

# The Pandemic's Toll on College Football

A Times analysis uncovered a sobering number of coronavirus cases in college athletic departments.

Dec. 11, 2020, 12:20 p.m. ET



Wisconsin had to cancel two football games this season due to coronavirus outbreaks on the team. Morry Gash/Associated Press

This year's college football season got off to a rocky start as parents protested attempts to cancel the season and President Trump [waded into the debate](#). And it has taken some major hits, with high-profile coaches and players testing positive for the coronavirus and team

outbreaks interrupting marquee games.

Now, for the first time, [a New York Times analysis](#) has begun to quantify the toll: At least 6,629 people who play and work in athletic departments that compete in college football's premier leagues have contracted the virus.

Not all athletic departments break down infections by sport. However, football accounts for many — but nowhere near all — of those athletes, while also claiming much of the attention paid to college athletics.

The Times managed to get complete data from only 78 of the 130 universities in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Football Bowl Subdivision. Some universities shared data willingly; several complied only after The Times filed requests under public records laws. Many schools stopped releasing information just ahead of football season, which is when most documented cases started.

"We had these numbers saying how many cases there are, but the reality is the number is much bigger than that," said our colleague Alan Blinder, who reported the story with Lauryn Higgins and Benjamin Guggenheim.

College athletes, coaches and staff members are some of the most closely monitored people in the United States. Athletes follow strict protocols and attend rigorous public health trainings. Even as nonathlete students said they had to [exaggerate symptoms](#) to get access to tests, universities [tested athletes](#) several times a week, if not daily.

"There are teams that have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars at minimum to protect their players and staff from the virus, but the virus

can get in," Alan said.

### ***Coronavirus Schools Briefing: It's back to school — or is it?***

As the season dragged on, the virus spread through programs.

[Coaches tested positive](#). [Players tested positive](#). And schools canceled game after game, as outbreaks ballooned.

It certainly could have been worse.

Many of the positive cases were asymptomatic, and no athletic department that shared data reported any deaths associated with the virus. Experts believe that virtually none of the infections in college sports are linked to the games themselves, with cases far more often traceable to meetings, meals, travel or nonathletic activities.

"People who wanted colleges to play this fall will say that, when you consider that many athletic departments would be in deeper financial trouble without football, perhaps the risk was worth it," Alan said, "especially since we don't know of any deaths in top-tier athletic departments or any transmissions linked to the actual playing of football. But plenty of other people will see these numbers, nod their heads and say 'told you.'"

---

## **Loan forgiveness in a pandemic**

The future of student loan debt is at a critical fork in the road. Last week, the Trump administration [extended a pandemic-induced pause](#) on loan payments, but only through January.

That means payments on \$1.7 trillion in loan debt held by more than 43

million borrowers are [set to resume](#) just days after President-elect Joseph R. Biden Jr. becomes president. That's also when the coronavirus pandemic and its economic impact are projected to be worse than ever.

The Education Department owns student loans totaling \$1.4 trillion. Federal law gives the education secretary the power to "compromise, waive or release" federal student loan debts.

Biden has endorsed canceling \$10,000 in federal student debt per borrower. But Democratic leaders, backed by the party's left flank, are pressing for up to \$50,000 of debt relief per borrower, executed on Day 1 of his presidency.

The more ambitious plan could cost the United States [\\$1 trillion](#). The more modest proposal endorsed by Biden would reach an estimated 15 million mostly lower-income borrowers who have low debt often because they did not complete their degrees.

"The virus epidemic has accelerated some of the trends that are strangling public higher education," said Louise Seamster, an assistant professor at the University of Iowa and a co-author of [a working paper from the Roosevelt Institute](#) that casts debt forgiveness explicitly in racial justice terms.

---

## **Around the country**

### **College update**

- **The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill** plans to quarantine students who have tested positive in the same

buildings as students who have only been exposed, [Charlotte Geier reported for The Daily Tar Heel](#), the student paper.

- The Saturday football game between **The University of Texas at Austin** and the **University of Kansas** has been canceled because of an outbreak in the Texas program, [Stephen Wagner reported for The Daily Texan](#), the student paper.
- **Pitzer College** in California will allow students to spread their four spring credits into the summer to lighten course load and mitigate student burnout during an uncertain spring semester, [Hannah Weaver reported for The Student Life](#), the student newspaper for the Claremont Colleges.
- From March to next June, the **University of California, Berkeley**, projects that it will have suffered \$340 million in losses. The university announced a plan to minimize job loss with a furlough program and employed time reductions, [Emma Rooholfada reported for The Daily California](#), the student paper.
- **A growing concern:** It might be time to [rethink college basketball](#). [A new poll](#) found 56 percent of sports fans in the United States think we [shouldn't be playing indoor team sports](#) right now. "I don't think it feels right to anybody," a coach said.

## K-12 update

- The **Chicago** Teachers Union has [released a list of demands](#) for reopening the city's schools. It says teachers should not have to [simultaneously teach](#) students online and in the classroom, and that individual schools should close if their ZIP code reaches a 3

percent positivity threshold.

- Three Catholic schools in **Michigan** are [suing the state](#) over in-person learning bans, claiming such regulations violate their First Amendment right to practice their faith.
- **Washington D.C.** released limited data on outbreaks in schools and day care centers, while acknowledging there is [no evidence of community spread](#) within school buildings.
- **Maine** public schools posted a [sharp enrollment decline](#) of nearly 8,000 fewer students, or about 4 percent of total enrollment, including double-digit decreases in pre-K and kindergarten.
- **A book recommendation:** "[A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door: The Dismantling of Public Education and the Future of School](#)" imagines "a future in which the growing movement of school privatizers in the United States totally have their way," Jon Shelton wrote for Jacobin magazine.
- **A good read:** An **Icelandic** study of 40,000 people found that children under 15 are "half as likely as adults to transmit the virus to others," [National Geographic reported](#). "Almost all the coronavirus transmissions to children came from adults."

---

No playdates in sight: Alice McGraw at the Mount Olympus monument in San Francisco. Cayce Clifford for The New York Times

## Tip: The toddlers are all right

When 2-year-old Alice McGraw saw another family walking toward her this summer, she stopped and pointed. "Uh-oh," she said. "People."

[Like so many infants and toddlers](#), Alice has almost no experience in a pandemic-free world. But experts do not expect the vast majority of our youngest people to experience social or emotional delays because they haven't spent time with peers.

That's because young children's most important relationships are with their parents. As long as adults play with them, talk to them and keep them engaged, development specialists say that most children will most likely be just fine. Phew.

[\*Sign up here to get the briefing by email\*](#)

**Open in the app.**

**We'll automatically log you in.**