

Ground Zero: A fifth to half of all coronavirus deaths have been in nursing homes

Staggering numbers shine light on lack of preparedness and drastic actions required to slow pandemic's toll at long-term care facilities.



A nursing home room is decontaminated for coronavirus in hard-hit Lombardy region of Italy. TASS via Getty Images

By [Christine Dolan](#)

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Article

Dig In

few days ago the World Health Organization’s European regional director garnered global headlines by providing a grim statistic that pinpoints the ground zero in this coronavirus pandemic.

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More than half of the COVID-19 deaths in Europe have occurred in long-term care or nursing home facilities. It is “an unimaginable human tragedy,” Dr. Hans Kluge declared.

Europe is not alone. At least one in five deaths recorded in the United States so far has occurred in nursing homes or long-term care facilities and experts believe that percentage may grow substantially.

The [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), one of the leading health nonprofits in America, reported late last week that 27 percent of the COVID-19 deaths in the 23 states that report fatalities publicly by location have occurred in nursing homes and long-term facilities.

In six of those states — Delaware, Massachusetts, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Colorado and Utah — the percentage of coronavirus deaths in nursing homes was over 50 percent of

total deaths, the foundation reported.

“The individuals that reside in long-term care facilities are among the most vulnerable in the US to this virus, given occupation density of these facilities and residents’ underlying poor health,” Kaiser warned.

The disproportionate death toll in long-term care facilities is shining a painful light both on how poorly prepared these facilities were for a lethal outbreak and how the drastic measures since taken to stem the tide — including a ban on family visits — are creating isolation in the final days of victims’ lives.

“They are no longer getting their emotional and physical support that such visits provide,” Kluge said. “Sometimes residents face the threat of abuse and neglect.”

Dr. Max Arella, a Quebec-based virologist and molecular biologist studying coronavirus for decades, told Just the News that in Canada some nursing homes have had 40% or more of their residents infected.

“From the start everyone was responding as if this were a normal influenza virus and with the aging population and underlying conditions whether it is diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis or cancer patients it is hard to practice social distancing,” he said.

“Everyone failed from the start. The Chinese and the World Health Organization failed and even at the international, regional and national levels leaders failed,” he said.

”There are sometimes two or more people in one room so if a healthcare provider goes from bed to bed or the patients play cards the virus spreads. Not recognizing what this was and responding early was a major issue.”

The first U.S. nursing home coronavirus case identified was in late February in King's County in the state of Washington. As subsequent cases were reported, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued an indication of their findings that large quantities of viral RNA in asymptomatic, pre-symptomatic, and symptomatic residents, and recommended that "all residents should be placed on isolation precautions if possible."

In New York, where the coronavirus numbers continue to climb, coronavirus patients in hospitals were returning to nursing homes because a New York state mandate required nursing homes to accept patients recovering from COVID-19 even if they were still contagious.

The March 25 New York Department of Health's advisory to nursing home administrators and hospital discharge planners bears Gov. Andrew Cuomo's name and states: "No resident shall be denied re-admission or admission to the nursing home solely based on a confirmed or suspected diagnosis of COVID-19."

Over 100 residents and employees at Hayward, California's Gateway Care and Rehabilitation Center have been infected. Gateway is one of 250 nursing homes in California that have been hit with the virus.

As the number of patients have become infected and perished with Gateway's history of past state violations, the [district attorney's office has opened a criminal investigation](#). The facility's owners have repeatedly declined comment.

Last week The Washington Post reported that at least 255 nursing homes in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia had cases of the virus, nearly double the number from two weeks earlier. More than 2,000 residents and workers have now been infected.

Although Lombardy, Italy's reputation for healthcare was widely recognized as one of the best in Europe, it turned out to be the hardest hit-region in one of the hardest-hit countries. Of Italy's 100,000 plus COVID-19 fatalities Lombardy's official toll represents 70% of that total.

Almost one-sixth of Italy's 60 million residents live in Lombardy which includes Milan and the industrial heartland. Lombardy has more people over 65 than any other Italian region and houses 20% of the country's nursing homes.

Italy closed its borders with China on Jan. 31 and its first case was reported on Feb. 21. Shortly thereafter the numbers started to explode, and the Rome-based national government locked down Lombardy on March 7, although the factories remained open. It was not until March 26 that all but essential production was stopped.

By April 7 the Lombardy doctor's association issued a letter to regional authorities listing seven "errors" in their response to the virus which resonated with what is found in nursing homes in America, including lack of protective equipment and gear and lack of data about the contagion.

What this has meant for family members on the outside who cannot visit their loved ones on the inside is a sense of worry and anxiety as the separation continues.

“I believe people are designed by God to live in community while one of our purposes is to share in others’ joys, concerns, and losses,” said Pastor Paul Teske, a retired Navy Chaplain and former minister of a church in Westport, Conn. “Part of the current social dilemmas of isolating those in nursing care facilities is creating deeper emotional issues of guilt and closure for their loved ones while facing death.”

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State Reporting of Cases and Deaths Due to COVID-19 in Long-Term Care Facilities

Priya Chidambaram (<https://www.kff.org/person/priya-chidambaram/>)

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Introduction

COVID-19 has had a disproportionate effect on people who reside or work in long-term care facilities, including the 1.3 million individuals in nursing homes; 800,000 in assisted living facilities; 75,000 in intermediate care facilities (<https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/covid-19-issues-and-medicare-policy-options-for-people-who-need-long-term-services-and-supports/>); and 3 million people who work in skilled nursing or residential care facilities. (<https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/covid-19-and-workers-at-risk-examining-the-long-term-care-workforce/>) CMS has released a series of guidelines targeted at reducing the impact of COVID-19 on nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, including guidance related to visitor restrictions, infection control guidelines, and designating separate facilities for coronavirus positive patients and negative patients. Until recently, however, there was no federal requirement for nursing homes to report coronavirus outbreaks and COVID-19 deaths, leading to an information gap for families, residents, and policymakers. On April 19, 2020, CMS released guidance (<https://www.cms.gov/files/document/qso-20-26-nh.pdf>) that would require nursing homes to report cases of coronavirus directly to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This data is not yet available, but there are a number of states that are already reporting data on long-term care facilities.

This data note provides data on long-term care facility cases and deaths by state (Table 1 and Table 2). We use data reported directly by states (versus through news outlets) through either state COVID-19 reporting or state press releases. The one exception to this is Texas' counts, which are official state numbers sent directly to reporters 3x/week. We include all available long-term care facility data reported by state, including cases among both residents and staff, where available. Definition of long-term care facility differs by state, but data reflects a combination of nursing facilities, residential care communities, adult care centers, intermediate care facilities, and/or other congregate settings. In states reporting data in "congregate settings," which could include locations such as jails and prisons, we removed reported cases and deaths in non-long-term care settings when possible.

Our data collection effort finds that in the 23 states that publicly report death data as of April 23, 2020, there have been over 10,000 reported deaths due to COVID-19 in long-term care facilities (including residents and staff), representing 27% of deaths due to COVID-19 in those states. Our data also finds that there have been over 50,000 reported cases, accounting for 11% of coronavirus cases in 29 states. In six states reporting data, deaths in long-term care facilities account for over 50% of all COVID-19 deaths (Delaware, Massachusetts, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Utah; Table 2). High case and death rates may be attributed to a number of factors, including high rates of testing within long-term care facilities and low rates of testing of the general public. The total cases and deaths from

reporting states accounts for just over half (53%) of all cases, and 81% of all deaths. Given that not all states are reporting data yet and the [continual lag in testing](https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-policy-watch/what-testing-capacity-do-we-need/), the counts of cases and deaths are an undercount of the true number of cases and deaths in long-term care facilities.

What are states already reporting?

As of April 23, 2020, 36 states were reporting some level of data about coronavirus cases and deaths in long-term care facilities, with wide variation in types of data being reported, long-term care facility definitions, inclusion of residents/staff, and frequency of updates (Table 1). There is wide variation in the types of data that states are reporting. Nine states report fully comprehensive data on cases and deaths at the facility level, including Illinois and Oregon. Other states, including Michigan, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania, report data at the country level, citing privacy concerns about reporting at the facility level. Three states provide data on facilities only, with New Mexico providing a list of facilities with reported cases, and Arizona and Maine reporting a total number of facilities. There is also some variation in the types of facilities that states include in their long-term care facility counts. Five states report data on nursing homes only, while the remaining states report on long-term facilities more generally. State definitions of “long-term care facilities” can include a range of settings, including assisted living facilities, personal care homes, and intermediate care facilities. Michigan and New Mexico are the only two states to report on congregate settings more generally, without providing a breakout for long-term care facilities. States also vary in their inclusion of residents versus staff in the reporting cases and deaths. Eight states report data on residents only, 17 states report data on residents and staff together, and the remaining states do not specify who is included in their data. States also varied in how often they update the data, with the majority of states updating the data daily. Kentucky and Utah provide the data via a daily press conference, and other states report that they update the data several times a week or weekly. Seven states, including California, Illinois, and New York, did not clearly report how often their data was updated (Table 1).

What does the available data show?

Nationwide, among the states reporting data, states indicate that cases have occurred at more than 4,000 facilities, and nearly 51,000 cases and over 10,000 deaths have been reported (Table 2). The number of long-term care facilities with known cases varies widely across states, with New Jersey (438) and Pennsylvania (407) reporting the highest number of facilities and Maine (3), Iowa (12), and New Mexico (12) reporting the lowest number of facilities (Table 2). Of the 29 states that reported case data, New Jersey reported the highest number of cases in long-term care facilities, with over 11,000 cases. North Dakota was the only state to report fewer than 100 cases in their facilities. As of April 23rd, the total number of long-term care facilities with known cases in the 32 states that report data is about 4,000 (Table 2). New York and New Jersey reported the highest number of deaths, accounting for over half of the total reported long-term care facility deaths.

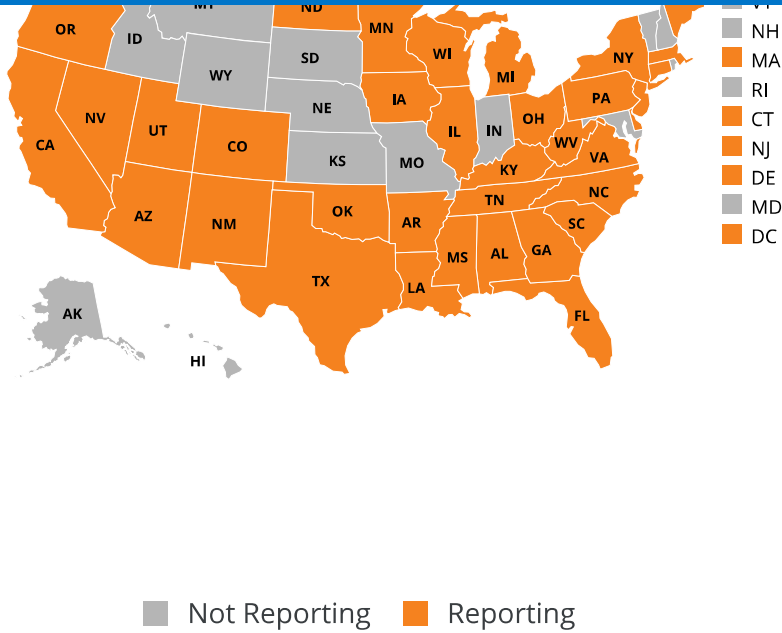
Interactive 1:

Share of State Cases and Deaths Attributed to Long-Term Care Facilities as of 4/23/2020

 <https://www.kff.org/wp->



Illinois



Reporting

5% of cases are in LTC facilities
18% of deaths are in LTC facilities

Long-term care facilities account for a notable share of cases and deaths in many states, with these facilities accounting for over half of deaths in six states (Table 2). Long-term care facility deaths as a share of total deaths in the state varies widely between states, from 8% in South Carolina to nearly 60% in Delaware (Table 2 and Interactive 1). Long-term care facility cases also account for a notable share of overall cases in states. Over one-fifth of cases in Oklahoma and Minnesota are in long-term care facilities. Illinois, South Carolina, and Tennessee have the lowest shares of cases attributable to long-term care facilities (5%).

Looking Ahead

State data reinforce the high risk that people and staff in long-term facility settings face during the coronavirus pandemic. The individuals that reside in long-term care facilities are among the most vulnerable in the US to this virus, given occupation density of these facilities and residents' underlying poor health. Many individuals in these facilities have underlying medical conditions that put them at serious risk if they contract the virus, and some report being anxious and afraid due to the severe nature of the outbreaks (https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/we-wait-in-our-nursing-home-helpless/2020/04/22/8900c0c4-83f4-11ea-a3eb-e9fc93160703_story.html). Nearly 40% of nursing homes in the country had infection control deficiencies (<https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/data-note-how-might-coronavirus-affect-residents-in-nursing-facilities/>) in 2017, which may further contribute to high numbers of cases and deaths. Many residents do not have a private home or family to return to during outbreaks, making it important to consider what types of actions policymakers can take to protect these populations.

There is wide variety in how states are currently collecting and reporting data, and it is unclear when the federal data will become available, what form it will take, and how comparable it will be across states. It is unclear how and when nationwide detailed facility-level data will be made available to the public and how often the data will be updated. Data currently available from states provides an incomplete picture, but can be used to direct attention the issue and help inform policy solutions to help mitigate the number of deaths going forward.

Table 1: Variations in State Reports of Long-Term Care Facility Cases and Deaths Related to COVID-19				
State (36 states)	What data is reported?	What types of facilities are included?	Does the data include residents and/or staff?	How often is data updated?
Alabama	Total cases	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily
Arizona	Total facilities	Long-term care facilities	Not reported	Daily
Arkansas	Total cases	Nursing homes	Residents	Daily
California	Cases by facility	Nursing homes	Residents and staff	Unspecified
Colorado	Cases and deaths by facility	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Weekly
Connecticut	Cases by facility	Nursing homes	Residents	Unspecified
Delaware	Deaths by facility and total cases	Long-term care facilities	Residents	Daily
District of Columbia	Cases and deaths by facility	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily
Florida	Deaths by county and list of facilities	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily
Georgia	Cases and deaths by facility	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily
Illinois	Cases and deaths by facility	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Unspecified
Iowa	Cases by facility	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily
Kentucky	Total cases and deaths	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily (press conference)
Louisiana	Total cases and deaths	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily
Maine	Total facilities	Long-term care facilities	Not reported	Unspecified
Massachusetts	Cases by facility and total deaths	Nursing Homes	Residents and staff	Daily
Michigan	Facility count by county	Congregate settings	Not reported	Unspecified
Minnesota	Total cases	Long-term care facilities	Residents	Daily
Mississippi	Cases and deaths by county	Long-term care facilities	Unspecified	Daily
Nevada	Cases and deaths by facility	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily (on weekdays)
New Jersey	Cases and deaths by facility	Long-term care facilities	Unspecified	Daily
New Mexico	List of facilities	Congregate settings	Not reported	Daily
New York	Deaths by facility	Nursing homes	Residents	Unspecified
North Carolina	Total cases and deaths	Long-term care facilities	Unspecified	Daily
North Dakota	Cases by facility	Long-term care facilities	Unspecified	Daily
Ohio	Cases by facility	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily
Oklahoma	Cases and deaths by facility	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily
Oregon	Cases and deaths by facility	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Weekly
Pennsylvania	Facilities, cases, and deaths by county	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Daily

South Carolina	Total facilities, cases, and deaths	Long-term care facilities	Unspecified	2x/week
Tennessee	Cases and deaths by facility	Long-term care facilities	Residents and Staff	Unspecified
Texas	Total facilities and total deaths	Long-term care facilities	Residents	3x/week
Utah	Total facilities and total deaths	Long-term care facilities	Unspecified	Daily (press conference)
Virginia	Total facilities, cases, and deaths	Long-term care facilities	Unspecified	Daily
West Virginia	Total cases	Long-term care facilities	Residents	Daily
Wisconsin	Total cases	Long-term care facilities	Residents	Daily

NOTES: Data was collected from available state reports and/or press releases. States that reported multiple long-term care facility settings were re-categorized as "Long-term care facilities".

Table 2: State Reports of Long-Term Care Facility Cases and Deaths Related to COVID-19 (as of 4/23/2020)

State	Data Reporting Status	Long-term care facilities with known cases	Cases in long-term care facilities	Deaths in long-term care facilities	Long-term care facility cases as a share of total state cases	Long-term care facility deaths as a share of total state deaths
TOTAL	Reporting (36 states), Not Reporting (15 states)	4,069 (32 states)	50,775 (29 states)	10,378 (23 states)	11% (29 states)	27% (23 states)
Alabama	Reporting		687		12%	
Alaska	Not Reporting					
Arizona	Reporting	88				
Arkansas	Reporting		170		7%	
California	Reporting	258	3,030		8%	
Colorado	Reporting	79	1,845	256	17%	50%
Connecticut	Reporting	108	1,713	375	8%	24%
Delaware	Reporting	14	237	52	7%	58%
District of Columbia	Reporting	14	199	15	6%	11%
Florida	Reporting	324	2,333	248	8%	27%
Georgia	Reporting	273	3,316	336	16%	40%
Hawaii	Not Reporting					
Idaho	Not Reporting					
Illinois	Reporting	189	1,850	284	5%	18%
Indiana	Not Reporting					
Iowa	Reporting	12	404		11%	
Kansas	Not Reporting					
Kentucky	Reporting	54	650	72	19%	39%
Louisiana	Reporting	205	2,402	464	10%	32%
Maine	Reporting	3				
Maryland	Not Reporting					
Massachusetts	Reporting	273	7,721	1,205	18%	55%
Michigan	Reporting	243				
Minnesota	Reporting	98	627		23%	
Mississippi	Reporting	74	515	65	11%	34%
Missouri	Not Reporting					
Montana	Not Reporting					
Nebraska	Not Reporting					
Nevada	Reporting	32	372	33	9%	18%
New Hampshire	Not Reporting					
New Jersey	Reporting	438	11,608	2,050	12%	40%
New Mexico	Reporting	12				

New York	Reporting	83		3,505		18%
North Carolina	Reporting	54	1,350	117	18%	43%
North Dakota	Reporting	14	61		9%	
Ohio	Reporting	91	781		6%	
Oklahoma	Reporting	42	597	63	21%	37%
Oregon	Reporting	19	293	43	14%	55%
Pennsylvania	Reporting	407	5,954	845	16%	51%
Rhode Island	Not Reporting					
South Carolina	Reporting	45	240	11	5%	8%
South Dakota	Not Reporting					
Tennessee	Reporting	22	375	37	5%	22%
Texas	Reporting	327		207		36%
Utah	Reporting	82		17		50%
Vermont	Not Reporting					
Virginia	Reporting	92	988	78	10%	22%
Washington	Not Reporting					
West Virginia	Reporting		123		13%	
Wisconsin	Reporting		334		7%	
Wyoming	Not Reporting					

NOTES: Data was collected from available state reports and/or press releases. All available LTC facility data reported by state is presented. Number of cases is reported for residents and staff, where available. Definition of "long-term care facility" differs by state, but data reflects a combination of nursing facilities, residential care communities, adult care centers, intermediate care facilities, and/or other long-term care facilities. Given the rapidly developing situation and states reporting new data every day, updated data may be available for states at the time of publication. Total cases and deaths data can be accessed here – <https://www.kff.org/health-costs/issue-brief/state-data-and-policy-actions-to-address-coronavirus/> (<https://www.kff.org/health-costs/issue-brief/state-data-and-policy-actions-to-address-coronavirus/>) (Accessed April 23rd, 2020).

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DA's office investigating Hayward nursing home where 13 died of coronavirus



Megan Cassidy

April 15, 2020

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