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COVID-19 Island Insights Series

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Hawai'i

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The COVID-19 Island Insights Series is an initiative spearheaded by the Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law & Governance (SCELG) and the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) at the University of Prince Edward Island in collaboration with Island Innovation. The initiative brings together critical assessments of how specific islands around the world have performed during the COVID-19 pandemic and the extent to which their recovery plans can promote resilience and sustainability in the long term.

For more information on SCELG see
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Hawai'i is an archipelago in the Pacific. Hawai'i, Maui, Kaho'olawe, Moloka'i, Lanai, Oahu, Kauai, and Ni'ihau, are its main islands. Though it is officially recognized as a state within the US, Native Hawaiians and allies challenge its legitimacy due to the illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893.

The population size is 1, 416 million.¹

The combined area of the archipelago is 16, 758 km².²

COVID-19 data and timeline

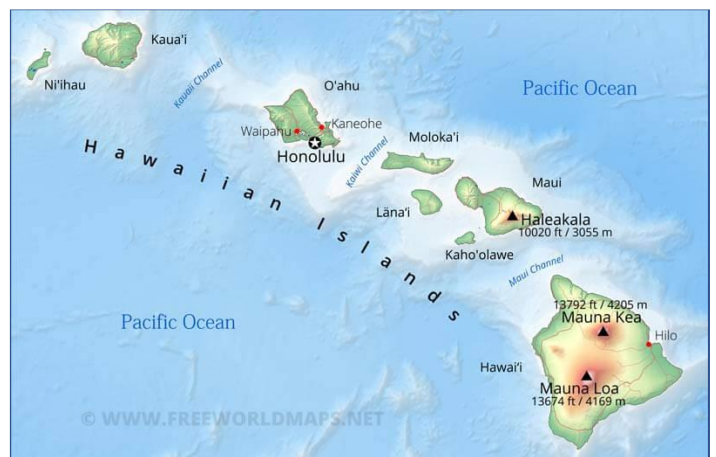
- First case detected on 6 March 2020.
- Number of confirmed cases until 15 February, 2021, 26, 889 (1.2% of population)
- Number of fatalities through 15 February 2021, 426.
- Schools transferred to on-line learning on 24 March 2020.
- Main travel restrictions were enacted on 26 March 2020.
- Travel restrictions remain in place including pre-travel COVID-19 tests and/or quarantine requirements.

¹ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/HI>

² <http://www.city-data.com/states/Hawaii-Location-size-and-extent.html>

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Hawai'i³

³ Source <https://www.freeworldmaps.net/United-states/hawaii/map.html>

COVID-19 on Hawai'i

The global reckoning that COVID-19 was indeed a pandemic came in mid-March 2020. Because the United States (US) failed to offer a national approach or a cohesive set of federal policies, US states were left to independently manage their responses to COVID-19. In comparison to other US states, there is little doubt that the state of Hawai'i has maintained the most aggressive policies to limit the spread of COVID-19. Since March 2020, it has continued to maintain the strictest restrictions in relation to travel, social gatherings, and use of public facilities. The vast majority of cases in Hawai'i have occurred on the densely populated island of Oahu, which is also the most touristed.

As the international center of the Pacific, where "east" meets "west", Hawai'i's approach reflects an appreciation of its transnationality and its uniquely remote island location. Inadequate contact tracing and limited testing led to the highest surge of cases experienced by the state in August 2020. With daily infections for the first time in the triple digits, the state's health director and public safety director resigned.

At present, Hawai'i's holds the lowest positivity rate among US states. Hawai'i's average positivity rate is 1.2 percent, in comparison to the US average at 4.6 percent (Penner 2021)⁴. Hawai'i's strict travel restrictions distinguishes its approach from the continental US. On 21 March 2020 the governor signed into order a mandatory 14-day self-quarantine that stayed in place through October 15, 2020. Initially the quarantine order included inter-island travel to and from all islands. With the goal of flattening the curve, the ultimate purpose of the order was to deter tourism to Hawai'i by strictly limiting the movement of new arrivals. Visitors or returning residents were only permitted to leave their

dwelling for medical emergencies and not for any other purpose such as purchasing food.

During the months of the 14-day self-quarantine, the *Honolulu Star Advertiser*, the island chain's largest newspaper, along with smaller local news outlets, reported numerous accounts of tourists breaking quarantine, questioning how quarantines could be regulated, and who was accountable to report failures of compliance.⁵ On 27 March 2020 the government enacted a state-wide stay-at-home and work-at-home order which continued through April 30, 2020 with fines of \$5000 for non-compliance. These measures were publicly supported by the tourist industry such as Hawaiian Airlines and caused the suspension of cruise ship traffic to Hawai'i. COVID-19 movement restrictions were implemented the day after a protest convoy occurred on several of Hawai'i's islands with residents honking horns and attaching signs to their vehicles seeking policies that would protect Hawai'i residents, especially *kupuna* (elders).

While the state government enacted policies related to out-of-state travel and stay-at-home orders, the implementation of COVID-19 policies were conducted at the county level. In Hawai'i, counties serve as the local level of governance as there is no city or municipal governance. Hawai'i is divided into four main counties (a fifth, Kalawao county governs the area in Moloka'i designated for those with Hansen's Disease) which include Honolulu, Hawai'i, Kauai, and Maui. Each of these counties maintains their own policies regarding the determination of what constitutes essential businesses, protocols at dining venues, and access to public beaches and parks. In addition, counties are able to request modifications of state level policies. For example, in October, Hawai'i transitioned from its 14-day self-quarantine order to negative test exemption (Emergency Rule #23) which permits travellers who have received a

⁴ Penner, Rienhold. 2021. [COVID] Daily Numbers Update 02/15/21, Email communication to UHARI listserv.

⁵ <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/05/19/hawaii-news/hawaii-residents-keep-eye-out-for-visitors-who-break-quarantine/>

negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours of arrival to enter the state without quarantining. However, Kauai County's mayor was able to impose a temporary moratorium on its participation in the state's pre-travel testing program in response to the doubling of COVID-19 cases on the island. An earlier case of island-specific policies was in Hawai'i County. In bold contrast to the governor's March 17th CDC-informed strategies to maintain only essential employees and shutter bars and restaurants, the mayor of Hawai'i island announced that same day, "the County of Hawai'i will maintain its services and operations as normal. All County employees are to report to work as scheduled",⁶ but left private businesses to decide on their own whether or not to close or modify operations. Despite letters from the public and a sorrowful emergency council meeting with councilpersons making teary-eyed pleas, the Mayor resisted stating that he received "permission from the attorney general, it's that flexible."⁷ Unfortunately, a dramatic rise in COVID-19 cases and loss of life in elder care facilities (a sector particularly hard hit across the US) demonstrated the failure of his approach, after which he shortly revised.

Like other US states, due to a history of discrimination, specific sectors of the population suffered precipitously more with sickness and death from COVID-19. A study by medical researchers at UH Mānoa found that Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) have been overwhelmingly distressed by COVID-19. He linked this to their overrepresentation as essential workers, limited access to health services and insurance, and holding a higher-than-average rate of pre-existing conditions. Though in Hawai'i Pacific Islanders make up about four percent of the state's population, they represent

more than 24 percent of the state's COVID-19 cases.⁸

The state provided updates through media and also open forums for public questions. However, the regular changes in policies addressing the spread of COVID-19 and the different policies enacted by each county has created much confusion for both local residents and travellers to Hawai'i. Finally, the Hawai'i Board of Education had no clear state approach to their call for a return-to-learn reopening plan. Many private schools have opened their doors, while public schools, many in low-income communities, have yet to re-open. The approach seems to be independently decided by schools with procedures that appear unsystematic. In addition, much of Hawai'i islands are rural and internet access is limited and uneven throughout the state which also suffers from a digital divide due to income inequality and under-resourced public schools.

Key socioeconomic pressures in Hawai'i during COVID-19

Tourism

Both in response to and by taking advantage of its island geography, Hawai'i was able to immediately enact strict restrictions impeding travel with its extended quarantine as well as disincentives to potential tourists by closure of tourist attractions bringing tourism to a halt. The success of Hawai'i to strikingly limit COVID-19 cases as compared to the continental US arrived with an economic cost and the recognition that the state's dependency on tourism was crippling. Along with travel restrictions, cutting into tourism and recreation by state residents

⁶ <https://www.bigislandvideonews.com/2020/03/17/video-mayor-kim-sends-message-on-county-policy-after-state-covid-19-directives/>

⁷ <https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2020/03/21/emotional-council-members-plead-with-hawaii-county-mayor-take-action-over-covid/>

⁸ <https://jabsom.hawaii.edu/native-hawaiians-pacific-islanders-face-higher-rates-of-covid-19/>

was the closure of public parks and beaches. Beach parks were officially closed in March, though entry into the ocean was permitted. Beaches and other parks reopened mostly in May, though inconsistently by county and then closed again in August due to an uptick in COVID-19 cases. Most beaches were reopened by October 2020 and have remained open since. Beginning in March, across all islands, sporting events, festivals, and public gatherings were cancelled fairly quickly, for example the Merrie Monarch Festival, the single most important hula event which takes place in Hilo, Hawai'i. These cancellations significantly impacted the hospitality industry.

The tension between safety from COVID-19 and the negative economic impact of the 14-day self-quarantine and other restrictions have been palpable. This was particularly challenging in Oahu, the most populated island with well-known tourist sites such as Waikiki Beach and the North Shore, where international surfing competitions that have taken place for more than a half a century were cancelled.

Similar to many locations, drinking and dining venues are extremely challenged by COVID-19 related restrictions. Although island residents have continued to support restaurants despite limiting conditions, studies by UH Mānoa political science faculty who surveyed restaurant owners found that tourists make a substantial portion of their customer base. With a sample size of 184, the study shows that for many restaurants up to fifty percent of their customers are tourists.⁹ Along with the steep decline of tourism, restaurants in Hawai'i were particularly challenged by on-again, off-again-restrictions. Changes since March include permission to serve outdoors and/or indoors, the number of patrons permitted to enter the venue, and time constraints on the hours of operation and the serving of alcohol. The study conducted by Mānoa faculty found that restaurateurs felt a

lack of communication, transparency, and clear planning by government was an immense hurdle in surviving past COVID-19.¹⁰ The vast majority have little confidence in the state's decision-making processes in relation to COVID-19 matters. The report suggests that without rent assistance and forms of financial support, half of the restaurant owners in Hawai'i believe they will have to shutter their doors by April 2021.

Employment

In addition, the decline in the tourism sector created widespread unemployment in Hawai'i. The state's average unemployment rate in November 2020 was 10.1 percent, approximately eight percentage points higher than the same month the previous year. In addition, unemployment varied by island and this was tied directly to the island's or county's dependency on the tourist sector. For example, in Maui County unemployment reached 16 percent in November, while on the island of Hawai'i it held at 9.8 percent. Unemployment claims for January 16, 2021 increased by approximately 265 percent from that of the previous year.

Housing

A perennial challenge in Hawai'i has been affordable housing. Hawai'i is considered to be the most expensive state to live in the US with housing a substantial contributor to the high living costs. A study conducted by the Economic Research Organization at the University of Hawai'i (UHERO) found that rental property owners and managers surveyed in August 2020 had about a ten percent increase in late (after mid-month) payments of rent.¹¹ A state-wide moratorium on evictions implemented on 17 April 2020 was extended to 21 February 2021, though there are criticisms of its effectiveness. The US Federal Housing Administration had placed evictions on hold but only through the

⁹ Barthel, Paul, Samantha Miller and Lawrence H. Nintz. 2020. "Back To the Table Report" Volume 3. University of Hawai'i Public Policy Center.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ <https://uhero.hawaii.edu/the-august-rental-market-struggling-tenants-and-rising-vacancies/>

end of December 2020. Under an executive order signed by the new Biden administration, the eviction moratorium will be extended to March 2021. The enactment of a federally mandated approach to COVID-19 by the new administration including funding to address the economic impact should benefit Hawai'i.

Post Covid-19 recovery on Hawai'i

According to the Hawai'i Tourist Authority (HTA) the majority of island residents think that "tourism in Hawai'i is being run for tourists at the expense of local residents".¹² For many of those in Hawai'i who have been critical of the unsustainable expansion of the tourist economy, COVID-19 impacts became an opportunity to re-examine Hawai'i's economy with calls to revise its tourist-centered approach. Though agriculture has been identified as a sector that could be expanded to diversify its economy, an UHERO study did not find it an effective for strategy for increasing a portion of the state's GDP.¹³ However for many residents in Hawai'i expansion of local and small-scale agriculture would contribute to healthy local foods and also reduce the archipelago's dependency on food imports, which currently exceed 90 percent of its food supply.

One organization, 'Āina Aloha Economic Futures,¹⁴ is a grassroots initiative formed on the basis of Native Hawaiian values, involving community-centered decision-making, to structure redevelopment in Hawai'i. The initiative, under Native Hawaiian leadership, was particularly concerned with re-opening tourism without a

strategy of stages and responses towards an increase of cases. In October 2020 when the state was preparing to open its doors to visitors, Aloha Futures, including community members and research faculty at UH Mānoa, outlined a two part plan for reopening tourism arguing that guests and visitors will "only be well-hosted by the people of Hawai'i when our families and communities are safe, strong, and can exercise our ability to be stewards of our islands."¹⁵ While various agencies and organizations have offered proposals such as "Building Bridges: Not On Our Backs" by the Hawai'i State Commission on the Status of Women,¹⁶ the state government has not committed to a set of policies for redevelopment. Inspired by the UN sustainable development goals, in 2016 Hawai'i became the first state committed to reaching clean energy by 2045.¹⁷ Post-COVID-19 development plans are expected in April 2021. Though many state officials are concerned that action and implementation will be delayed until 2022, hopefully Hawai'i's SDGs guide its rebuilding strategies.^{18 19}

As of January 20, 2021 COVID-19 vaccines are being scheduled in Hawai'i on the island of Oahu. Neighbouring islands have also begun to receive supplies of the vaccine. Hawai'i is outpacing the US in COVID-19 vaccinations in long-term care facilities.²⁰

¹² <https://uhero.hawaii.edu/hawaii-tourism-authority-and-sustainable-destination-management-in-hawaii/>

¹³ <https://uhero.hawaii.edu/reviving-agriculture-to-diversify-hawaiis-economy/>

¹⁴ www.alohafutures.com

¹⁵ <https://www.ainaalohafutures.com/>

¹⁶ <https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/4.13.20-Final-Cover-D2-Feminist-Economic-Recovery-D1.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059832#:~:text=Sustainable%20Hawaii%20is%20an%20initiative,energy%20for%20electricity%20by%202045.>

¹⁸ <https://www.civilbeat.org/2021/02/stabilizing-or-stalling-state-officials-explain-why-hawaiis-recovery-plan-will-take-2-years/>

¹⁹ <https://alohachallenge.hawaii.gov/>

²⁰ <https://www.khon2.com/coronavirus/hawaii-outpaces-rest-of-nation-in-covid-19-vaccinations-for-long-term-care-facilities-survey-says/>

Useful Sources

- <https://www.ainaalohafutures.com/action-agenda>
- <https://governor.hawaii.gov/>
- <https://uhero.hawaii.edu/>

Published COVID-19 Island Insights Papers

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| #1. Malta. November 2020 | #7. Guam. December 2020 |
| #2. Egadi Islands. November 2020 | #8. Okinawa. February 2021 |
| #3. Grenada. November 2020 | #9. Mauritius. February 2021 |
| #4. Trinidad and Tobago. November 2020 | #10. Seychelles. February 2021 |
| #5. Shetland Islands. November 2020 | #11. Aotearoa New Zealand. February 2021 |
| #6. Åland Islands. November 2020 | #12. Hawai'i. February 2021 |



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