

A NOVEL
CORONAVIRUS IN CHINA
THAT STARTED TO MAKE
BACK-PAGE HEADLINES AT THE
END OF 2019 RECEIVED SCANT IF
ANY ATTENTION BY MANY IN THE U.S.
IT DIDN'T AFFECT US—UNTIL IT DID.
TODAY, OUR COUNTRY HAS THE MOST
REPORTED DEATHS FROM COVID-19 IN
THE WORLD, AND THE PROGNOSIS
FOR 2021 IS STILL UNCERTAIN.
BY JEFFERY FRASER

GOING ON 21

Few New Year's Eve revelers in Pittsburgh took notice of the news quietly reported nearly 7,500 miles away that day. A cluster of people with pneumonia in Wuhan, China, had researchers scratching their heads. Dozens of people were infected by a virus never seen before, for which there was no vaccine or known treatment. Within months, everyone would know COVID-19 as an inescapable part of their lives.

Tens of millions of people have been infected across the globe. Only a handful of nations have so far been spared. Nearly 1.6 million people worldwide who were alive at the dawn of 2020 were dead from the virus by the beginning of December, including more than 285,000 Americans, and over 11,500 who lived in Pennsylvania.

The first warning of the magnitude of the peril came in January, when China took the unprecedented step of shutting down Wuhan, putting an entire city of 11 million people under quarantine.

Scientists scrambled to decipher the new disease—a coronavirus, like the common cold and MERS, but with frightening traits. Respiratory distress and lung damage can be severe. Mortality is high. And the more cases seen, the more evidence emerges that it can inflict broader harm, such as causing blood to clot and damaging the heart, brain and other organs.

One of COVID-19's remarkable traits is its stealth. People infected can go a week or two without symptoms, or never exhibit them at all, leading them to unknowingly transmit it to friends, family and strangers with a cough, sneeze or close conversation.

The virus has infected and killed people of all ages, genders and races. But some populations are at greater risk. People with pre-existing conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease, are more likely to experience severe illness and death, as are the elderly, particularly those in long-term care facilities.



MARCH

Pittsburgh's Strip District is a popular restaurant and wholesale and retail food shopping destination that usually has little parking available, but it often looked nearly deserted in the spring.



More than 80 percent of COVID deaths in Allegheny County involved long-term care facilities during the first six months of the pandemic. And rates of hospitalization and death among people of color are more than twice as high as those among white people, Centers of Disease Control data suggest.

The first U.S. case was reported in late January in Washington state—a man in his 30s who had traveled to Wuhan. Seattle became America's first “hot spot,” a term that would become familiar in the months to follow.

Europe's first severe outbreak swept Italy in February as the world watched televised images of patients treated in the streets outside overwhelmed hospitals. In March, the horror came to New York City, where infections jumped to 12,000 in three weeks—35 percent of the world's cases at the time. Hospitals rented refrigerated trucks to store the dead as morgues filled. Exhausted doctors and nurses pleaded publicly for masks and other protective gear to spare them from the virus claiming their patients and co-workers.

Pennsylvania confirmed its first case on March 6. Infections in Philadelphia and counties a short drive from New York soon surged. The coronavirus arrived in southwestern Pennsylvania on March 13 with confirmation of a case in Washington County.

Governors and local government and health officials were left to figure out a response without a coordinated national public health



MAY JUNE

After the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood became a regular location for protests like this one on June 1.

strategy to harness the virus, which an increasing number of nations in Europe and Asia successfully deployed. Early on, ventilators were rationed, forcing doctors to choose which severely ill patients to keep alive. A nationwide shortage of COVID tests kept states and counties from fully understanding the scope of the outbreak in their communities. UPMC and local private labs developed their own.

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf imposed social distancing measures on March 12—including the wearing of masks in stores and public places—and urged nonessential businesses to shutter in Allegheny and four eastern counties. He shut down schools statewide the following day, joining several other hard-hit states.

President Donald Trump declared a national emergency a day later, but left social and business restrictions largely up to each state. As some states wrestled their outbreak under control, flare-ups would occur in other states where restrictions were lax, raising the risk of interstate transmission—a pattern seen across the country throughout the summer.

Southwestern Pennsylvania shined as a national example of how a metropolitan region could corral the virus during the pandemic's early months. Daily new cases in Allegheny County peaked at 70 on March 30, while being reported by the thousands in eastern counties.

But success would prove fleeting.

JUNE
JULY

Summer socializing too often involved not enough people wearing masks, as occurred June 28 at Lefty's bar, and contributed to later spikes in the coronavirus cases and increased restrictions from the Allegheny County Health Department on drinking at bars and restaurants.



Katie Blackley, 90.5 WESA



SEPT

The beginning of the school year brought new challenges as students like Adele Bradley, who attends Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, along with faculties and staffs around the country, tried to figure how to safely navigate an educational environment during the pandemic.

The public health crisis, meanwhile, thrust the nation into a recession with no clear end in sight. More than 30 million Americans filed for unemployment during a six-week span in March and April. National unemployment hit 14.7 percent in April. It reached 16.8 percent in southwestern Pennsylvania. Restaurant closures and a lack of tourism ravaged the local leisure and hospitality industry. In May, the sector had shed 48 percent of its jobs. Even after a summer rebound, local unemployment rates were nearly twice as high as last year's.

Falling sales tax revenue led the Allegheny Regional Asset District to trim funding to the arts, museums, libraries and other amenities. Steep tax revenue shortfalls loomed for state, county and local governments. In Allegheny County alone, a pandemic lasting into next year could push 26 municipalities into financial distress deep enough to qualify for state Act 47 economic recovery assistance, University of Pittsburgh researchers warned.

The relaxing social and business restrictions in early summer helped local businesses rebound and eased joblessness. But it came with a price.

Allegheny County, which for several days in early June reported fewer than five new cases, saw daily cases surge above 250 in July after moving into the "green" phase of reopening. County data suggest it was largely driven by young adults. Cases involving restaurants were

high. Cases among people attending parties grew. Vacation season led to increased cases among people who had recently traveled.

The pandemic assumed political overtones. The wearing of masks to curb the spread of COVID-19 became a point of contention, despite being effectively practiced in most other nations. Protests against such restrictions were staged in several states, including in Harrisburg and on the steps of Pittsburgh's City-County Building. U.S. gun sales in March set a historic monthly high.

Protests against social injustice following the death of George Floyd in the custody of Minneapolis police spread across the country in the context of a pandemic and a hotly contested presidential race.

Hope for ending the pandemic's assault on normalcy rested on making a vaccine. An unprecedented worldwide effort to develop one produced more than 100 candidates. In November, Pfizer and German drug maker BioNTech said its vaccine was 95 percent effective in clinical trials. And another company, Moderna, reported similarly remarkable results in late-stage trials of its vaccine.

The research includes different strategies for building a virus and new methods of testing it for safety and effectiveness more quickly than the typical 18-month-or-longer timetable. Public confidence in the result is critical to acquiring the mass immunity necessary to suppress a virus. National polls

in August suggested that more than one-third of Americans would hold off on getting a vaccine if one were available.

A new era in the pandemic saga opened as September drew to a close. Colleges reopened along with K-12 schools, each with their own strategies for teaching remotely or in person. Social gatherings large and small increased just as colder weather forced them indoors.

As the fall progressed, the number of COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths spiked, again. By December, the daily number of new cases in the U.S. was averaging more than 200,000. In Allegheny County, new cases began to exceed 800 a day for the first time after Nov. 25.

So far, there has been little indication that the response of a pandemic-weary America will be better than the first eight months. By December, the U.S. claimed 21.5 percent of the world's COVID-19 cases and 18 percent of the deaths, despite having only 4 percent of the world's population.

Initially, conditions in the Pittsburgh region were not as dire as in the rest of the country, or even in other parts of Pennsylvania, but the situation has worsened here as it has elsewhere. Local foundations—including The Heinz Endowments—nonprofits and local governments have coordinated their attempts to fill in the gaps left by federal efforts.

And as some pin their hopes on a vaccine to end the crisis, the pandemic rages on. **h**