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People seek relief from the heat — and that means taking off masks, despite health advice

By [Lucas Phillips](#) and [John Hilliard](#) Globe Correspondent and Globe Staff, Updated July 19, 2020, 11:14 a.m.



The scene at the M Street Beach Sunday. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

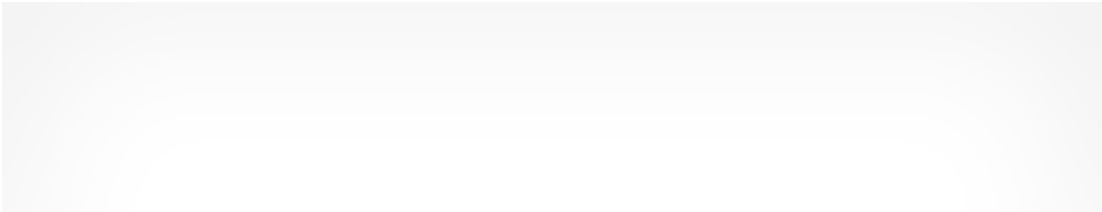
People sought relief from scorching temperatures and humidity at public beaches and parks across the state Sunday — but even with the continuing threat of the coronavirus pandemic, many chose to skip the advice of health experts and not don masks.

As much of the state sweltered under a heat advisory that is expected to last through Monday, crowds gathered on the shoreline of Boston's M Street and Carson beaches.

At the M Street Beach early Sunday afternoon, among the throngs seeking to escape the summer heat there none could be seen wearing masks, despite warnings that the coronavirus can easily spread among such a large crowd. On Saturday, many hundreds of young people packed the sand also without masks or distancing from one another, [which had raised the concerns of some epidemiologists.](#)

Dr. C. Robert Horsburgh Jr., a Boston University professor of epidemiology, said it's discouraging to hear that so many people would not follow the direction of medical experts or of leaders like Governor Charlie Baker, who has mandated masks in situations where distancing isn't possible.

Baker is only asking the public to take reasonable steps to help stop the pandemic, Horsburgh said.



“I don’t want to jump on people; I get it, it’s hotter than blazes,” he said in a phone interview Sunday. “But I hope that people will think about their fellow citizens and maybe be more careful than they would be just for themselves.”

Payton Plunket, 26, a North End resident said she spent more than six hours at the M Street Beach Saturday, then returned Sunday when the crowds were less dense.

“People were more in a party mood” on Saturday, Plunket said. “Definitely a lot more room to ourselves [today].”

Her roommate, Claire Smith, 26, said she didn’t mind the crowd: “I’m just glad people are living their lives.”

The heat that drove so many to beaches and swimming areas over the weekend will continue into Monday, when temperatures expected to soar into the 90s officially marking a heat wave, according to Alan Dunham, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service.

In Boston, where the city reached a high of 95 degrees Sunday, overnight temperatures could fall to the upper 70s before they return to the mid-90s Monday, he said, along with increased humidity.

A cold front due late Monday afternoon or evening will offer some relief from the humidity, resulting in drier air and somewhat lower temperatures that are expected to be out of the 90s by Tuesday and into the upper 80s.

Outside Boston Sunday, at several swimming areas and parks in suburban communities west of the city, officials closed parking areas at different points during the day after they reached capacity, including the Cochituate State Park in Natick, Hopkinton State Park, Douglas State Forest, the Nahant Beach State Reservation, the Salisbury Beach State Reservation, and the Walden Pond State Reservation in Concord.

In the city, most people on Boston Common Sunday afternoon, like the beach-goers, had taken a break in the heat from wearing masks — including the fried dough vendor by Park Street Station who was not wearing one as he handled the dough and served customers.

Felix Diaz, 43, of Boston said he used to be “paranoid” and sought always to wear his mask, even in open spaces like the park, until he saw others without them.

“I started seeing people taking them off and started following them,” he said while relaxing with his daughter and wife, who was on a break from

her shift at a nearby restaurant.

Sitting by the dried-up Frog Pond, Ciara Novoa, 21, of Boston was one of the few with a mask. She said she was not bothered by the heat.

Then again, she had spent the day going from her air-conditioned apartment, to her air-conditioned job as a Back Bay concierge, and after a cigarette break, would go to her air-conditioned gym.

“I can feel it now and I’m like, oh, my gosh, I feel bad for anyone outside right now,” Novoa said.

Samuel Scarpino, a Northeastern University epidemiologist, said that right now, there is a misunderstanding about the level of risk from COVID-19, but warned against any aggressive tactics to enforce mask use.

Instead, he said, the state needs a coordinated, thoughtful messaging campaign that accurately conveys the importance of mask wearing.

“Our elected leaders need to mandate mask wearing in all public places (excluding those with a medical issue that would preclude safe mask wearing) and stress the importance of high compliance in mask wearing if we’re to continue leading slightly more normal lives,” Scarpino said in an e-mail on Sunday.

The state reported 12 new confirmed coronavirus deaths on Sunday, bringing the Massachusetts death toll due to COVID-19 to 8,213. The total number of confirmed cases of the disease also grew by 218, reaching

106,882.

Baker, in May, [issued an order requiring people in the state wear a mask in public](#) if they can't stay away from others. The order came with a fine of up to \$300 for people who don't comply.

On Sunday, a spokeswoman for Baker directed questions about enforcing the governor's mandate to the Massachusetts State Police.

David Procopio, a State Police spokesman, said that troopers urge beachgoers, in the strongest possible terms, to wear masks. In troopers' interactions with the public, they "continue with ongoing education regarding the benefits of social distancing and the wearing of masks," he said in an e-mail.

The Baker administration's strong actions, including the early and ongoing emphasis on wearing masks, clearly mitigated the spread of the virus, Procopio said.

"But the Massachusetts public needs to realize it cannot let down its guard," he said.

A spokeswoman for Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh referred a reporter to comments the mayor made Thursday regarding the threat of COVID-19 and the need to wear a face covering and maintain distancing where possible.

Dr. David Hamer, an infectious diseases physician at Boston Medical Center, as well as a professor at Boston University School of Public Health

and School of Medicine, said he had been concerned when he saw photos of the large crowds on Saturday at the M Street Beach.

Large numbers of young people, not wearing masks and not socially distanced, raise the potential for a surge in disease in Massachusetts, he said.

“The good news is, people are outside, the bad news is the air is hot and humid, and relatively minimal wind, and the crowding at the beach is pretty substantial,” Hamer said in a phone interview. “If anyone in the crowd was infected, then their risk of transmission is substantial.”

Back at the M Street Beach, a 33-year-old man who gave his name as Jonathan T. sat in a spot surrounded by open sand.

The Boston man, who declined to give his last name and didn’t wear a mask, said he felt safe.

“I’m not really exposing myself to the elderly or immunocompromised here,” he said.





No masks and little social distancing in the water at the M Street Beach. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

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