Who is Wearing a Mask to Curb the Spread of COVID-19?

Part III: The Impact of Mask Mandates

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Key Points

- **Mask mandates in Wisconsin increased mask wearing from 41% to 96%.**
- **After the mandates, mask wearing increased across all demographics, especially among the resistors (young males and rural shoppers).**

Despite an abundance of evidence that wearing a mask reduces the spread of COVID-19, many people continue to avoid wearing them[1,2,3]. Previous student commentaries discussed an observational study[3] which found younger individuals, males, and people living in rural areas were the least likely to be seen wearing masks[4,5]. It was found that about 41% of individuals wore masks while entering stores in Milwaukee and surrounding areas between June 3 and June 9, 2020[3]. The same group of Marquette University faculty and students returned to the same large retail stores to observe mask wearing trends before (n = 5,517) and after store and statewide mask mandates (n = 4,358). The State of Wisconsin mask mandate went into effect on August 1 and required all people five years and older to wear a mask in enclosed public spaces[6].

In early June (3-9) before any mask mandates were in effect, 41% of the sample of shoppers were observed to wear masks[3]. In late July (22-31), stores with mandates were observed to have 93% of shoppers wearing masks, while 80% of shoppers wore a mask on entering stores with no mandate. After the August 1 statewide mandate, 96% of shoppers were observed to wear a mask while entering a store. Before the mandates, the odds of an individual wearing a mask varied greatly by age, gender, and location[3]. Once the in-store and statewide mandates were put into place, mask wearing became consistent across all demographics and locations. See Figure 1.

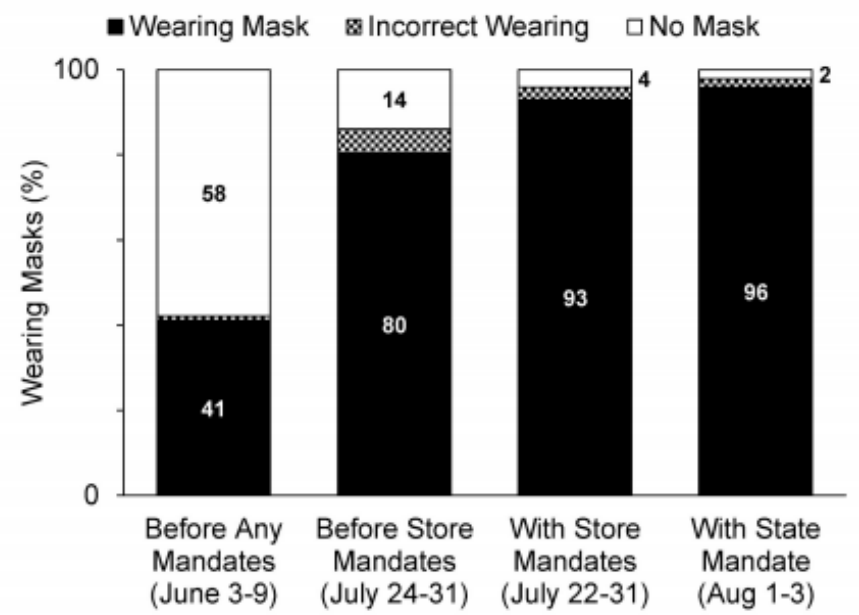

Figure 1. Mask wearing percentages under different mandates. Black bars indicate shoppers wearing masks correctly. Grey bars indicate shoppers wearing masks incorrectly (not properly covering both mouth and nose). White bars indicate shoppers without masks. Figure from Haischer et al (2020)[3].

Universal mask wearing (or near universal) is one of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19, which would save countless lives and spare the country from further economic hardship[7]. Wisconsin was unable to reach these levels without a statewide mandate. It is evident from this data that many people in Wisconsin need a mandate in order to comply with mask wearing recommendations aiming to stop the spread of COVID-19. It is likely that mask mandates will produce similar results of compliance in the 16 states that have yet to implement them, and many of which are experiencing significant increases in cases of COVID-19[8]. The begrudging compliance in US states is in contrast to the altruistic mask wearing behavior seen in some countries where mask-wearing was mandated nationwide or already a normalized practice[9].

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