

# Half a million dead in US, confirming virus's tragic reach

February 23 2021, by Adam Geller

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In this July 31, 2020, file photo, Romelia Navarro, 64, weeps while hugging her husband, Antonio, in his final moments in a COVID-19 unit at St. Jude Medical Center in Fullerton, Calif. The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 has almost topped 500,000—a number so staggering that a top health researchers says it is hard to imagine an American who hasn't lost a relative or doesn't know someone who died. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

For weeks after Cindy Pollock began planting tiny flags across her yard—one for each of the more than 1,800 Idahoans killed by COVID-19—the toll was mostly a number. Until two women she had never met rang her doorbell in tears, seeking a place to mourn the husband and father they had just lost.

Then Pollock knew her tribute, however heartfelt, would never begin to convey the grief of a pandemic that has now claimed 500,000 lives in the U.S. and counting.

"I just wanted to hug them," she said. "Because that was all I could do."

After a year that has darkened doorways across the U.S., the pandemic surpassed a milestone Monday that once seemed unimaginable, a stark confirmation of the virus's reach into all corners of the country and communities of every size and makeup.

"It's very hard for me to imagine an American who doesn't know someone who has died or have a family member who has died," said Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics at the University of Washington in Seattle. "We haven't really fully understood how bad it is, how devastating it is, for all of us."

Experts warn that about 90,000 more deaths are likely in the next few months, despite a massive campaign to vaccinate people. Meanwhile, the nation's trauma continues to accrue in a way unparalleled in recent American life, said Donna Schuurman of the Dougy Center for Grieving Children & Families in Portland, Oregon.



CORRECTS SPELLING OF LAST NAME ON FIRST REFERENCE - Cindy Pollock does maintenance on the construction flags in her front yard in Boise, Idaho, on Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021. Pollock began planting the tiny flags across her yard—one for each of the more than 1,800 Idahoans killed by COVID-19—the toll was mostly a number. Until two women she had never met rang her doorbell in tears, seeking a place to mourn the husband and father they had just lost. (AP Photo/Otto Kitsinger)

At other moments of epic loss, like the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Americans have pulled together to confront crisis and console survivors. But this time, the nation is deeply divided. Staggering numbers of families are dealing with [death](#), serious illness and financial hardship. And many are left to cope in isolation, unable even to hold funerals.

"In a way, we're all grieving," said Schuurman, who has counseled the families of those killed in terrorist attacks, natural disasters and school shootings.

In recent weeks, virus deaths have fallen from more than 4,000 reported on some days in January to an average of fewer than 1,900 per day.

Still, at half a million, the toll recorded by Johns Hopkins University is already greater than the population of Miami or Kansas City, Missouri. It is roughly equal to the number of Americans killed in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War combined. It is akin to a 9/11 every day for nearly six months.



Cindy Pollock poses for a portrait in Boise, Idaho, on Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021. Pollock began planting the tiny flags across her yard—one for each of the

more than 1,800 Idahoans killed by COVID-19—the toll was mostly a number. Until two women she had never met rang her doorbell in tears, seeking a place to mourn the husband and father they had just lost. (AP Photo/Otto Kitsinger)

"The people we lost were extraordinary," President Joe Biden said Monday, urging Americans to remember the individual lives claimed by the virus, rather than be numbed by the enormity of the toll.

"Just like that," he said, "so many of them took their final breath alone in America."

The toll, accounting for 1 in 5 deaths reported worldwide, has far exceeded early projections, which assumed that federal and state governments would marshal a comprehensive and sustained response and individual Americans would heed warnings.

Instead, a push to reopen the economy last spring and the refusal by many to maintain social distancing and wear face masks fueled the spread.

The figures alone do not come close to capturing the heartbreak.

"I never once doubted that he was not going to make it. ... I so believed in him and my faith," said Nancy Espinoza, whose husband, Antonio, was hospitalized with COVID-19 last month.



In this Jan. 9, 2021, file photo, Chaplain Kristin Michealsen holds the hand of a deceased COVID-19 patient while talking on the phone with the patient's family member at Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in the Mission Hills section of Los Angeles. "I have never seen this much of death and suffering," said Michealsen, who has been a chaplain for 13 years. "I often tell families that I'm holding their loved one's hand when they can't and that I am with them when they are dying when they can't be." (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)

The couple from Riverside County, California, had been together since high school. They pursued parallel nursing careers and started a family. Then, on Jan. 25, Nancy was called to Antonio's bedside just before his heart beat its last. He was 36 and left behind a 3-year-old son.

"Today it's us. And tomorrow it could be anybody," Nancy Espinoza

said.

By late last fall, 54 percent of Americans reported knowing someone who had died of COVID-19 or had been hospitalized with it, according to a Pew Research Center poll. The grieving was even more widespread among Black Americans, Hispanics and other minorities.

Deaths have nearly doubled since then, with the scourge spreading far beyond the Northeast and Northwest metropolitan areas slammed by the virus last spring and the Sun Belt cities hit hard last summer.



In this July 7, 2020, file photo, Nurse Cindy Kelbert, left, checks on a critically ill COVID-19 patient through a glass door as she is surrounded by other nurses at St. Jude Medical Center in Fullerton, Calif. The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 has almost topped 500,000—a number so staggering that a top health researchers

says it is hard to imagine an American who hasn't lost a relative or doesn't know someone who died. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

In some places, the seriousness of the threat was slow to sink in.

When a beloved professor at a community college in Petoskey, Michigan, died last spring, residents mourned, but many remained doubtful of the threat's severity, Mayor John Murphy said. That changed over the summer after a local family hosted a party in a barn. Of the 50 who attended, 33 became infected. Three died, he said.

"I think at a distance people felt 'This isn't going to get me,'" Murphy said. "But over time, the attitude has totally changed from 'Not me. Not our area. I'm not old enough,' to where it became the real deal."

For Anthony Hernandez, whose Emmerson-Bartlett Memorial Chapel in Redlands, California, has been overwhelmed handling burial of COVID-19 victims, the most difficult conversations have been the ones without answers, as he sought to comfort mothers, fathers and children who lost loved ones.





In this Feb. 11, 2021, file photo, people are administered COVID-19 vaccines at a vaccination center, at Gillette Stadium, in Foxborough, Mass. The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 has almost topped 500,000—a number so staggering that a top health researchers says it is hard to imagine an American who hasn't lost a relative or doesn't know someone who died. (AP Photo/Steven Senne, File)



In this May 2, 2020, file photo, siblings Erika and Dwayne Bermudez comfort one another during a short viewing of their mother, Eudiana Smith, who died of coronavirus, at The Family Funeral Home in Newark, N.J. "I was robbed of the experience of being able to celebrate her life in a manner that would offer some kind of respect for the woman she was," Erika Bermudez said. She did her best, live-streaming the ceremony to friends and family who couldn't attend. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)



In this Jan. 26, 2021, file photo, with indentations from a N-95 mask marking her face, registered nurse Lilyrose Fox peels protective tape from her nose after working in patients rooms in the COVID acute care unit at UW Medical Center-Montlake, in Seattle. The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 has almost topped 500,000—a number so staggering that a top health researchers says it is hard to imagine an American who hasn't lost a relative or doesn't know someone who died. (AP Photo/Elaine Thompson, File)



In this Nov. 24, 2020, file photo, registered nurse Shelly Girardin, left, is illuminated by the glow of a computer monitor as Dr. Shane Wilson examines COVID-19 patient Neva Azinger inside Scotland County Hospital in Memphis, Mo. The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 has almost topped 500,000—a number so staggering that a top health researchers says it is hard to imagine an American who hasn't lost a relative or doesn't know someone who died. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson, File)



In this Jan. 7, 2021, file photo, a COVID-19 patient is put on a ventilator at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange, Calif. The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 has almost topped 500,000—a number so staggering that a top health researchers says it is hard to imagine an American who hasn't lost a relative or doesn't know someone who died. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong, File)



In this July 21, 2020, file photo, Samuel Nunez cries as he eulogizes his daughter Lydia Nunez, who died from COVID-19, during a funeral service in memory of her at the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Los Angeles. The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 has almost topped 500,000—a number so staggering that a top health researchers says it is hard to imagine an American who hasn't lost a relative or doesn't know someone who died. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez, File)



In this April 22, 2020, file photo, pallbearers, who were among only 10 allowed mourners, walk the casket for internment at the funeral for Larry Hammond, who died from the coronavirus, at Mount Olivet Cemetery in New Orleans. Hammond was Mardi Gras royalty, and would have had hundreds of people marching behind his casket in second-line parades. (AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File)

His chapel, which arranges 25 to 30 services in an ordinary month, handled 80 in January. He had to explain to some families that they would need to wait weeks for a burial.

"At one point, we had every gurney, every dressing table, every embalming table had somebody on it," he said.

In Boise, Idaho, Pollock started the memorial in her yard last fall to counter what she saw as widespread denial of the threat. When deaths spiked in December, she was planting 25 to 30 new flags at a time. But her frustration has been eased somewhat by those who slow or stop to pay respect or to mourn.

"I think that is part of what I was wanting, to get people talking," she said, "Not just like, 'Look at how many flags are in the yard today compared to last month,' but trying to help people who have lost loved ones talk to other people."

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