

Mass testing, mask wearing help Detroit slow virus' pace

March 7 2021, by Corey Williams



Yvonne Gibbs, 72, receives Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine, Jan. 27, 2021, at the TCF Center in Detroit. COVID-19 hit Detroit hard. But fast action by city leaders early in the pandemic may have slowed the rampant advance of the virus among Detroit's largely Black population. Detroit recorded 431 confirmed COVID cases on March 30, 2020, and another 387 two days later, according to the city's Health Department. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio)

It was March 11 last year when Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan announced that the St. Patrick's Day parade was canceled because a virus that had already sickened tens of thousands worldwide had reached Michigan.

"All those folks standing shoulder to shoulder for hours, it was a recipe for the spread of the problem," Duggan told reporters at the time. He said it would be "a matter of days" before a city resident was infected.

He was right. COVID-19 hit Detroit hard. But fast action by [city leaders](#) early in the pandemic may have slowed the rampant advance of the [virus](#) among Detroit's largely Black population.

Detroit [recorded 431 confirmed COVID cases on March 30, 2020](#), and another 387 two days later, according to the city's Health Department. There were 49 confirmed deaths on April 1, another 51 on April 9 and 52 on April 16.

"We know Detroit was one of the first in the nation to be hit by COVID," said Renuka Tipirneni, an assistant professor of internal medicine at the University of Michigan. "People live in more crowded housing, need public transportation to get to work in essential jobs."

But Detroit fought to get its residents tested for the virus early on, and had "a very targeted and robust messaging campaign," said Dr. Joneigh Khaldun, Michigan's chief medical executive.

Duggan appeared on Facebook, YouTube and TV, urging residents to mask up, social distance and stay home.

He made Detroit among the first cities in the U.S. to deploy Abbott Laboratories tests that provide results in minutes, allowing police and firefighters to avoid quarantine if they tested negative after possible exposure.

Detroit also instituted free, mass drive-thru testing at the former state fairgrounds. Virus testing was conducted at homeless shelters, too.

"The actions of the city of Detroit did save lives," Khaldun told The Associated Press. "People who needed a test, got a test. People had the right information about the virus and how to protect themselves against the virus. That's where you are going to see virus numbers come down."

But Detroit hasn't escaped tragedy. More than 30,000 cases have been confirmed in the city, and close to 1,900 residents have died.

In late August, Belle Isle—a state park in the Detroit River—was transformed into a memorial for grieving families who slowly drove past hundreds of photos of loved ones who had succumbed to the virus.

People of color nationwide have been disproportionately infected and killed by the virus, and most of the faces in the photos on Belle Isle were Black. Nearly eight out of 10 of Detroit's 670,000 residents are African American.

The elderly and poor are also susceptible. About 20% of Detroiters are age 60 and older. Detroit's poverty rate is among the nation's highest.

By the second week in April, Duggan said the "center of the battle" was in Detroit nursing homes after 11 deaths and 141 confirmed infections. The city launched daily rapid testing of nursing home residents and staff.



Robert Huguley, 74, receives Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine, Jan. 27, 2021, at the TCF Center in Detroit. COVID-19 hit Detroit hard. But fast action by city leaders early in the pandemic may have slowed the rampant advance of the virus among Detroit's largely Black population. Detroit recorded 431 confirmed COVID cases on March 30, 2020, and another 387 two days later, according to the city's Health Department. (AP Photo/Carlos Osorio)

This "was a good strategy," said 60-year-old Sherry Evans, whose 81-year-old mother, Ilene Hegler, suffered from dementia and was then living in a nursing home outside Detroit.

"The nursing home contacted me around April 18-19 saying she had a fever," said Evans, of Dearborn Heights. "They called me back and said she tested positive. They called me back again and said they couldn't

beat the fever."

Her mother died April 21.

"They were more sensitive in Detroit that the virus was killing older people and Blacks," Evans said.

The city reported around 149 new COVID-19 cases and about 20 deaths on April 23. Newly confirmed cases on July 1 numbered around 39, and health officials started seeing fewer daily deaths. But cases began trending up in late fall. On Nov. 30—following the Thanksgiving holiday—about 329 new cases were confirmed. The numbers have since dropped.

"I think (Duggan's) leadership, along with that of the Black church, both played major roles," said the Rev. Kenneth Flowers, who lives outside Detroit, but whose Greater New Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church is in the heart of the city.

The city worked with churches and other organizations to preach the importance of masking up, said Flowers, who along with his wife, two daughters, sisters and 90-year-old mother have all recovered from the virus.

"We did testing in our church," Flowers said. "It saddens and angers me when I see a lot of people in certain areas not wearing their masks and not taking it seriously."

When the city began receiving vaccine doses in December, it opened up a downtown convention center garage for drive-thru vaccinations for people ages 75 and older, before dropping the age limit.

The city is "realizing the importance of meeting people where they are,"

said Rashawn Ray, a David M. Rubenstein Fellow in Governance Studies at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, who co-authored a [report](#) on COVID-19 in Detroit. "Drive-thrus are exactly what should be happening."

An Associated Press analysis of vaccination data from 17 states and two cities that released racial breakdowns through Jan. 25 shows fewer Black people being inoculated than the rest of the population.

Duggan said he has received a commitment from President Joe Biden's White House for 15,000 weekly doses of the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines. The city has administered more than 100,000 vaccination doses.

Duggan also said the city will make the Johnson & Johnson vaccine available.

For those reporting their race, about 82% of those who have received at least one shot are Black.

Robert Huguley, a 74-year-old Black man who lives in Detroit, was vaccinated last month at the TCF Center.

"I think they're doing the best they can," he said of the [city's](#) efforts to vaccinate as many people as quickly as possible. "We need more vaccine. Without the vaccine there's not a lot you can do."

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