

# A County Guide to Riding the Third Wave

**5 takeaways from the pandemic  
for easier county management**



After a gnarly second wave of COVID-19 cases back in July, many are [projecting the third wave to be significantly worse than the first two](#). As the weather gets colder and the virus has migrated from metropolitan regions to more rural settings, there have been clear signs of a third pandemic wave in the U.S., despite promises of a [vaccine as early as December 2020](#). Once again, counties are on the frontline.

Counties across the country support over 900 hospitals and operate over 1,900 public health departments. The 3.6 million county employees who are responsible for managing their jurisdictions' health departments and emergency responses are the ground troops in the fight against the coronavirus crisis.



**900**  
Hospitals



**1,900**  
Public health departments



**3,600,000**  
County employees





# 2020 has been a **TOUGH YEAR.**

While championing their communities throughout this tumultuous year, counties have learned a lot and this time around, they don't have to completely invent the wheel. By relying on real county data from across the country, we've pulled together a few key takeaways of what did and didn't work for counties the first (two) time(s) around in managing COVID-19. In this guide, we've tried to frame what county executives already have in the back of their minds in a way that can help them lead more effectively and efficiently as they double down this winter.

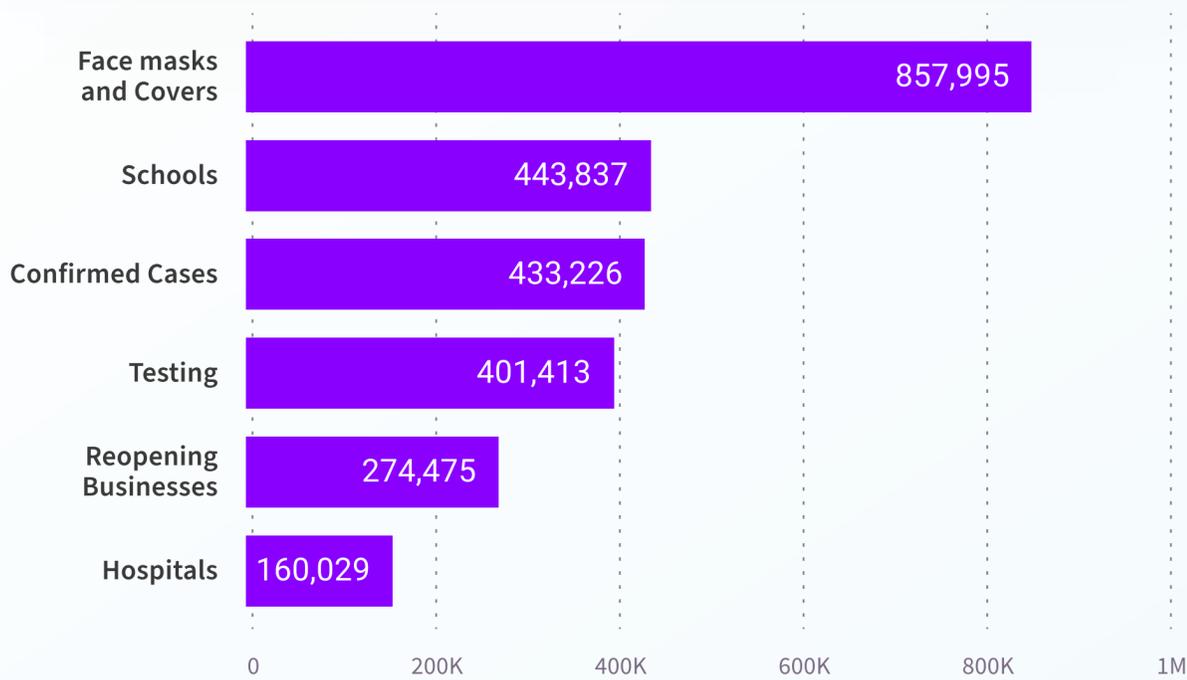
In an effort to help counties better understand the emerging needs their residents are voicing towards their communities, **Zencity analyzed resident discourse across our network of 170+ Zen-cities and counties between July 1-October 30.** We took a look at top public health concerns and then compared resident sentiment towards each of these concerns to determine an effective plan of attack. This is what we want to remind county leadership as you work to ensure the safety of your communities.

**Here are 5 key takeaways for counties to leverage as we enter the third wave**



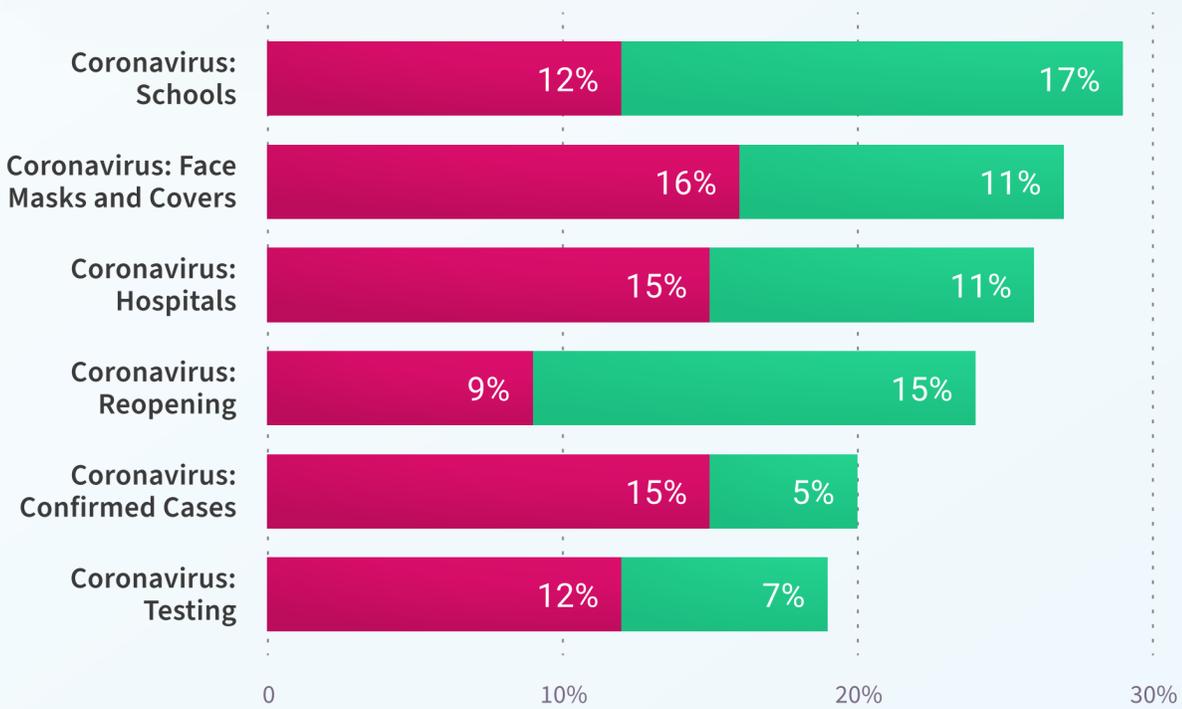
## Counties Top COVID-19 Concerns

The number of resident interactions about their counties' coronavirus initiatives.



## COVID-19 Top Concerns - Sentiment Comparison

An overview of residents' feelings towards their counties' Coronavirus-related activity.



# Preempt resident concerns with proactive governance

Practice makes perfect, right? So as we enter into this third phase, local leaders can understand and address concerns that residents have previously expressed before they escalate this time around.

## Supporting Data

Unsurprisingly, the data shows that the most discussed issue in counties in the context of COVID was [face masks and covers](#), which generated 48% more discourse than the second most discussed topic - schools. Masks have remained a hot topic amongst citizens and the discussions about masks have been contentious and often negative. A lack of clear federal guidance probably contributed to this as state and local government leaders were left with the challenge of setting their own policies, leading to further confusion, conflict and concern.

During the first waves of coronavirus, Zencity's data showed that [discourse surrounding face masks in counties focused primarily on businesses](#), with over 45% of interactions representing general comments about the local economy. Many residents were confused when it came to enforcement and the challenges businesses would face in making sure that both employees and customers complied with face mask guidelines.

A further analysis of our sentiment data reveals that the main drivers of positive reactions under the testing category were county-led initiatives to provide free COVID-19 tests to communities, and great appreciation and support expressed towards first responders. Counties can leverage this analysis to [continue providing free testing to constituents](#) and leverage their own communication channels to convey the information.



### Course of Action

So this time around: Don't pass over publicly available information, like resident discourse data, to help make and inform policy decisions and protocols. And it may sound obvious but what worked last time - do it again this time; whether it's free testing or clarifying mask guidelines across different jurisdictions in the county.

# Stop the spread of misinformation and disinformation with transparency

As the rise of misinformation and disinformation has become a worthy opponent for official local government communication channels, it's on county leaders to innovate in order to promote the credibility and integrity of official information.

## Supporting Data

Zencity's data showed that amongst county residents, the second most negatively discussed topics were hospital capacity and confirmed cases. Similar to face masks, the issue of hospital capacity drove the same levels of sentiment, with 15% negative responses by residents, and 11% positive. Many counties across the US have been reporting regularly about bed occupancy and ICU occupancy in their hospitals. Throughout July-October, we saw multiple counties report that their hospitals were near capacity. With hospitals running short on staff, PPE, drugs, ventilators and other supplies, residents' concern was on the rise as well.

Confirmed cases have the lowest percentage of positive sentiment which provides an opportunity for county leaders to proactively be even more transparent in their local reporting this time around. Many counties across the country, like [Thurston County, WA](#) and [Harris County, TX](#) have set COVID-19 communication plans, in addition to online dashboards with metrics and guidelines regarding confirmed cases.

We've seen countless examples of county leaders transparently keeping residents informed about numbers and the spread of COVID, preventing hysteria and most importantly - maintaining trust between residents and their county leaders. Another subject residents were sensitive towards was schooling and reopening. For communities who did reopen schools initially, like [Combs High School in Pinal County](#), drivers of negative sentiment could include schools re-closing due to COVID-19 outbreaks among students and staff. News reports revealed that some parents expressed concern with how COVID-19 cases in schools are not communicated, as happened early into the school year in [Pitt County, NC](#).

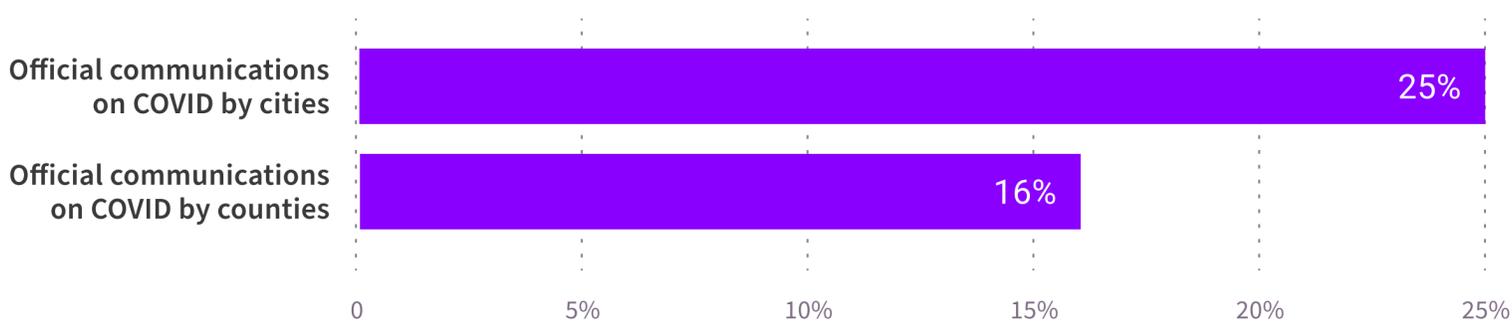


### Course of Action

So this time around: Drown out misinformation with accurate information. Always be truthful and honest with residents even if it's not great news. To answer this need, various counties have taken a transparent approach creating online communication dashboards and recommended learning scenarios.

## Cross agency collaboration - ensure the right channels are being utilized

A county's integral role in handling public health includes [the need for external communication](#) and focused messaging with residents. Official communication channels are defined as channels owned by the county or city. For counties, this includes emergency departments, health management teams, sheriff accounts, etc. For cities, official channels include communications from the mayor's account, city government, police department, etc.



### Supporting Data

According to our data, from July through October, 25% of official communications put out by cities were COVID-related, compared to only 16% of county official communications. Although cities dedicated a higher percentage of their public communication efforts to Coronavirus and public health than counties, the engagement generated by counties was similar to that of cities.

These numbers infer that residents look to both county and city leaders for information on public health, and both county and city governments should be providing transparent and frequent updates to their constituents. In order to optimize resources, the ability to understand which channels are most impactful, is key as we enter the next wave.



### Course of Action

This time around: Both county and city leaders should work in tandem to determine the most effective communication channels on a case by case basis, as well as focus on releasing impactful and honest messaging in real-time to put residents at ease.

## There's no tried and true, but the time for innovation is NOW

When the pandemic hit, the digital realm became invaluable. In fact, NACo exclaimed: [Amid COVID-19, digital counties are crucial](#). But in parallel, in a recently released report from [NACo](#), “counties are witnessing the technology gap for vulnerable groups.” The report identifies that “families with low incomes and communities of color are often at a disadvantage when systems move online,” for a host of reasons.

### Supporting Data

COVID-19 has demanded digital innovation at a high speed, across the board, across virtually all industries and sectors, and this is also true for local government. Counties are faced with the need to innovate digitally on a number of different fronts - education and public school systems is just one example.

According to Zencity's data, the topic of schools reopening during the pandemic elicited the most emotional response (i.e., highest sentiment scores overall) and unsurprisingly, impacted different communities in different ways. County authorities had to rethink traditional in-classroom schooling and quickly execute infrastructure changes that otherwise might have taken years to plan. [Vigo County, IN](#), for example, expanded broadband access to constituents to help with schooling and working from home.



### Course of Action

This time around: Counties are wiser to the kinds of digital changes essential to providing safe and effective services, but also to disparate impact these changes have on vulnerable communities. Ahead of the third wave, county leaders should assess where they're investing county resources and how to innovate before the same potential challenges arise.

# Residents are happy to support their local economy as long as its safe

[64% of county leaders](#) are equally concerned about the economic and the public health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and 60% of counties identify small business relief as one of their top three priorities. Likewise, initially reopening businesses generated high positive sentiment amongst county residents during a time period when reopening was mostly underway.

## Supporting Data

As indicated in Zencity's [Reopening Data Report](#), communities across the US have been occupied with the subject of reopening essentially since things closed down in May. But do residents feel differently about different types of venues opening? Our data tells us that by and large - no. Movie theaters, gyms, beauty salons, parks, and restaurants all generated varying levels of trepidation but resident sentiment was mainly based on the perceived ability of these venues to comply with guidelines and ensure patrons were protected. Positive reactions to local businesses reopening indicated that residents' were confident in businesses' and institutions' ability to comply with social distancing.

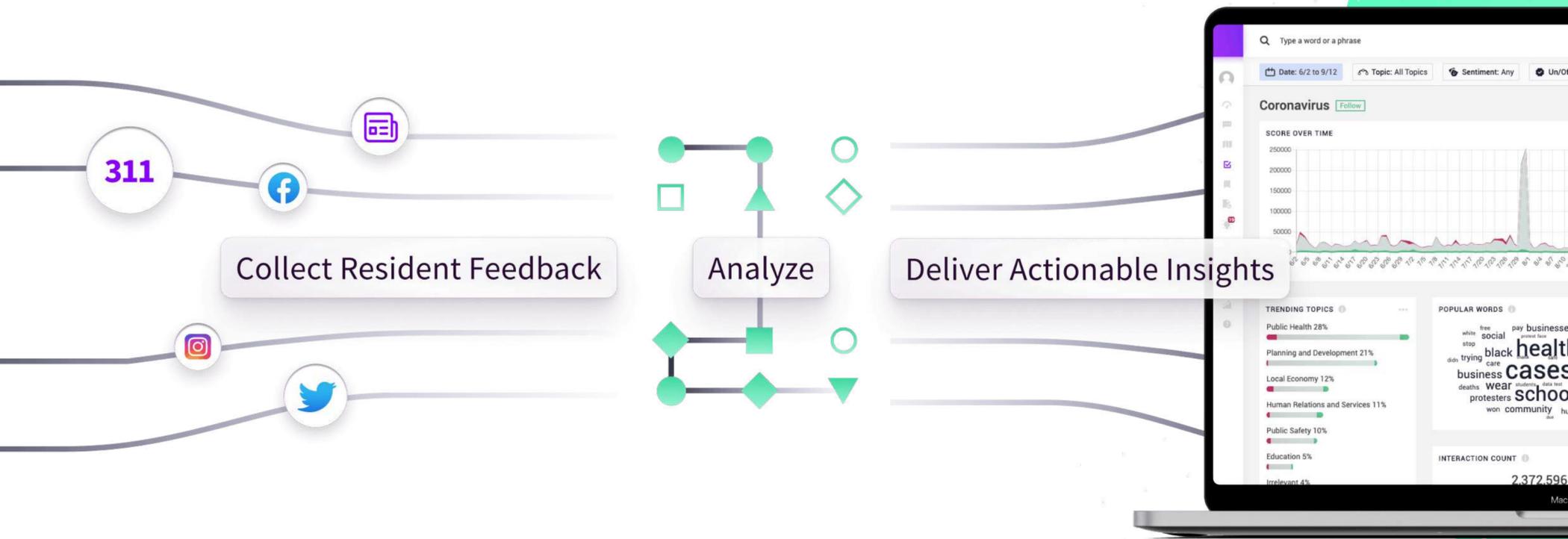


### Course of Action

This time around: Especially with the holidays around the corner and the pressure-on to drum up local business, if the third phase results in fluctuation with shuttering local economies, counties can be ready for reopening. Successful reopenings with positive support from residents require precautionary action and alignment between residents and local businesses as to what a safe and comfortable experience is for all sides.

# In Summary

These unprecedented times require a new plan of action, one that is constantly being improved based on lessons learned and community unity. This guide was made with the intention of helping the local county leaders at the frontlines of the crisis take a proactive approach as the third wave comes crashing down.



## About Zencity

Zencity helps counties better understand their residents' needs and concerns in real-time. We transform resident feedback data points into actionable insights that help county organizations provide localized solutions tailored to their different communities. County managers use Zencity to better understand resident feedback, prioritize resources, and connect with their communities.

[Contact us to learn more](#)