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The COVID-19 college football crisis: Surgo Foundation identifies six college communities where loosened restrictions, risk factors converge

WASHINGTON, October 1, 2020 — As college football season heats up, football conferences loosen health restrictions, and the CDC releases [a new study](#) showing increasing COVID-19 cases among college-aged people, Surgo Foundation has released a new analysis showing six college towns that it warns are especially vulnerable to a COVID-19 outbreak.

Surgo used its [COVID-19 Community Vulnerability Index \(CCVI\)](#) to determine whether the county where a college is located demonstrates vulnerability through at-risk populations. In each of the six communities (**see below**), COVID-19 cases are increasing and social distancing is low -- while the communities themselves have large at-risk populations (due to large proportions of elderly residents, large proportions of people with underlying chronic conditions, or both).

“We see a real danger zone in these six communities, with converging factors that increase the risk of COVID transmission to people who are at risk for severe illness,” said Sema Sgaier, co-founder and executive director of Surgo Foundation. “Adding potential super-spreader events like football games and tailgate parties in communities that are already highly vulnerable to COVID-19 compounds the threat.”

Six College Football Communities in the COVID-19 Danger Zone
 (As of 9/29: Colleges in communities with large at-risk populations, very high transmission risk, and low social distancing, sorted by % change in weekly COVID-19 case growth)

Rank	College and Conference	County and State	At-risk Population: High levels of underlying chronic conditions or residents 65+	% Weekly Increase in Cases (per 100K)	Social Distancing Grade	Date of First Game	Fans Allowed at Games?
1	Oregon (PAC12)	Lane, OR	Over 65	68%	D-	11/06/20	No
2	Rutgers (BIGTEN)	Middlesex, NJ	Underlying chronic conditions	57%	F	10/24/20	No
3	Clemson (ACC)	Pickens, SC	Over 65	51%	F	9/19/20	Yes
4	Louisville (ACC)	Jefferson, KY	Both	34%	F	9/12/20	Yes
5	Virginia (ACC)	Albemarle, VA	Over 65	27%	D-	10/10/20	Yes
6	Washington (PAC12)	King, WA	Underlying chronic conditions	13%	F	11/06/20	No

Sgaier noted that of the six colleges, **Clemson**, **Louisville**, and **University of Virginia** are currently at increased risk due to policies allowing fans to attend games in-person, creating additional opportunities for COVID-19 spread.

“We hope college administrators and local officials in these areas look at our data, take the threat seriously, and rethink their policies on allowing fans, especially as these institutions reassess their COVID-19 policies,” she said.

Using its [COVID-19 Community Vulnerability Index \(CCVI\)](#), along with CDC and Unacast mobility data, Surgo researchers looked at communities representing 65 schools in the Power 5 conferences -- the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), the Big Ten Conference, the Big 12 Conference, the Pacific-12 Conference (PAC-12) Conference, and the Southeastern Conference (SEC). From this group, they narrowed the list down to 27 communities¹ particularly vulnerable to COVID-19 severity due to higher-than-average proportions of elderly residents, people suffering from underlying chronic conditions, or both. From that list of 27, Surgo researchers identified six communities additionally burdened by weekly increasing COVID-19 cases and minimal social distancing.

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METHODOLOGY:

- *“At-risk” is defined as a county demonstrating high (≥ 0.67 on a 0-1 scale) Theme 5 epidemiological vulnerability on the [COVID-19 Community Vulnerability Index](#) and/or a greater than national average over-65 population (15.2%)*
- *“Very high transmission risk” defined according to [CDC school decision thresholds](#) with $>10\%$ change in new cases per 100K during past week compared to previous week and evidence.*
- *Low social distancing defined as graded D+ or lower by [Unacast](#).*
- *College game dates and fan policies were sourced from news articles. Surgo Foundation’s definition of “fans allowed” includes both reduced capacity and family-only policies.*

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¹ In alphabetical order:

Arizona (Pima, AZ); Arkansas (Washington, AR); Auburn (Lee, AL); Boston College (Norfolk, MA); Clemson (Pickens, SC); Georgia Tech (Fulton, GA); Indiana (Monroe, IN); Iowa (Johnson, IA); Louisville (Jefferson, KY); LSU (East Baton Rouge, LA); Miami (Miami-Dade, FL); Missouri (Boone, MO); Nebraska (Lancaster, NE); Northwestern (Cook, IL); Ohio State (Franklin, OH); Oklahoma (Cleveland, OK); Ole Miss (Lafayette, MO); Oregon (Lane, OR); Oregon State (Benton, OR); Pittsburgh (Allegheny, PA); Rutgers (Middlesex, NJ); Syracuse (Onondaga, NY); Tennessee (Knox, TN); Vanderbilt (Davidson, TN); Virginia (Albemarle, VA); Virginia Tech (Montgomery, VA); Washington (King, WA)