As numbers of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) cases and deaths continue to climb in the United States, a large majority of US adults say they have embraced wearing masks whenever they leave their homes and that they can continue to follow social distancing guidelines for at least another 6 months if necessary, according to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) poll.

Such measures remain essential for mitigating spread of the infection as the number of cases, hospitalizations, and deaths surge around the country. The US COVID-19 toll was an estimated 22 million cases and more than 371,000 deaths as of January 10.

Public opinion researchers at KFF conducted the survey from November 30 to December 8 among a nationally representative sample of 1676 adults, just before approval of the first COVID-19 vaccines in the United States.

With the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccines occurring much more slowly than expected and the appearance of a new, more transmissible variant strain of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in the United States, it’s clear that mitigation measures, such as wearing masks and social distancing, will continue to be essential to curbing disease spread for some time. Half of those surveyed in the KFF poll said they believed the worst of the coronavirus outbreak is still ahead, and 68% feared that they or a family member will contract COVID-19—the highest percentage since February 2020, when KFF began tracking public opinion on this question.

The KFF researchers found that 73% of those surveyed said they now don a face mask every time they leave home, compared with just 52% in May. Although just 11% said they wear masks only some of the time or not at all—a group more likely to be White (70%), male (65%), and Republican (54%)—this segment of the public has been highly vocal in criticizing businesses with mask requirements, protesting at grocery stores, shopping malls, and other venues.

In addition, 7 in 10 of those surveyed said that they would be able to continue following social distancing guidelines for at least another 6 months. Only 4% said they could follow such guidelines for less than another month, and 9% said they would not do so at all.

These attitudes also reflected large partisan differences, with 87% of Democrats saying they could follow social distancing guidelines for at least 6 months or until a vaccine is widely available. In contrast, only 50% of Republicans said they could do so, and 20% said they couldn’t follow the guidelines at all.

“The reluctance of some Republicans to follow social distancing guidelines may stem from the perception that the seriousness of coronavirus is being exaggerated,” the KFF researchers said. They noted that 35% of respondents said they believed that news coverage of COVID-19 exaggerates its seriousness, 36% believed that the news media is presenting it correctly, and 25% said they think the seriousness of COVID-19 is underestimated.

The survey also probed attitudes about COVID-19–related constraints on businesses, some of which have had new restrictions imposed in the wake of the recent upsurge in cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. Overall, about 4 in 10 of those surveyed said the number of restrictions imposed by their state was about right.

However, the researchers described “a stark partisan divide” in opinions about restrictions on businesses aimed at slowing the COVID-19 spread. Among Democrats, 49% said their state does not have enough restrictions on businesses, and only 7% said their state had too many. Among

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Republicans, only 14% said their state did not have enough restrictions, whereas 50% said their state has too many restrictions.

Findings from another survey, a STAT-Harris poll released in late December, confirm widespread public support of mask wearing and other measures to curb the spread of SARS-CoV-2. This poll also found that the majority of those polled believe that the Biden administration should mandate mask wearing and other mitigation measures.

The STAT-Harris poll, an online survey of about 2000 US adults conducted December 11 to 13, found that 75% of respondents supported mandating the wearing of masks, 73% thought people should be required to be tested if they feel sick, and 66% supported banning gatherings involving more than 10 people. In addition, 58% said the Biden administration should temporarily shut down nonessential businesses, such as gyms and restaurants, and mandate vaccination.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Corresponding Author: Joan Stephenson, PhD, Consulting Editor, JAMA Health Forum (Joan.Stephenson@jamanetwork.org).

Author Affiliation: Consulting Editor, JAMA Health Forum and JAMA.

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