

People gave up on flu pandemic measures a century ago when they tired of them – and paid a price

March 24 2021, by J. Alexander Navarro

How many extra deaths occurred in 1918-1920 pandemic?

Excess deaths in the state of Michigan over the course of the influenza pandemic reflect the disease surges that occurred across the nation – an initial wave in spring 1918, a second bigger wave in fall of that year, another that extended into that winter and a final wave at the start of 1920. Excess deaths are those above the average amount public health officials expect for the time of year, based on what's happened normally in the past.



Credit: Chart: The Conversation, CC-BY-ND Source: Siddharth Chandra, Julia Christensen, Madhur Chandra, Nigel Paneth, “Pandemic Reemergence and Four Waves of Excess Mortality Coinciding With the 1918 Influenza Pandemic in Michigan: Insights for COVID-19”, American Journal of Public Health 111, no. 3 (March 1, 2021): pp. 430-437.

Picture the United States struggling to deal with a deadly pandemic.

State and local officials enact a slate of social-distancing measures, gathering bans, closure orders and mask mandates in an effort to stem the tide of cases and deaths.

The public responds with widespread compliance mixed with more than a hint of grumbling, pushback and even outright defiance. As the days turn into weeks turn into months, the strictures become harder to tolerate.

[Theater and dance hall owners complain](#) about their financial losses.

[Clergy bemoan church closures](#) while offices, factories and in some cases even saloons are allowed to remain open.

[Officials argue whether children are safer in classrooms](#) or at home.

[Many citizens refuse to don face masks while in public](#), some complaining that they're uncomfortable and others arguing that the government has no right to infringe on their civil liberties.

As familiar as it all may sound in 2021, these are real descriptions of the U.S. during the deadly 1918 influenza pandemic. [In my research as a historian of medicine](#), I've seen again and again the many ways our current pandemic has mirrored the one experienced by our forebears a century ago.

As the COVID-19 pandemic enters its second year, many people want to know when life will go back to how it was before the coronavirus. History, of course, isn't an exact template for what the future holds. But the way Americans emerged from the earlier pandemic could suggest what post-pandemic life will be like this time around.

Sick and tired, ready for pandemic's end

Like COVID-19, the 1918 influenza pandemic hit hard and fast, going from a handful of reported cases in a few cities to a nationwide outbreak within a few weeks. Many communities issued several rounds of various closure orders—corresponding to the ebbs and flows of their epidemics—in an attempt to keep the disease in check.

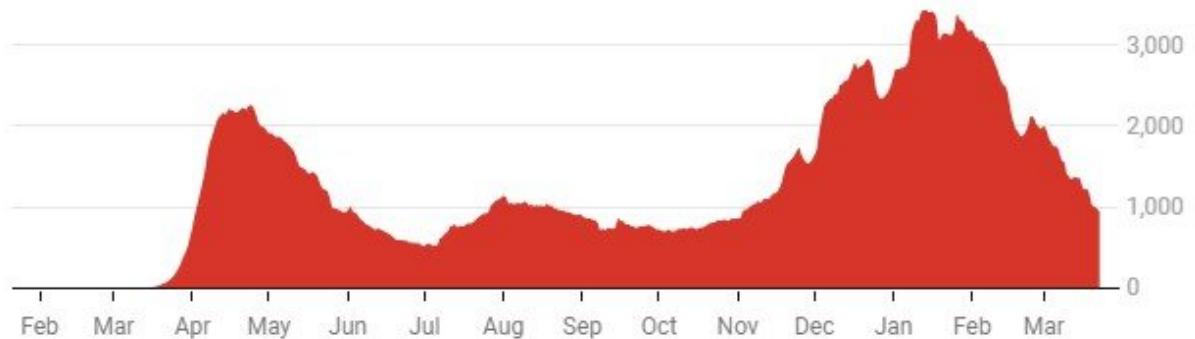
[These social-distancing orders worked](#) to reduce cases and deaths. Just as today, however, they often proved difficult to maintain. By the late autumn, just weeks after the social-distancing orders went into effect, the pandemic seemed to be coming to an end as the number of new infections declined.

People clamored to return to their normal lives. Businesses pressed officials to be allowed to reopen. Believing the pandemic was over, state and local authorities began rescinding public health edicts. The nation turned its efforts to addressing the devastation influenza had wrought.

For the friends, families and co-workers of the [hundreds of thousands of Americans who had died](#), post-pandemic life was filled with sadness and grief. Many of those still recovering from their bouts with the malady required support and care as they recuperated.

New confirmed COVID-19 deaths in the U.S., per day

Daily deaths from the coronavirus in March 2021 are roughly equivalent to those during August 2020, when many closures and restrictions were still firmly in place.



Seven-day rolling average of the number of people confirmed to have died from COVID-19, per day (not including today). This chart gets updated once per day with data by Johns Hopkins. Johns Hopkins University didn't provide reliable data for March 12 and March 13, 2020. Credit: Chart: Datawrapper/The Conversation Source: Johns Hopkins CSSE

At a time when there was no federal or state safety net, charitable organizations sprang into action to provide resources for families who had lost their breadwinners, or [to take in the countless children left orphaned](#) by the disease.

For the vast majority of Americans, though, life after the pandemic seemed to be a headlong rush to normalcy. Starved for weeks of their nights on the town, sporting events, religious services, classroom interactions and family gatherings, many were eager to return to their old lives.

Taking their cues from officials who had—somewhat prematurely—declared an end to the pandemic, Americans

overwhelmingly hurried to return to their pre-pandemic routines. [They packed into movie theaters](#) and dance halls, crowded in stores and shops, and gathered with friends and family.

Officials had warned the nation that cases and deaths likely would continue for months to come. The burden of public health, however, now rested not on policy but [rather on individual responsibility](#).

Predictably, the pandemic wore on, stretching into a third deadly wave that lasted through the spring of 1919, with a fourth wave hitting in the winter of 1920. Some officials blamed the resurgence on careless Americans. [Others downplayed the new cases](#) or turned their attention to more routine public health matters, including other diseases, restaurant inspections and sanitation.

Despite the persistence of the pandemic, influenza quickly became old news. Once a regular feature of front pages, reportage rapidly dwindled to small, sporadic clippings buried in the backs of the nation's newspapers. The nation carried on, inured to the toll the pandemic had taken and the deaths yet to come. People were largely unwilling to return to socially and economically disruptive public health measures.

It's hard to hang in there

Our predecessors might be forgiven for not staying the course longer. First, the nation was eager [to celebrate](#) the recent [end of World War I](#), an event that perhaps loomed larger in the lives of Americans than even the pandemic.

Second, death from disease was a much larger part of life in the early 20th century, and scourges such as diphtheria, measles, tuberculosis, typhoid, whooping cough, scarlet fever and pneumonia each routinely [killed tens of thousands of Americans every year](#). Moreover, neither the

cause nor the epidemiology of influenza was well understood, and many experts remained unconvinced that social distancing measures had any measurable impact.

Finally, there were no effective flu vaccines to rescue the world from the ravages of the disease. In fact, the influenza virus would not be [discovered for another 15 years, and a safe and effective vaccine](#) was not available for the general population until 1945. Given the [limited information](#) they had and the tools at their disposal, Americans perhaps endured the public health restrictions for as long as they reasonably could.

A century later, and a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, it is understandable that people now are all too eager to return to their old lives. The end of this pandemic inevitably will come, as it has with every previous one humankind has experienced.

If we have anything to learn from the history of the 1918 influenza pandemic, as well as our experience thus far with COVID-19, however, it is that a premature return to pre-pandemic life risks more cases and more deaths.

And today's Americans have significant advantages over those of a century ago. We have a much better understanding of virology and epidemiology. We know that [social distancing](#) and [masking work to help save lives](#). Most critically, we have multiple safe and effective vaccines that are being deployed, with [the pace of vaccinations increasingly weekly](#).

Sticking with all these [coronavirus](#)-fighting factors or easing off on them could mean the difference between a [new disease surge](#) and a quicker end to the [pandemic](#). COVID-19 is much more transmissible than influenza, and [several troubling SARS-CoV-2 variants are already](#)

[spreading](#) around the globe. The deadly third wave of influenza in 1919 shows what can happen when people prematurely relax their guard.

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