

Several States Lift Mask Mandates

Connecticut, New Jersey, California among those aiming to ease mask mandates in public places as Omicron surge subsides



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Officials in several Democrat-led states said Monday they would lift mask mandates for schools or other indoor areas in coming weeks [as Covid-19 cases fall](#).

The governors of Connecticut and New Jersey said school districts would be able to determine their own masking policies starting Feb. 28 and March 7, respectively.

California's indoor mask mandate will expire on Feb. 15, Gov. Gavin Newsom's office said. The order was extended in January, but the amount of Covid-19 cases in the state has fallen by 65% from its Omicron high, officials said. The mandate will stay in place for now in schools, according to Gov. Newsom's office. New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy said officials in the state based their decision on declining case rates and hospitalizations, which have decreased by a third in the past week.

“This is a huge step back to normalcy for our kids,” the Democratic governor said. School districts will be able to keep mask mandates in place if they choose and students or staff who want to wear face coverings will be allowed, state officials said.

New Jersey, like many other states, has been seeing a decline in Covid-19 cases after the Omicron surge. The state’s 14-day average of newly reported cases was about 4,523 as of Feb. 6, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of data from Johns Hopkins University, down from about 8,234 a week earlier.

The decisions come amid rising political and legal pressure across the country to repeal mask mandates and other Covid-19 restrictions that have been in place since 2020.

A state court in Pennsylvania struck down a school mask mandate in December.

Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont, a Democrat, noted that his proposal is contingent on state legislators agreeing to extend his expiring emergency powers.

[Changes in Covid-19 school](#) approaches have been among the most contentious policies of the pandemic. Some say masks make it harder for children to understand emotional and social cues, while others say that lifting mandates [risks the health](#) of children and school staff.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s guidance [for K-12 schools recommends](#) that all children ages 2 and up, along with visitors, teachers and staff wear masks indoors, regardless of whether they are vaccinated.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday that the Biden administration supports Mr. Murphy’s order because, unlike one issued by Virginia’s new Republican Gov. Glenn Youngkin last month, [it doesn’t block local districts](#) from keeping mask rules in place.

“What happened here in New Jersey and a couple of other states...is that they pulled back the requirement,” Ms. Psaki said. “They didn’t make it more difficult for schools, school administrators, local officials to keep requirements that they made a determination would keep their school safe.”

She said the Biden administration continues to support the CDC's recommendation that students and staff wear masks at schools.

“When the science and the data warrant, of course, our hope is that that's no longer the recommendation and they are continuously assessing that,” she added.

In New York, a judge on Long Island [temporarily suspended the state's mask mandate](#) after ruling that health officials needed approval from the legislature. An appellate court [reinstated the mandate](#) a day later, but the case is pending.

Some school leaders have begun calling on New York Gov. Kathy Hochul to allow for district or parental choice. Districts outside of Rochester have begun surveying parents about potential changes to masking policies.

Ms. Hochul, a Democrat, said Monday that she was hoping to get to a place where New York could lift its school mask mandate but that she wanted to see a higher rate of vaccination among elementary-aged children.

In Delaware, Gov. John Carney on Monday signed an order lifting the state's universal indoor mask mandate effective on Friday but extending requirements for school masks until March 31.

In Oregon, state health authorities said Monday that the requirements to wear masks in schools and other indoor places will lapse on March 31.

“We should see Covid-19 hospitalizations drop by the end of March because so many Oregonians are wearing masks and taking other steps to protect themselves,” said Dean Sidelinger, the state epidemiologist and health officer. “At that point, it will be safer to lift mask requirements.”

Masks Come Off in More States, but Not Everyone Is Grinning



Mitch Smith and Shawn Hubler
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New York's governor said on Wednesday that she was ending the state's indoor masking rules. The governor of Massachusetts announced that face coverings would soon become optional in schools. And by day's end, the governors of Illinois, Rhode Island and Washington said that they, too, would loosen coronavirus rules.

The moves, which came rapid fire, one after another, mean that many of the Covid-19 restrictions that have divided Americans will soon be eliminated in places where politicians have

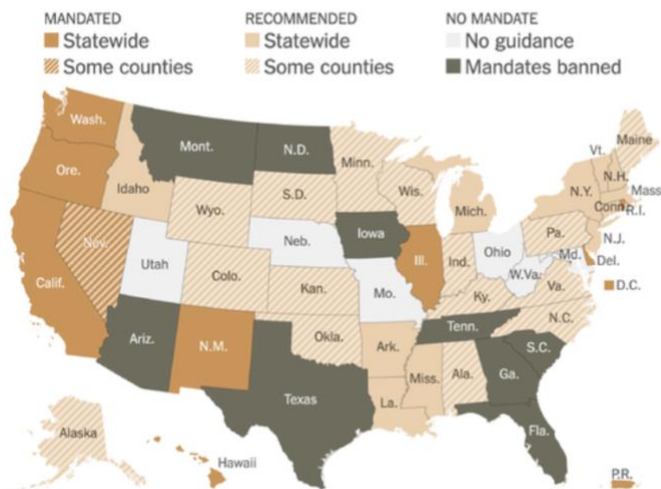
long championed sweeping virus precautions. But as the Omicron variant loosens its grip, and as polling shows Americans [exhausted with the pandemic](#), leaders in liberal-leaning states are shifting to a new approach, moving toward an engage-at-your-own-risk stance that many conservative areas embraced a year ago.

“Numbers are coming down, and it is time to adapt,” said Gov. Kathy Hochul of New York, a Democrat who said she was letting expire [a state requirement](#) that businesses seek proof of vaccination or require masks at all times in indoor public spaces.

The decisions add to the confusion and patchwork nature of what Americans can and cannot do. While some people welcomed them as a relief and part of a return to normal life, others asked whether states were moving too fast at a time when more than 200,000 new infections were being announced each day and when the country was reporting more than 17,000 deaths a week, more than at any other point in the pandemic except last winter.

“It’s time to give our kids a sense of normalcy,” said Gov. Charlie Baker of Massachusetts, a Republican, announcing that he would let school mask rules expire at the end of February.

But in California, Barbara Ferrer, the top public health official in Los Angeles County, expressed her concern to elected officials this week: “We should not be lifting the masking mandate when we are reporting thousands and thousands of new cases every day. That doesn’t make sense.”



Even as governors were lifting rules, officials in some cities, counties and school districts indicated that they would keep their own mandates in place, adding new complications to an already confusing array of rules across the country.

That divide was especially stark in California, which is set to end an indoor mask mandate for vaccinated people in most public settings this month, but where counties are allowed to keep their own stricter measures. Health officials in some counties, including Marin, Orange, Sacramento, San Francisco and San Diego, pledged to lift strict local rules when the state

does. Other counties — including Los Angeles and Santa Clara — said they would not ease restrictions until rates of vaccination, transmission and infection had improved.

In New York, Ms. Hochul's decision did not supersede virus restrictions enacted by local governments, including New York City's requirement to show proof of vaccination to eat inside restaurants, exercise in a gym or watch a movie at a theater.

For Americans who have chafed at wearing masks, the wave of rule lifting was welcome. It felt like a hopeful sign, they said, or at least a pragmatic acknowledgment that masks would not stomp out the virus.

"I feel like if you feel safer wearing it, then you should continue to wear it, but if you don't want to, you shouldn't have to," said Natalie Koteles, who is vaccinated and works for an accounting firm in downtown Chicago.

Ms. Koteles said the application of mask rules felt arbitrary at times, even silly. She had to wear a face covering while walking into her workplace, but not while at her desk. They are required when entering restaurants, but not while eating. "The rules are totally inconsistent," she said.

For others, though, the change seemed jarring, premature, dangerous. How had we gone in just weeks from a fearsome Omicron surge and added cautions to a quick retreat? And what about immunocompromised people who might not be well protected by vaccines, or the youngest children who are still not eligible for shots?

"They seem to not grasp the gravity of what Covid can do to our family," said Stephanie Madole, whose school-age daughters in Redding, Calif., are immunocompromised.

Ms. Madole said her older daughter had struggled to understand why masks would now be optional. "She asked, 'Why don't people want to protect me?' And I couldn't answer that question for her," said Ms. Madole, who now plans to home-school her children.

The abrupt shift in policy began to play out last week, when members of the National Governors Association asked President Biden to provide clear guidelines for their states to move on from the crisis response and to recognize that the virus was here to stay, and that it could be managed without completely upending daily life.

As of last week, nine states, all with Democratic governors, had [statewide mask mandates](#) in place. Several other states had local mask mandates, or mandates that only covered schools.

On Monday, Gov. Phil Murphy of New Jersey, a Democrat, announced that he [would no longer require students and school employees to wear masks](#), contradicting the current recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Other Democratic governors in [California](#), Connecticut, Delaware and [Oregon](#) quickly moved to lift some mask mandates.

Federal officials have moved more cautiously, meaning many Americans are receiving clashing guidance from different levels of government. The White House has been meeting with outside health experts to plan a pandemic exit strategy and a transition to a “new normal,” but Dr. Rochelle P. Walensky, the director of the C.D.C., said on Wednesday that while Covid-19 caseloads were dropping across the country, it was not yet time to lift mask mandates.

The country’s virus outlook has improved significantly in recent weeks, with daily case reports dropping by more than two-thirds since reaching a peak of more than 800,000 a day in January. Hospitalizations have also plummeted from record levels seen last month; daily death reports, too, appear to be plateauing.

In New York City, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., and other places hit first by the Omicron variant, case numbers have returned to levels from before the most recent surge.

Even as governors moved to loosen rules in recent days, they stopped short of declaring victory over the virus. New variants and surges remain a distinct possibility, and scientists have said that the virus will become endemic, meaning it will circulate indefinitely at lower levels.

“What we’re talking about now is far different from where we were two years ago,” said Rhode Island’s interim health director, Dr. James McDonald. He said Covid-19 was about to become an endemic disease, “and we have to find a new balance.”

Bob Smoler, a high school math teacher in Connecticut, said he remained well aware of ongoing risks, even as he welcomed a less restrictive approach announced in that state this week.

“Obviously, I won’t have to be a mask policeman anymore and tell kids, ‘Put your mask on,’” Mr. Smoler said. “It’s a return to normalcy.”

In Sacramento, Graham Williams, a retired banker, said he believed that his state’s decision to end some restrictions showed that leaders were following the science; California is averaging about 36,000 new cases a day, down 67 percent in the past two weeks.

“I think the collective action that’s necessary has been taken,” Mr. Williams said. “And the effectiveness of mask mandates, as opposed to individual decisions, is not as clear-cut as we’d all like it to be.”

The details and timelines of the policy rollbacks varied widely from place to place.

In Illinois, Gov. J.B. Pritzker said he planned to lift indoor mask rules in most places, though not schools, at the end of February if hospitalizations continued to drop. In Washington, Gov. Jay Inslee said that next week he would end [the state’s outdoor mask mandate](#) and announce an update on its indoor mandate, while Oregon officials said masking rules would be lifted by the end of March. And in Rhode Island, Gov. Dan McKee said he would lift his order on masking in schools in early March and in most other settings this week.

Still, some questioned the timing. Joe Basilone, a coffee shop owner in Chicago, said it all felt too early to him. He said he planned to continue asking his employees to wear masks after the mandate lifted, but would not require it for customers.

“I mean, am I tired of wearing a mask? Sure, I am,” Mr. Basilone said. “We’ve been doing it for over two years now. But I still have the mind-set that it creates safety for people who might have compromised immune systems. My concern is that it might again be jumping the gun here.”

City leaders who have instituted restrictions more stringent than those imposed by their states have also begun to re-evaluate their policies. In Boston, Mayor Michelle Wu [laid out benchmarks on Tuesday](#) for when the city would lift proof-of-vaccine requirements if hospitalizations and case numbers continued to fall. In Denver, [health officials said](#) masks would become optional in schools later in February. And in Duluth, Minn., Mayor Emily Larson said she would allow a mask mandate imposed last month near the height of the Omicron surge to expire on Saturday.

“There are still new strains and personal choices as it relates to vaccination,” Ms. Larson said. “This leaves us all vulnerable and open to future infection and pandemic realities. And to me, that’s another reason to allow this to expire — it’s my personal feeling that we are now moving into not how we beat Covid-19, but how we coexist with it.”