

‘I feel defeated’: Mask and vaccine mandates cause new divides as officials try to head off virus surge

Cities and counties say protections are necessary as coronavirus cases explode again

By [Dan Diamond](#), [Kim Mueller](#), [Alex Baumhardt](#) and [April Capochino Myers](#)

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At hospitals, mandatory deadlines for staffers to get coronavirus shots are arriving. At big corporations such as United Airlines and Google, workers are being told to roll up their sleeves. Even unions that once balked at vaccine mandates are signaling support.

And it’s not just shots: In dozens of cities and counties, indoor mask mandates are back, with city leaders and public health officials arguing the requirements are necessary to save lives and preserve the economic recovery. In some corners of the nation, the government mandates extend to vaccination.

“This is to protect kids [and] protect those who can’t get vaccinated,” San Francisco Mayor London N. Breed said Thursday as she announced the city would require a variety of businesses to demand proof of vaccination — a move that came 10 days after reinstating an indoor mask mandate. “To make sure that I never have to get up in front of you and say, ‘I’m sorry, I know we just reopened and now the city is closed again because we are seeing too many people die.’”

The summer of 2021 is a season of mandates, with rules requiring masks and vaccines reemerging as the pandemic’s latest cultural and political flash point. In many parts of the country — including states hit hardest by a resurgence of the virus — the mandates are pitting blue cities against red governors, sparking protests and placing new burdens on already harried workers.

“There are days that I feel defeated — like today,” said Justin Short, an assistant property manager at a luxury apartment building in downtown Kansas City, Mo. This month, Short helped post fliers announcing that masks were required in the building and thanking the 300 residents “for helping keep the community safe.” An unknown culprit started ripping down the fliers and even shattered one of the plexiglass frames.

“I had this idea that we would work together for the greater good,” Short said, a smile dissolving on his face. “I was wrong.”

Public health officials highlight data that mask mandates are widely supported and that face coverings are a simple way to ward off transmission. About 6 in 10 Americans support mask requirements in areas with high coronavirus transmission, according to a [Quinnipiac University poll](#) released earlier this month.

“It makes sense with caseloads going up like they are,” said Brian Kendall, an infectious-disease physician at Providence Portland Medical Center in Portland, Ore., praising new mask rules taking effect in the city this month as he headed into a local gym — clad in a face covering. “A lot of my colleagues are extremely frustrated, to the point of cynicism.”

Virus-linked hospitalizations across the United States have quadrupled in the past month, to nearly 80,000, according to The Washington Post’s rolling seven-day average, and hospitals in Florida and Mississippi [warn they’re out of beds and staff](#).

The virus surge has posed new risks to Americans who let down their guard and others who have yet to take steps to protect themselves. About 57 percent of adults say they regularly wear a mask in public, according to an [Axios-Ipsos poll](#) released this month, compared with more than 90 percent in early 2021. Meanwhile, more than 90 million Americans who could get a shot haven’t, four months after all U.S. adults became eligible.

And according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, workers are [more likely](#) to get vaccinated when employers encourage it. The foundation found in June that 4 in 10 unvaccinated workers said they would get the shots if required — a takeaway that suggests vaccine mandates could sway tens of millions of Americans who have ignored months of appeals.

But vaccine mandates have been the source of significant controversy, prompting lawsuits, walkouts and political grandstanding from critics — even as many vaccinated Americans demand the measures, saying such protections are overdue.

Health-care workers, backed by conservative advocacy organization Liberty Counsel, this week staged national walkouts to protest coronavirus vaccination requirements. The San Francisco Deputy Sheriffs’ Association this month posted a message on Facebook seeming to threaten mass resignation if the city proceeds with a vaccine mandate this fall.

“If deputy sheriffs are forced to vaccinate, a percentage of them will retire early or seek employment elsewhere,” the group wrote.

At Pennsylvania State University, the school’s leader sensed the brewing storm. In an [open letter](#) released Thursday, Penn State president Eric J. Barron defended the school’s decision not to institute a vaccine mandate, saying leaders were trying to protect the community with “as little polarization as possible.”

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But from a public health perspective, “a lot of efforts at persuasion have reached their maximum,” Hamel added, saying vaccination incentives and similar tactics have mostly run their course. “I think this is why we’re seeing more mandates arise now.”

A vocal minority of Americans are frustrated that mask mandates came back at all.

Ned Fasullo, a business development executive in Baton Rouge, helped block a local plan in July to separate vaccinated and unvaccinated students in Catholic schools, worried it would keep his unvaccinated children away from their friends. That victory was short-lived: Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards this month issued a statewide indoor mask mandate that led schools — including the Catholic schools attended by Fasullo’s children — to require students and teachers to wear masks indoors.

“I think people at the state level stepping in has been incredibly divisive for our state,” Fasullo said, decrying the Democratic governor’s order — which the state’s Republican attorney general has worked to subvert by arguing Edwards’s mask mandate lacks legal authority. “It has torn Louisiana into multiple factions. It is not the government’s job to tell people to wear masks and get vaccinated.”

Increasingly, officials disagree: More than 50 cities and counties have reinstated mask mandates in the past month, according to a Post review, in addition to statewide mask mandates reimposed in Oregon and Nevada. And several cities and states — including New York City and New Orleans — have moved forward with strict new requirements to provide proof of vaccination when visiting restaurants, gyms and other public spaces.

After months of vowing not to impose vaccination mandates, the White House has increasingly nudged employers to take action. President Biden on Wednesday hosted a summit with business leaders who had moved to require workers to get vaccinated, touting them as a model for others.

Last month, Biden told millions of federal workers they faced a choice: get vaccinated or undergo regular testing, masking and other restrictions. Administration officials said they believed that helped push private employers to adopt their own shot requirements.

“It gave businesses an umbrella, especially because they did not want to go first,” said a senior administration official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the administration’s strategy. “And then it gave them a road map — that this is one way to do it.”

Other experts said business leaders were heartened by the failure of lawsuits against organizations that required workers to get shots. Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett this week turned back a challenge to Indiana University’s vaccination mandate for students.

“A few people dipped their toes in the water and found that the water was fine,” said Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University’s public health school, praising Houston Methodist and other health systems that were among the first to impose vaccination mandates months ago.

Some labor groups, including the Washington Teachers’ Union in D.C., also signaled they are newly open to vaccine mandates, if they’re able to shape the requirements.

Jha said the arrival of coronavirus variants motivated action, with the highly infectious delta variant linked to an explosion of cases. Confirmed coronavirus infections across the United States have risen from about 13,000 a day in early July to more than 128,000 a day now, according to The Post’s rolling seven-day average.

“I’ve been talking to a lot of companies, businesses, universities,” Jha said. “One of the things that they’re realizing with delta — it’s really hard to know how to bring students and employees back if you don’t have mandates.”

Some vaccinated Americans cautioned against pressuring wary holdouts. Chad Sivertson, a 40-year-old Republican in Minnesota, said vaccine-hesitant Americans should be given time to work through their concerns, rather than be ordered to get vaccinated to keep their jobs or take trips. Sivertson said he initially balked at getting vaccinated before learning more about the process and getting his first Pfizer-BioNTech shot in March.

“If it were to have become a requirement, and I hadn’t gotten the vaccine yet, I probably would have been a conscientious objector. Because I don’t want to be forced to take a vaccine,” Sivertson said.

Compared with vaccine mandates, much less animus envelops requirements to wear masks, experts said. More than 6 in 10 parents support requiring unvaccinated children to wear masks in school, according to Kaiser Family Foundation polling, while a similar number of parents oppose requiring schoolchildren to get vaccinated.

Still, frustration and notable partisan splits exist: 88 percent of Democrats back requiring masks for unvaccinated children in schools, while 69 percent of Republicans oppose it.

At the Kansas City apartment building he helps manage, Short — a 33-year-old who said he still suffers breathing problems and heart palpitations after a week-long bout of coronavirus — said he is empathetic when building residents are frustrated about the return of the local mask mandate.

“I know why they are groaning and rolling their eyes,” Short said. “There was this idea that when it ended the first time, we were going to be done.”

But “my main concern is the grocery workers,” Short said. “I’m concerned about the people on public transit. The waiters. The bartenders. There isn’t any enforcement of the mandate. So, enforcement is left up to the grocery workers. To the waiters. To the bartenders.”

Schmitt, a Republican bidding for a U.S. Senate seat, said he filed the lawsuit on behalf of residents “to stop this insanity.” St. Louis Mayor Tishaura O. Jones (D) called Schmitt’s lawsuit “frivolous” and politically self-serving. Ultimately, the St. Louis County Council voted to rescind the mask mandate there.

Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas (D) predicts his city’s mask mandate will be upheld, saying it’s procedurally different from St. Louis County’s.

Meanwhile, virus cases in Jackson County, Mo. — home to Kansas City — have surged nearly 600 percent since July 1, according to The Post’s tracker.

City and county leaders in Florida and Texas have similarly clashed with Republican governors trying to outlaw vaccination and mask mandates. In Dallas, city school leaders this week [defied](#) Gov. Greg Abbott (R) by announcing that students and staff will be required to wear masks in school buildings as coronavirus cases spike. Abbott last month issued [an executive order](#) barring government entities, including public schools, from mandating masks or vaccines.

Some small business owners say they’re grateful for officials stepping in to issue mandates, such as when Berkeley, Calif., officials Aug. 2 [ordered](#) that masks would again be required indoors.

“It makes my job and my life a lot easier,” said Leanne Shanszad, owner of Gold Leaf Cafe in Berkeley, who reinstated mask requirements this summer as she grew nervous about the delta variant. “I have to support these people who work for me and whose job is not to fight with customers about personal freedoms.”

Even some of the youngest Americans say they’re willing to sacrifice in hopes of protecting others.

For 9-year-old Lilian Robbins, the masks have become a part of life. At Portland’s Oregon Park on Tuesday, she carried her mask to put on when she got too close to others or had to use the bathroom.

“We’ve been doing this for over a year,” Robbins said. “We shouldn’t just stop doing this now, there could still be a surge.”

The soon-to-be fourth-grader said she’s hopeful she can get vaccinated by the end of September or early October, but she will follow her elementary school’s rules.

“It’s just a mask,” she said.

Alissa Greenberg in Berkeley, Calif., contributed to this report. Diamond reported from Washington; Mueller from Kansas City, Mo.; Baumhardt from Portland, Ore.; and Capochino Myers from Baton Rouge.

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By [Dan Diamond](#)

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