

# Many who died of COVID rejected vaccines

Majority of Florida fatalities came after June 1, 2021

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It didn't have to be this way.

Though COVID vaccines have been available across Florida for more than a year, the majority of the more than 74,000 people who have died statewide of the disease succumbed in the past 12 months. Most chose not to get the free shots.

More than half of Florida fatalities came after June 1, 2021, months after adults ages 18 or older could get the shots, figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show. Nationwide, it was just the opposite. The majority of the 1 million-plus deaths across the country came before March 1, 2021, when shots were in shorter supply.

At least 29,000 deaths in the state might have been prevented if everyone who could have gotten the shots, did, a Brown University analysis published May 13 shows. Florida had twice as many vaccine-preventable deaths as California, the most populous state, and the second most in the nation, after Texas, university researchers said.



**GOV. RON DESANTIS WATCHES JESSICA BROWN GET VACCINATED IN DELRAY BEACH IN 2020.** GREG LOVETT/PALM BEACH POST

Ever since inoculations began in December 2020, doctors, scientists and most public health officials have urged people to get vaccinated, emphasizing that immunization protects against severe illness, hospitalizations and deaths.

Not everyone heeded the messages. A number of the dead, unvaccinated Floridians whose family members spoke to The Palm Beach Post had ridiculed vaccine recipients and scientists while praising GOP figures such as Gov. Ron DeSantis or former President Donald Trump. Others distrusted the shots for nonpolitical reasons, or they simply never got around to getting them.

Whatever their reasons, they left behind spouses, children, family and friends frustrated that they hadn't gotten vaccinated. And DeSantis has no apparent plans to combat immunization misinformation or boost inoculations as the nation grapples with new waves of infection.

Kristy Losapio's 50-year-old sister, Kari Simonson Pitcher, contracted COVID last year and died Sept. 10. She was unvaccinated. Losapio, a nurse in Brevard County, blamed her sister's husband, Michael Pitcher.

"He was a very rabid anti-vaxxer," Losapio said. "I feel like pretty much that's why she didn't get vaccinated, because of him. ... She was scared of him. I think she wanted to, but she just didn't. She was like, 'Well, you know Michael's really against it, and he feels like we're all being manipulated.'" On March 23, 2020, as quarantine and stay-at-home measures had begun to kick in, Michael Pitcher shared a picture of a Twitter post from then-President Trump that read, "WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF. AT THE END OF THE 15 DAY PERIOD, WE WILL MAKE A DECISION AS TO WHICH WAY WE WANT TO GO!"

Pitcher, 50, described Trump in 2019 as "my president" in a Facebook post in which he said it was "mildly irritating" to lose connections in part due to his support for Trump.

"I don't know why these people (who oppose inoculation) are massive Trump fans," Losapio said. "Like hello, Trump was vaccinated." The former president has touted his administration's Operation Warp Speed, which helped expedite development and distribution of COVID vaccines.

Michael Pitcher caught COVID himself in August. "Need prayers Covid has me," he wrote Aug. 2 on Facebook. He died Sept. 27 — 17 days after his wife.

Kari Simonson left behind her 17-year-old daughter, Mia, whom Losapio takes care of.

"She is struggling," Losapio said. "Her senior year of high school is next year. When we think about how many milestones occur in your life, it's one after the other. Her mom is missing all of it. ... Mia wants to be a nurse just like her mother. The fact that Kari won't ever get to see that happen when she's the one who inspired it is just awful."

Kristy Losapio's family is far from the only one in Florida to say they lost loved ones under the influence of GOP opposition to the vaccines and a torrent of misinformation.

Their concerns are reflected in political maps. A disproportionate share of COVID deaths since June 1, 2021, came from Florida counties DeSantis won in 2018. About 49% of fatalities were among those counties' residents, when just 40% of the state's population live in those places.

Just 63% of Floridians living in De-Santis-won counties have gotten at least one vaccine dose, compared with 75% in counties that went Democratic in 2018. About 70% of Florida residents are at least partially vaccinated, state Health Department figures show.

About 62% of deaths since June 1 were logged in counties where vaccination rates are below the statewide average.

More than 70% of CO VID-positive patients in Palm Beach County hospitals during the delta variant wave last summer were unvaccinated, according to statistics county commissioners required hospitals to report from August to October. The figure was similar in Miami- Dade County during the omicron wave.

The state Agency for Health Care Administration, which collects data about whether people who died in hospitals were vaccinated, chooses not to report those numbers. Nor does the federal government.

The un vaccinated accounted for 81.5% of COVID deaths nationwide between June 2021 and March, data that Florida and other states send to the CDC shows.

Lauren Hafner, 52, an un vaccinated nurse from Riviera Beach, succumbed to the virus Sept. 2, leaving behind a son. She praised DeSantis on her Facebook page for opposing President Joe Biden after he announced requirements for hospitals and big businesses to vaccinate employees.

“Even the fully vaccinated are dying,” she wrote July 26. She shared a post Aug. 4 equating Nazism with a New York City policy requiring proof of inoculation for entry into businesses.

The fully vaccinated do die, but they tend to have underlying conditions or to be elderly.

Tamara Drock, 47, an un vaccinated elementary school teacher from Loxahatchee, died Nov. 12 from COVID complications. Her husband, Ryan Drock, 51, sued the hospital to force medical staff to treat her with ivermectin. The lawsuit stalled after the judge ordered the husband and the hospital to work out an agreement. Before that could happen, Tamara died.

That anti-parasitic drug, typically used on farm animals, has not been shown to be effective against coronavirus infections. Even so, some unvaccinated Republicans who caught COVID began taking Ivermectin last year, often to no use.

Before he became DeSantis’ handpicked surgeon general, Dr. Joseph Ladapo praised the drug in a Nov. 24, 2020, Wall Street Journal column titled “Too Much Caution Is Killing Covid Patients.”

Lloyd C. Campbell Jr., 73, was an unvaccinated pastor from Stuart. In the months leading to his death Jan. 31, he shared posts on Facebook from popular conservative figures such as a video from former Fox News host Andrew Napolitano titled “Can you sue vaccine manufacturers?”, or memes such as one insinuating the Biden administration is immunizing “all the illegals.”

The obituary Campbell’s family took out in the TCPalm newspaper did not include his COVID diagnosis, but one family member wrote on Facebook Jan. 11 that he was hospitalized with the disease.

Rebecca Simonson, 55, of North Port in Sarasota County, shared anti-vaccine messages on Facebook such as “After 16 months of the most intense psychological warfare ever, big shout out if you’re UNJABBED & UNMASKED & still hug & kiss, & smile in the street like a normal non-mutant human.” The unvaccinated Republican also praised DeSantis last May as “THE BEST” for “KEEPING THE STATE OPEN.” She died of COVID Sept. 16 .

Two unvaccinated brothers in Jacksonville, Aaron Jaggi, 41, and Free Xaver Jaggi, 35, caught the virus last year and died within 12 hours of each other, Aug. 12 and 13, 2021, respectively.

“No one thinks the corona virus (sic) is a hoax,” Free Xaver Jaggi wrote Aug. 16, 2020, on Facebook. “The hoax is treating a virus with a 99.7% survival rate as if it was Ebola and claiming that everyone living their life is a murderer.”

The brothers’ vaccinated mother, Lisa Brandon, suffered only a mild COVID infection, which she credited to the shots. “I think they would be alive today if they would have gotten their shot,” she told News4Jax last August.

Cheryl Secunda, 67, of Port Orange in Volusia County, wrote last year on Facebook “double no I am not taking the vaccine.”

She shared a video Nov. 4 of nurses dancing, writing, “They are dancing the happy dance because they weren’t forced by a dictator in the White House to take a non researched vaccine.”

The unvaccinated mother of three caught the disease this year and died March 1.

Dennis Ahola, 72, of Lehigh Acres in Lee County, was a Vietnam War veteran who spent more than a year railing against anti-COVID measures and the vaccines before the disease caught him.

On May 8, 2020, he wrote on Facebook that liberals “are not worry about TB (tuberculosis) or other’s flu before.. Have you ever ask yourself.. Why are they Now so concerned. lets see. Could they wanta Control the Election. yes that’s it..”

On Sept. 20, 2021, he wrote, “Did you know that if someone got the vaccine Shot, and you Kiss, share a drink, straw or Swap Saliva you are transferring the virus to them!!”

He died in October. The last photo he uploaded to Facebook was one he took of himself laying in a Gulf Coast Hospital bed, wearing a ventilator, asking for prayers.

Jim Wheelles, 70, of Milton in Santa Rosa County, badmouthed the vaccines long before they were rolled out. “Remember if they can make it mandatory to wear a mask, they can make it mandatory to get the deadly vaccine, this is what it’s all about folks,” read a message he shared July 5, 2020, on Facebook.

On Sept. 14, 2021, Wheelles wrote “I love my governor” in a post where he shared an article titled “DeSantis Blasts Biden’s Hypocrisy, Exempting Congress from Vaccine Mandate” from [Breitbart.com](https://www.breitbart.com), a website once run by Steve Bannon before he became Trump’s chief strategist.

Wheelles died Feb. 8 after contracting COVID.

Trump is the driving force behind why many Republicans remain unvaccinated, experts say.

“It all comes down to Trump,” said University of Miami political science professor Joseph Uscinski, author of “American Conspiracy Theories.”

Trump described the coronavirus in February 2020 as the Democrats’ “new hoax,” Uscinski pointed out. “With COVID, the disease itself and the vaccine for it became

partisan because President Trump started out saying the disease itself isn't real. ... The people who listen to him will act as if it's a hoax to this day."

That's consistent with findings from the Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonprofit focused on health-care policy. Republicans are 30 to 40 percentage points less likely than Democrats to say they're worried about getting sick, the foundation's polling director, Liz Hamel, said.

"They are much more likely to say the news media is exaggerating the seriousness of the pandemic," Hamel said. "We find it is more likely among Republicans who are unvaccinated to say, 'I just don't want to get it' or 'I don't think I need it.'" At least 60% of unvaccinated Americans the foundation has polled identify as Republicans, it reported in November.

"Trump framed this early on as lives vs. livelihood. He sowed that distrust," said Brian Castrucci, CEO of the de Beaumont Foundation, which teamed up last March with GOP pollster Frank Lutz to host a virtual focus group with 19 Republican voters about the vaccine, trying to find ways to persuade vaccine skeptics.

Castrucci described Trump's early pandemic message as "Don't listen, don't comply" with anti-COVID measures such as quarantining, masking or social distancing. "When he was sick (in October 2020), he never came out with how sick he was. If you are sowing the seeds of mistrust, you must reap what you sow."

DeSantis has shown no interest in fighting misinformation spread to and among his supporters.

"'Misinformation' and 'disinformation' are vague terms that are often politicized and, unfortunately, weaponized to silence dissent," DeSantis aide Bryan Griffin said in an email May 20. "Falsehoods being spread online are best combatted not by censorship, but by an open and free exchange of ideas."

But DeSantis has shown an appetite for forcing social media platforms to his will. He signed a bill into law last year allowing Florida residents to sue Big Tech companies if they are "treated unfairly" by them, a news release from his office said. A federal appeals court struck down the law Monday for violating the First Amendment.

When vaccines were rolled out in Florida began in December 2020, DeSantis decreed that the elderly must be inoculated before almost everyone else. They comprise the vast majority of COVID deaths, which is why he wanted to inoculate "seniors first," he said.

By April, as the supply of shots became more steady, DeSantis opened up immunization to all Florida adults.

But by then, DeSantis had turned his attention to the state's economy and his concern that local measures to contain the spread of the virus were impeding business and individual freedoms.

He ramped up his attacks on local anti-COVID measures. He signed executive orders the previous month nullifying fines that cities and counties levied against people and establishments who broke local masking or social distancing laws. He also asked state lawmakers to send him a bill allowing him to overturn local mask laws.

As spring break 2021 brought crowds of revelers to the state, COVID infections spiked in places such as Miami Beach and Daytona Beach. Mayors said the governor's orders worsened outbreaks in their cities.

"For whatever reason this governor seems to think that it's not our job to try and control the spread," Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber, a Democrat, said at the time. "He doesn't talk about wearing masks or social distancing. He tells people everything's open. He really projects out to the world that the disease is not an issue."

By summer, the virus' delta mutation was killing more people in Florida than anywhere else nationwide. Despite that, the DeSantis administration fought efforts to vaccinate people or incentivize inoculation. With the governor's blessing, Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody sued the CDC over its requirement that cruise ship passengers and staff present proof of vaccination. The state also sued the Biden Administration over its orders requiring hospitals and businesses with at least 100 employees to vaccinate their workers.



**KARI SIMONSON PITCHER, LEFT, IS PICTURED WITH HER YOUNGER SISTERS, KRISTY, CENTER, AND KIM. KARI DIED OF COVID-19 ON SEPT. 10, 2021, AT AGE 50. SHE HAD NOT BEEN VACCINATED.**  
PROVIDED



**DAVID KELSEY OF WINTER HAVEN IS SHOWN WITH HIS LONGTIME PARTNER, LUISA MOORE. KELSEY, A LONGTIME EMPLOYEE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS, DIED OF COVID-19. PROVIDED BY LUISA MOORE**



**RYAN AND TAMARA DROCK HAD BOTH CONTRACTED COVID-19. RYAN RECOVERED BUT TAMARA DIED AT PALM BEACH GARDENS MEDICAL CENTER, WHERE RYAN WANTED A JUDGE TO ORDER THE HOSPITAL TO GIVE HER THE DRUG IVERMECTIN. SHE DIED BEFORE THE COULD REACH AN AGREEMENT. PROVIDED**



**VINCENT KONIDARE, FORMER PALM BEACH POST MANAGER, DIED OF PNEUMONIA FROM COVID-19. HE WAS VACCINATED. PROVIDED BY FAMILY**

Last May, DeSantis signed a bill banning businesses from asking visitors for proof of vaccination. The state Health Department said in October that it had been investigating more than 100 businesses, organizations and events, including a Harry Styles concert in Orlando, cruise lines and the Kravis Center in West Palm Beach.

The state fined Leon County, home to Tallahassee, \$3.5 million in October, saying it broke the law when it fired 14 government employees who refused to show proof they were vaccinated. The state pulled the fine in December after the county agreed to rehire them.

DeSantis decreed last July that schools cannot require students to wear masks. He threatened to withhold pay for school district officials who defied him. After a judge tossed DeSantis's order in August, the governor signed legislation in November

banning school mask requirements. He also approved laws that month banning businesses and organizations from ordering employees to get vaccinated.

DeSantis received a dose of the single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine in April 2021, off-camera. He has not said whether he has gotten a booster. “He will share it when, and if, he wants to do so,” DeSantis aide Griffin said. Scientific studies have shown the J& J formula offers less protection than Moderna and the Pfizer-

BioNTech vaccines against omicron.

The governor badmouthed the vaccines during a Jan. 3 news conference while pushing treatments that laboratory tests had shown to be ineffective against omicron infection. “With omicron, you know, the vaccines are not preventing infection,” he said.

His surgeon general, Ladapo, has said “healthy” children ages 5 to 17 should not get immunized against COVID.

Some of the unvaccinated who died weren’t supporters of Trump.

David Kelsey, a 50-year-old decorated Army veteran who lived in Winter Haven, opposed Trump, his longtime girlfriend, Luisa Moore, said. But still, she said he died because of an “extremist” group he joined through social media.

Moore had gotten vaccinated as soon as she could, she said, in April 2021. She urged Kelsey to do same, but he refused.

“He became a member of a group on Facebook that was extremist,” said Moore, 59. “They thought there was going to be a civil war in the United States if Biden won. They didn’t believe in the vaccine because there wasn’t enough studies.”

Before he joined that group, Moore remembered Kelsey as the proud military man she met in 2007 at a Starbucks in Kissimmee through a newspaper personal ad. He showed her a photo album of himself in Kuwait during the Gulf War in 1990.

Then, last August, COVID came for Kelsey. As he lay in Winter Haven Hospital’s intensive care unit, he realized he needed the vaccine, and texted Moore his regrets. “He said, ‘As soon as I get out of the hospital, I’m going to get the vaccine,’” she told The Lakeland Ledger.

But it was too late. Kelsey died Sept. 13.

“I blame the (Facebook) group that put some ideologies (in his head) that are wrong because he wasn’t like that,” Moore said. “He changed completely.”

COVID killed fully vaccinated Floridians far less often over the past year. One of those who died was Vincent Konidare, 58, a former Palm Beach Post employee.

He had proudly gotten the J& J shot in March 2021, but he tested positive for COVID in August. The North Palm Beach father of two had to be hospitalized. After weeks of struggle, he died Sept. 19. He seemed “perfectly healthy,” his daughter Valerie Konidare had said.

More often, the disease just sickens inoculated people. Jimmy and Tobi Pomerance, of Palm Beach County, had gotten their shots and visited Utah last July. When they returned, they said they both tested positive. They experienced headaches, fatigue,

and Tobi temporarily lost her sense of taste and smell. But, they said, their condition would have been much worse had they skipped vaccination.

For some families, the cost was very high. In the western Palm Beach County town of Belle Glade, the wife of Mayor Steve Wilson lost her grandmother, two uncles and three cousins — all unvaccinated — to COVID in late August. Lisa Wilson had gone door-to-door in the rural farming city of 20,000 trying to persuade residents to get the shots. She had also been working on her family.

“I was in their ears almost every day. ‘You’ve just got to do this,’” Wilson, an aide to County Commissioner Melissa McKinlay, said during a commission meeting Sept. 14.

Just 58% of vaccine-eligible residents ages 5 and older in ZIP code 33430, which covers Belle Glade, have gotten at least one shot, state Health Department data show. The county rate is 76%.

Belle Glade City Commissioner Mary Wilkerson has been trying to get more people in her city vaccinated, but it’s been tough. One of those she tried unsuccessfully to sway was one of Wilson’s uncles, Tyrone Moreland, 48.

“He said, ‘My doctor said I’m in good health.’ He was just lying.” Years ago, when Moreland was working for Solid Waste Management, two garbage trucks backed into him, pinning him, Wilkerson said. “‘With your health issues, Tyrone,’ I said, ‘you should be the first in line to get the shot.’” Wilkerson has heard all sorts of excuses, she said. Recently she heard residents say they fear the vaccine contains a microchip to track them.

“Some people tell you any excuse and hope you believe it,” Wilkerson said. “I think it’s just laziness.” Plus, she added, a lot of boys and men fear needles. “They’ll tell you, ‘I don’t want no one stickin’ me.’” And then when unvaccinated people catch the disease and have to go to the hospital, Wilkerson said, “they want people to wait on them hand and feet to save them but they didn’t do enough to save themselves.”