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# ANALYSIS: GEORGIA COVID-19 CASE TRENDS INDICATE VIRUS SPREAD AFTER MEMORIAL DAY TRIPS, GATHERINGS

SOCIAL BEHAVIOR WILL DETERMINE WHETHER GEORGIA SEES CASE SPIKE AFTER LABOR DAY, SCIENTIST SAYS

ATLANTA, GA (Tuesday, Sept. 1, 2020) — Public gatherings and insufficient efforts at precautions like mask wearing and social distances on Memorial Day weekend are likely contributors to a more than 616 percent surge in Georgia cases of COVID-19 in June and July, according to an analysis of Georgia cases by a leading public health expert.

That surge was accompanied by an increase in hospitalizations that strained the healthcare infrastructure across the state.

“Labor Day, for many a festive, end-of-summer gathering, could be an even worse public-health threat,” says Dr. Amber Schmidtke, who has a degree in Medical Microbiology and Immunology and analyzes COVID-19 data trends in Georgia. “What we do or don’t do today to limit disease transmission will impact the number of cases two weeks from now — and deaths three to four weeks from now.”

Magnifying the risk, according to the White House Coronavirus Task Force, is Georgia’s status in the country’s “red zone,” with case rates and death rates twice as high as the national average. There is invariably a delay, usually about two weeks, from an exposure to the recording of a new case. The delay from exposure to death is about three to four weeks.

Dr Schmidtke’s findings about the COVID-19 threat in Georgia include:

- The summer surge in cases began around the second week of June, two weeks after Memorial Day. At that time, cases were falling in Metro Atlanta. Meanwhile, cases were increasing most dramatically in areas along the Georgia borders, areas noted for tourism and hospitality industries. As time progressed, the gains seen in Metro Atlanta were reversed and cases began to increase. On Memorial Day (May 25), the 7-day average case count was 605.9 according to the Georgia Department of Public Health. At the peak of Georgia’s case surge on July 11, the seven-day average case count was 4,342. That’s an increase of roughly 616 percent.
- As cases accumulated, so did hospitalizations and ventilator usage. From June 26 to July 29, hospitalizations increased 169 percent. Ventilator use went from 30 percent to about 45 percent and has remained there ever since.

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Dr. Schmidtke emphasizes the critical importance of wearing masks, social distancing and limiting gatherings to 10 people or fewer. That type of behavior may have impacted the spread of COVID-19 following July 4, which did not show the same spike in cases as Memorial Day, she says.

“It is possible that news reports of overwhelmed hospitals discouraged many from participating in their usual Fourth of July festivities, which aided in limiting disease transmission,” Dr. Schmidtke says. “It is an important reminder of the power we have as individuals to interrupt the spread of this illness in our communities.”

*Dr. Schmidtke has a Ph.D. is in Medical Microbiology and Immunology. She has worked at Creighton University, the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention and Mercer University School of Medicine.*

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