

# Commentary: Latinos will pay for governors' errors

By Rogelio Sáenz

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has rescinded the statewide mask mandate and reopened Texas — moves that, data suggest, will disproportionately harm Latinos.

Nobody can accuse Gov. Greg Abbott of being overprotective of Texans.

A few weeks ago, his penchant for skimping and deregulation caused the Texas grid to collapse when a snowstorm swept through the state, wreaking havoc for a week.

Last week, Abbott announced his decision to open up the state for business — “100 percent” — and do away with the mask mandate in the midst of the pandemic.

He has gotten a lot of flak for his rash and politically motivated decision.

Public health experts have warned Abbott's ruling will result in climbing COVID-19 infections and deaths. President Joe Biden weighed in, describing Abbott's and Mississippi Gov. Tate Reeves' decisions as “Neanderthal thinking.”

Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman took exception to Biden's sting, characterizing it as unfair — to Neanderthals.

Abbott's irresponsible action will undoubtedly cost lives. However, as has been true the past year, the misery will not be randomly distributed. Latinos will bear the brunt of the suffering.

Using Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provisional data on COVID-19 deaths between Jan. 1, 2020, and Feb. 27, I estimate Latinos have died at a rate 2.5 times higher than whites and 1.7 times higher than Blacks. To date, Latinos account for 46 percent of all COVID-19 fatalities in the state and for all reported deaths at ages below 18 (Black and white children and adolescents also have died from COVID, but the numbers have been so low, they are not reported); 71 percent of those 18 to 29; 68 percent of those 30 to 49; and 60 percent of COVID-19 deaths of those between 50 and 64.

National comparisons also shine a light on the precarious situation of Latinos in our state. Texas has the fifth-highest Latino COVID-19 age-adjusted death rate in the country, with 349

deaths per 100,000 Latinos, behind the District of Columbia, New Jersey, New York and Arizona. Texas ranks 19th and 29th in white and Black COVID-19 age-adjusted death rates, respectively.

What's the situation like in the Magnolia State? There, Blacks and whites are overrepresented among COVID-19 fatalities, although Blacks have died at a rate 1.7 times higher than whites. Blacks account for all Mississippians 18 to 29 years old who have died from COVID-19 (whites in these age groups have also died, but their numbers are so small they are not reported), 67 percent of those 30 to 49, and 55 percent of fatalities among those 50 to 64.

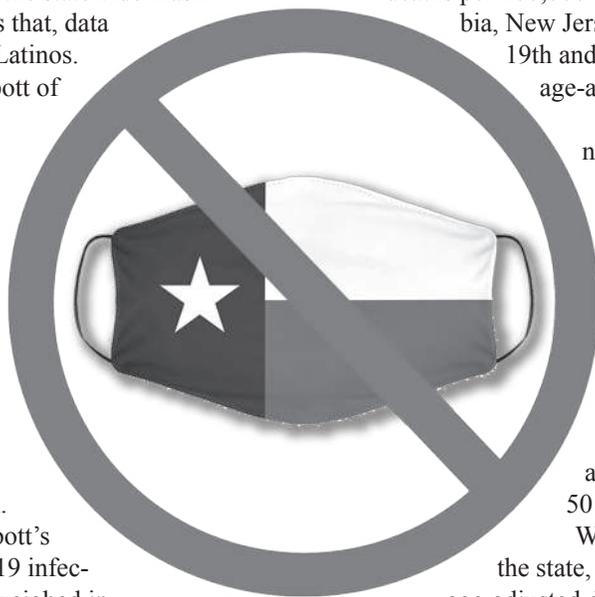
With 322 deaths per 100,000 Blacks in the state, Mississippi has the fifth-highest Black age-adjusted death rate in the nation, behind New York, New Jersey, Connecticut and Iowa. To boot, Mississippi has the highest white COVID-19 death rate in the country, with 187 deaths per 100,000.

Abbott and Reeves have put residents in danger with their irresponsible decisions to open their states — “100 percent” — for business and dispose of mask mandates. Given the patterns that we have seen over the past year, Latinos are especially at risk of being hurt by Abbott's decision, and Blacks and even whites in Mississippi due to Reeves' ruling.

If, as many public health experts predict, their actions lead to increasing infections and deaths, Abbott and Reeves will need to be held accountable. The pandemic has taught us much, but particularly concerning the resurgence of misery when we let our guards down. Unfortunately, with all due respect to Neanderthals, their logic persists in the governorships of Texas and Mississippi.

*BIO: Rogelio Sáenz is a professor in the Department of Demography at the University of Texas at San Antonio.*

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