

Rush to reopen fueled L.A. crisis

After flattening the curve in L.A. County, officials' decisions to reopen led to record-breaking surges in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations. Here's how it happened:

MARCH 4

A state of emergency

0 deaths • 7 cases

The morning after voters flock to the polls on Super Tuesday, L.A. County public health officials declare an emergency.

The coronavirus is spreading, but residents are assured that a pandemic response is in place. It has been 38 days since L.A. County saw its first reported case, Jan. 26, when a traveler returned from Wuhan, China, to Los Angeles.

L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti praises local leaders. "In so many places where many jurisdictions are divided, we are so united," he says.

Barbara Ferrer, the county's public health director, says the county has "plenty of capacity" for testing, no shortages of test kits and a sophisticated lab.

No serious restrictions are announced: Residents are only advised to wash their hands, stay home when they're sick and to try to keep six feet from strangers.

Later that same day, Gov. Gavin Newsom issues a state of emergency for California. More than 9,400 Californians with possible travel-related exposure are instructed to isolate themselves at home.

Life, for the most part, continues as normal.

The NBA season heads toward the playoffs. The L.A. Marathon takes place as scheduled, just four days after the emergency declaration. One spectator holds a sign reading, "Run like someone with the coronavirus is behind you!" as bystanders laugh off the threat.

This is our last window of normalcy, a vacation no one knows they are on.

MARCH 15

Widespread closures begin

1 death • 69 cases

Newsom asks bars and nightclubs to close and residents 65 and older and people with underlying conditions to stay home.

Los Angeles officials go even further, also closing movie theaters, gyms and fitness centers. The L.A. Unified School District closes all of its schools the following day.

Anxiety grips the region, with residents clearing shelves at grocery stores in a rush for food, water and toilet paper.

MARCH 19 - APRIL 7

Californians told to stay at home

173 deaths • 6,944 cases

Newsom issues the stay-at-home order, making California the first state in the country to do so.

"Let's bend the curve together," Newsom says at a news conference.

Los Angeles, again, takes even stronger measures.

In L.A. County, indoor malls, shopping centers, playgrounds and nonessential retail businesses are ordered to close.

The city of Los Angeles bans public gatherings and orders the closure of all

nonessential businesses.

On April 7, Garcetti orders residents and workers to wear masks at essential businesses, and also requires them on trails and at golf courses.

Freeways are empty of cars, a sign of a surging unemployment rate.

APRIL 14

A road map for reopening

366 deaths • 10,075 cases

A month into the shutdown, L.A. County seems united.

Residents applaud medical workers nightly from their balconies. Towers downtown shine blue in appreciation. Most people wear masks and keep a safe distance from others.

The efforts appear to work: Studies cited by news reports show California has probably reached its peak number of daily cases if social distancing continues at its current levels.

Newsom outlines a plan for reopening the economy, listing six criteria that counties must meet to begin opening up businesses.

MAY 4 - 11

Beaches and retail stores begin to reopen in L.A.

1,570 deaths • 32,269 cases

In early May, the infection rate in L.A. County stabilizes. Leaders remain cautious.

On May 4, Newsom begins implementing moves to rapidly reopen the state, announcing retail stores, including those that sell books, clothing and toys, can reopen at the end of the week for pickup.

For L.A. County to reopen, it must meet Newsom's criteria. Once county leaders choose to move forward, cities within the county can decide whether they want to follow the county's lead or keep more stringent restrictions in place. Garcetti makes those decisions for L.A., the biggest of the 88 cities in the county.

In L.A. County, florists and bookstores open for pickup. In addition, most beaches, hiking trails and golf courses reopen.

"We're going to go extraordinarily slow," said Ferrer, the county's public health director. "And the reason why is we don't want to be doing this at the expense of people's lives."

MAY 18 - 21

L.A. says it won't reopen until July 4

2,021 deaths • 42,138 cases

As hospitalizations begin to flatten and testing ramps up statewide, Newsom on May 18 loosens criteria to allow for the immediate resumption of indoor dining in restaurants and the reopening of shopping malls.

Most significantly, he eliminates a requirement that counties would have to log zero deaths from COVID-19 for two weeks to move forward — something that would

have been nearly impossible for L.A. County to achieve.

But L.A. leaders warn of moving too quickly and instead offer a July 4 target date for reopening of restaurants and other businesses. Coronavirus transmission remains stubbornly high, and the county's death toll surpasses 2,000, more than half of all deaths statewide thus far.

"We are going to really aim together to get there as quickly as possible, but we're going to pay attention to the data," Ferrer says.

MAY 25 - 29

Cases drop, and L.A. sprints forward with reopening

2,294 deaths • 51,685 cases

Five days later, L.A. County leaders abandon their plan to reopen slowly.

Chamber of Commerce groups across L.A. County rally businesses, especially in the Antelope, Conejo and Santa Clarita valleys and beach cities, pleading with the L.A. County Board of Supervisors to reopen the economy.

Local leaders, primarily Garcetti and the Board of Supervisors, have long said L.A. County likely won't reopen as quickly as Orange, Ventura and other surrounding counties because it is the largest and most diverse. But, as every county around L.A. starts to reopen, they forgo this idea and start talking about the importance of the region moving at the same speed.

In the last week of May, L.A. County officials open the following places after receiving permission from Newsom: restaurants for indoor dining; barbershops and hair salons; places of worship; in-store shopping at retail stores and malls; drive-in movie theaters; and flea markets.

MAY 27 - JUNE 10

Massive police protests erupt

2,768 deaths • 67,111 cases

On the same week that L.A. County reopens restaurants and hair salons, major protests break out. The demonstrations against police brutality, which begin May 27 and last more than a week, draw thousands of people.

It remains unclear how much the protests contributed to a surge in coronavirus cases in L.A. County that began in June. Officials later say the protests likely spread the coronavirus, but are not the main driver of the increase in cases.

At the very least, the protests, along with the reopenings, contribute to mixed messaging about what exactly is safe for people to do. After days of people protesting in the streets, and restaurants and stores welcoming customers inside their doors, Ferrer's answer to a question about whether family gatherings are allowed surprises and confuses many.

"We are completely not out of the woods," Ferrer says. "We are in the middle of the woods and we still have a lot of risk. This is not a time for parties or gatherings at your house. We do need you to just

remain with the members of your household. ... The only exceptions to that are political protests."

JUNE 10 - 19

Cases increase, but so do reopenings

3,066 deaths • 79,676 cases

The momentum builds for reopening and, by mid-June, the county allows gyms, bars, wineries and nail salons to unlock their doors and welcome customers. L.A. County officials at around the same time warn that transmission of the coronavirus and hospitalizations are increasing. For the first time, more than 2,000 new coronavirus cases are reported in a single day. Officials predict that the county could run out of intensive care unit beds in the coming weeks.

In an interview on June 17, two days before bars reopened, Garcetti says he worries the county is moving too fast. He would have preferred to wait at least three weeks between each step, he says. But the mayor decides to follow the county's lead, saying that keeping the city closed would do little if the rest of the region was open.

"I'm very nervous about how quickly it's cascaded ... but I think there's been immense political pressure," he said. "We don't know in three or four weeks where we'll be and I think we have to be prepared — and we know how to — to be able to walk back. That will be immensely painful."

JUNE 26 - JULY 6

Record-breaking rise in cases prompts shutdowns again

3,537 deaths • 116,670 cases

The increases grew even more than officials anticipated. By late June, the county has reported more than 3,000 new coronavirus cases in a single day. Worryingly, the number of people sick enough to be in the hospital approaches never-before-seen highs.

With much of the state experiencing similar surges, Newsom orders closures of bars as well as indoor dining in L.A. and several other counties. Concerned about crowding during the Fourth of July holiday, L.A. County officials also temporarily close beaches.

"I know that everyone is extraordinarily tired, and they're tired of having to deal with this virus," Ferrer says.

JULY 13 - JULY 18

Cases in L.A. hit record highs, leading to more reopening rollbacks

4,084 deaths • 153,179 cases

The trends worsen. Newsom

implements statewide restrictions that force L.A. County to close gyms, churches, hair salons, malls, zoos and museums.

By July 18, the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 in L.A. County reaches a high point, with 2,232 patients admitted with the disease. L.A. Unified officials announce they will not reopen campuses for the start of the school year. The Rose Parade is canceled for the first time in 75 years.

"I know this step back in our recovery journey is disheartening, but we must do everything in our power to stop the virus from spreading," Ferrer says. "We flattened the curve before, and we can do it again."

JULY 20 - AUG. 15

More than 5,000 deaths

5,245 deaths • 220,762 cases

The restrictions appear to work. By late July, hospitalizations from COVID-19 begin to plateau, a trend that continues through August. On July 29, officials allow nail salons and hair salons to reopen, but only if they provide all services outdoors.

Still, the experience shows how carefully calibrated the public health response needs to be to keep the public safe while reopening. Despite the improvements, L.A. County's death toll from COVID-19 surpasses 5,000 on Aug. 11.

Garcetti did not answer questions from The Times about whether he thinks it was a mistake to reopen. His spokesman, Alex Comisar, said in a statement that Garcetti's responses to "COVID-19 are based on data and the advice of public health experts — never politics."

"The mayor has made — and will always make — his decisions in the best interests of Angelenos," Comisar said.

Supervisor Kathryn Barger said L.A. County reopened businesses with safety precautions in place and pointed to the protests following George Floyd's death in May as a reason for a massive uptick in cases.

At the same time, she acknowledged one mistake.

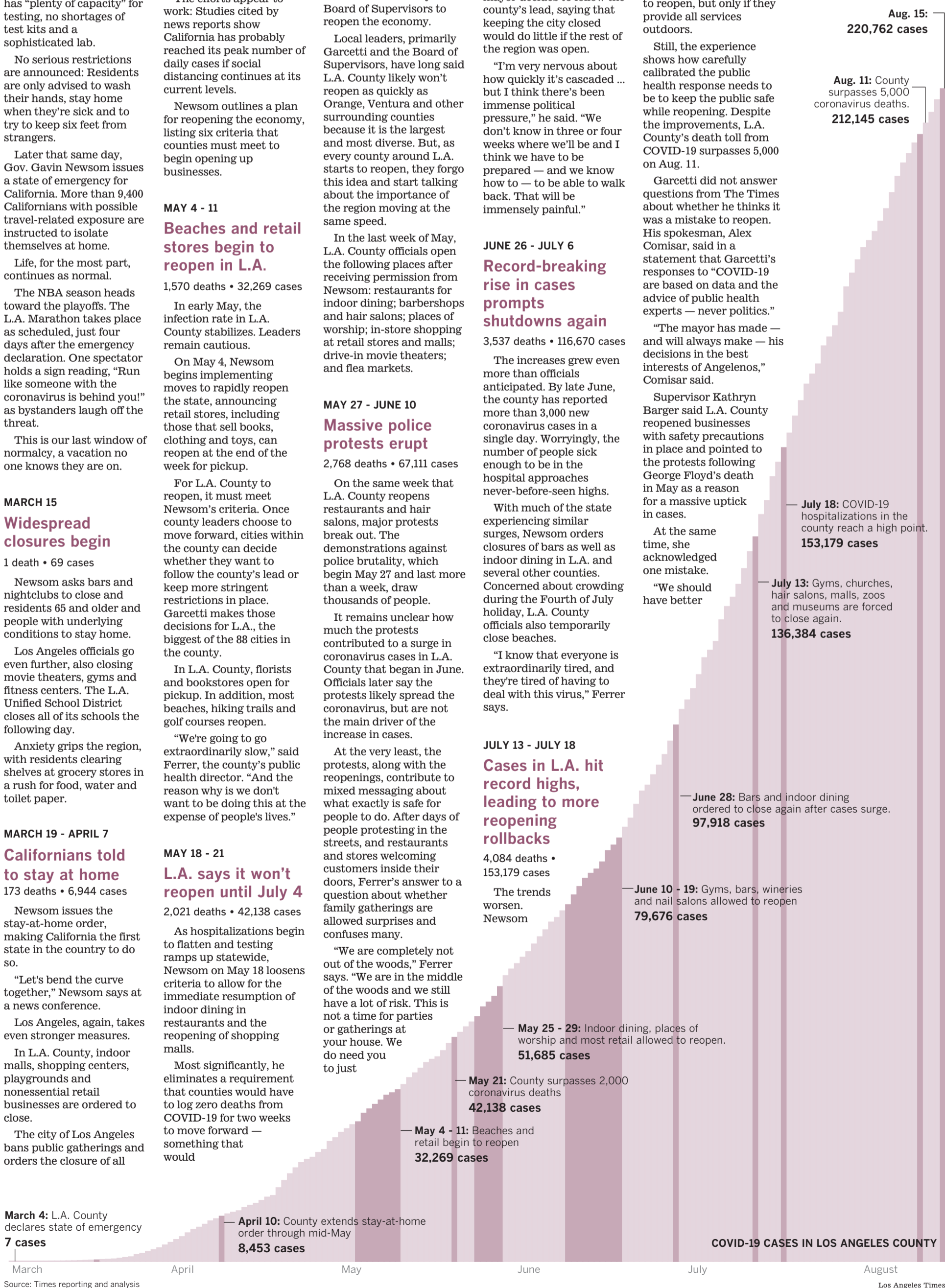
"We should have better

communicated that the virus was still present in the community," Barger said. "Many residents and businesses did not heed health officer orders or guidance to continuously wear face coverings, maintain physical distancing and refrain from interacting with people outside of their own household."

Both Barger and Ferrer stressed the difficulty of responding in real time to a novel virus. Ferrer said in a statement to The Times that "we must be prepared for more unforeseen changes on the road ahead of us."

Ferrer declined to directly answer questions from The Times about whether she was comfortable with the speed that the county reopened, and what type of pressure, if any, she had faced from elected officials.

"That's not contradictory — it's a matter of flexibility as we balance and adapt to the situations we are encountering in real time," she said.



Source: Times reporting and analysis