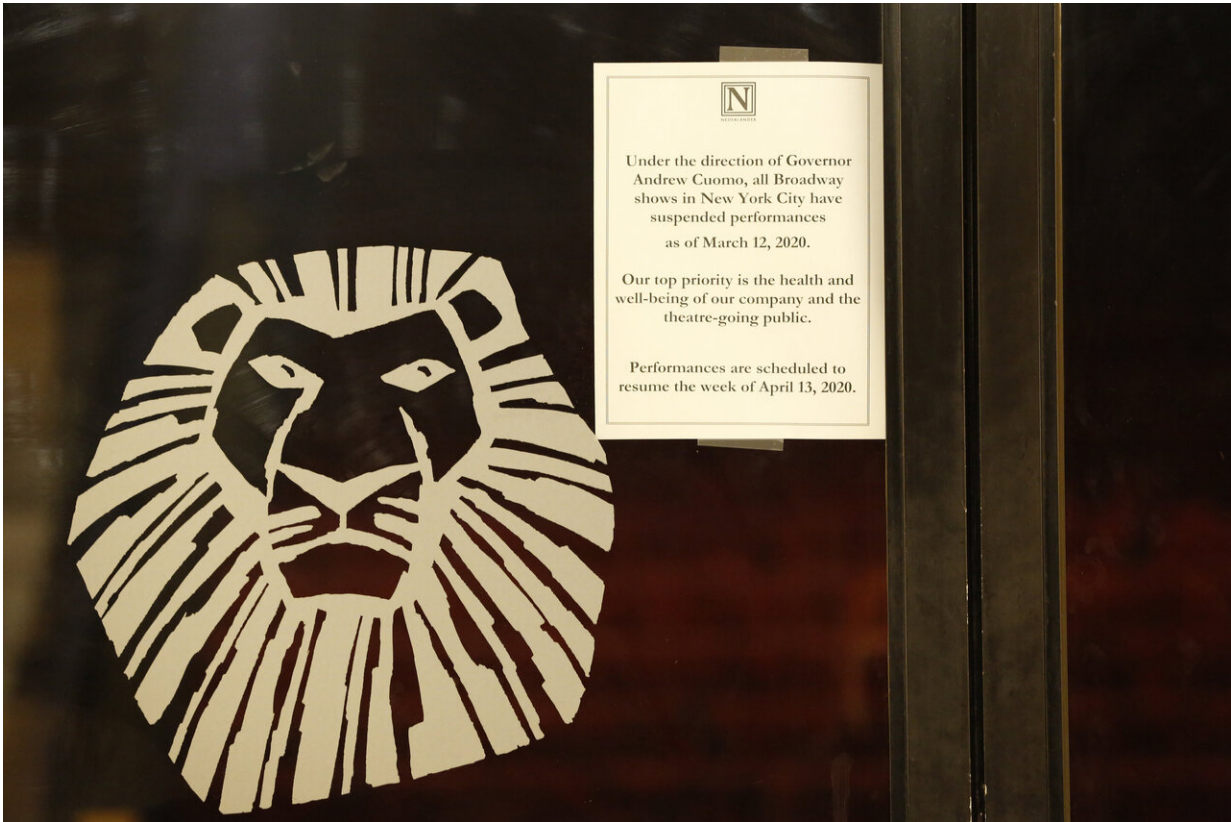
Tourists, including one using a scarf to protect her face against coronavirus in spite of relatively mild winter temperatures, walk through Times Square, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York. New York's Gov. Cuomo banned gatherings of more than 500 people in the city, forcing Broadway theaters and many city attractions to close. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)



A sign on the door of the David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center Thursday, March 12, 2020, announces the cancellation of Shen Yun performances through March 29, in New York. Nearly all of Lincoln Center's performance spaces closed their doors after New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced a temporary statewide ban on gatherings of more than 500 people. For most people the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)



A pedestrian passes an entrance to the Barclays Center in the Brooklyn borough of New York on Thursday, March 12, 2020, after the NCAA's Atlantic 10 Conference Tournament was announced cancelled due to concerns over the COVID-19 coronavirus. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)



A sign announcing the suspension of all Broadway shows is posted on a door at the Minskoff Theatre, where "The Lion King" had been playing, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York. Gov. Andrew Cuomo banned gatherings of more than 500 people. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)



A mask-wearing woman walks in front of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York. Most of Lincoln Center's performance space including the Metropolitan Opera, shuttered their doors Thursday after New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo temporarily banned gatherings of more than 500 people amid a rise in cases of coronavirus. For most people the new virus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness including pneumonia. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)



A poster advertising "The Phantom of the Opera" is shown on the shuttered Majestic Theatre on a nearly deserted side street near Times Square, Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York, after New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo banned gatherings of more than 500 people amid a rise in coronavirus cases. The ban for Broadway theaters started Thursday and will be in effect through April 12, according to a statement from the Broadway League, an organization of theater owners and producers. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)



The Minskoff Theatre is shuttered Thursday, March 12, 2020, in New York, near Times Square after Broadway theaters closed following New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's banning of gatherings of more than 500 people over concerns about the spread of the coronavirus. (AP Photo/Kathy Willens)

At the National September 11 Memorial and Museum, security officers reported some of the sparsest crowds they've seen as they prepared to shutter the popular museum Friday.

The coronavirus dominated conversation, even out on city parks where joggers were intent on maintaining some semblance of normalcy.

Danielle Xuereb, 38, of Manhattan, had been preparing to run a half-marathon but learned it was cancelled.

"I've been working from home and will probably continue to and probably lay low for a week or two," she said. "Maybe not go to my normal yoga classes. I guess my main concern is how long this will all last."

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