Washington vs. Idaho: A COVID Tale of Two States

By Alex Berezow, PhD — January 27, 2021

The data suggest that Washington is doing better than Idaho at reducing COVID sicknesses and deaths. However, the data also suggest that massive restrictions aren't necessary to get COVID under control. It's time for Washington to start opening up.

I live in the Seattle area, but I spend a lot of time in Boise because of family. This has allowed me the unique opportunity to experience two completely different state government responses to the coronavirus pandemic.

According to WalletHub, Washington has implemented one of the strictest policies in the country, coming in at a rank of #46. Indeed, the governor ordered another round of restrictions beginning on November 16, and we have yet to emerge from it. The restrictions have completely upended everyday life, making it feel like a lockdown.

For example, indoor dining is banned. Indoor gatherings are also banned, which means that you can't invite friends and family members over if they live in another household. Essentially, Governor Inslee banned Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's. At this pace, he's going to ban Valentine's Day too.

Actually, if the Governor wants to be honest, the State of Washington probably will not fully emerge from restrictions until 2022. The governor's "plan," such as there is one, includes four phases of reopening. The criteria are so strict that not a single region in the state has met the
criteria to enter Phase 2. The criteria for Phases 3 and 4 have yet to be released [4], which probably means there is no plan to reopen Washington.

Idaho took a different approach. According to WalletHub, the state ranks #14, which means it has implemented some of the least restrictions [5]. Restaurants are open. With some exceptions, public and private gatherings are limited to 10 people. Although there is no state-wide mask mandate, many businesses and localities (including Boise) do require them.

So, how have Washington and Idaho performed during the COVID pandemic? One measure is the number of new coronavirus cases per capita. My analysis (using data from the COVID Tracking Project [6]) yielded the following:

There are three things worth noting: First, as one might expect, there are more cases per capita in Idaho than Washington. Second, despite Idaho’s relatively relaxed attitude, the number of new cases per capita is diminishing rapidly. Third, Washington State’s lockdown didn’t work as intended. There was a small decrease in new COVID cases after the November 16 lockdown was announced, but cases shot back up again by early December. Then, new cases spiked once again at the beginning of 2021, but only now are finally starting to fall.

Another good way to measure the impact of COVID is deaths per capita. In Washington, there have been 4,148 deaths (54 deaths per 100,000), and in Idaho, 1,681 deaths (94 per 100,000).
Together, these data suggest that Washington is doing better than Idaho at reducing COVID sicknesses and deaths. However, the data also suggest that massive restrictions aren’t necessary to get COVID under control. It’s time for Washington to start opening up.