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# 'We have been untouched': Pandemic life in the least vaccinated county in Texas

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GUTHRIE — Driving north on U.S. 83, past unending Texas prairies of wheatgrass and scattered juniper, you enter a land of dwindling numbers. As you brake to pass through each town, a new sign informs you of its population: 2,347 people in Anson ... 2,124 in Hamlin... 919 in Aspermont.

But as you drive under the U.S. 82 bridge and enter the blink-and-you'll-miss-it town of Guthrie in King County, you must heed an even smaller but unseen number: 17.2. That is the percentage of county residents 12 and older who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

Among Texans statewide, that number is closer to 53.6%, and in Travis County, home of the state capital, it's about 64%.

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King County, the least vaccinated county in Texas, is among a shot-shy cadre of counties nationwide with total vaccination rates that haven't budged from the low teens for months, and probably never will. While the rest of the country adapted to daily death counts, Zoom school, and a tilting zeitgeist, the pandemic has never really made it to King County.

Residents said no one wore masks. School last year was held in person. The kids had sleepovers. Social distancing happened, but only accidentally.

Life in King County — an area the size of Rhode Island with fewer than 300 people — is inherently socially distant. Just 11 people in the whole county got the coronavirus, and no one died.

During the 1918 flu pandemic, rural Gunnison, Colo., barricaded its roads and enforced a strict quarantine for anyone entering the town. A hundred years later, rural Guthrie, effectively the only town in King County, has barred the experience of the pandemic, if not the actual virus.

More than politics, rural independence or limited health care infrastructure, people in King County haven't gotten the vaccine because they haven't thought much about COVID-19 this past year.

## 'We have been untouched'

Even before the pandemic, King County was an anachronism.

In the rolling plains below the Texas Panhandle, with less and less to distract you, save the hapless yellow grasshoppers smearing your bumper, you notice under the U.S. 82 bridge a hieroglyphic arrangement of numerals like runes — “77,” a sideways “2”, “+1” — the cattle brands of nearby ranches.

This is a place that in 2021 has real cowboys who ride horses to herd cattle, buy Stetsons for their utility alone, and work all the live-long day, every day, except Christmas and Thanksgiving.

Most folks work for the nearby “Four Sixes Ranch.” This multimillion-dollar establishment permeates every aspect of life in Guthrie. Everywhere you look in town you see the repeating sixes emblazoned in crimson and white, the ranch's cattle brand.

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Brandie Blodgett, a middle-aged woman with dark, curly hair works the register at the Supply House in Guthrie, the only store for 30 miles. She processes orders for provisions requested by the cowboys — more Tabasco sauce and dip on this particular day — and sells produce and leather kitsch emblazoned with the omnipresent sixes.

“Since we're a working ranch we had to continue to operate as usual,” she said. “We couldn't stop. I mean if you stopped, animals don't get tended to.”

The ranches did change some policies as a result of the virus. Rather than splitting a canteen, the cowboys started bringing bottled water in their saddle bags, for instance.

Pandemic-related changes to the supply chain have, at times, been devastating to the price of beef, which is tied to so many people's livelihoods. And hunting-focused outposts such as the Spice Box Ranch in eastern King County saw their 2020 income dry up when no one was getting on planes to come shoot feral hogs.

"To be honest there were a lot of days where it's pretty easy to forget that there is a pandemic here," said Jodie Reel, the school district superintendent who lives in town. When teenagers drove to Lubbock or Abilene for a sporting event, they'd forget to bring a mask. It just wasn't front of mind.

"We have been untouched," said Mary McNeil who works at the one-room post office in Guthrie. "We were non-maskers, we were anti-vaxxers. Just us as a whole, as it was said, we kept on living our life the same way it always has been."

McNeil doesn't know anyone personally who has gotten COVID-19, but she dealt with a different kind of catastrophe last year. During a football practice last August, her 18-year-old son, Rue McNeil, passed out from heat stroke and later died in Texas Children's Hospital in Houston.

**Tracking COVID-19 vaccine distribution by state:** How many people have been vaccinated in the US?

That tragedy defined 2020 for the tight-knit community more than any virus.

"Where most people started their school year off with COVID protocols and how we're going to socially distance, our first day of school we crammed everyone in our community into our auditorium together and we just prayed because we didn't know what else to do," said Kaitlin Jeffrey, principal of the K-12 Guthrie School, the only school in the county. "We were definitely not concerned about COVID because we were like, 'How many more people can we fit in here?' Nobody questioned it. That's just what we did."

A GoFundMe webpage quickly raised \$15,000 online to cover the family's medical expenses. Friends and neighbors brought meals.

"One of the blessings was that I was here when it happened," said McNeil.

## **A government thing**

The communal spirit that defines Guthrie has so far not extended to protecting one another by getting a vaccination. Part of the reason for this is political. Across the nation, counties

that voted for Donald Trump are forgoing the vaccine at far higher rates than counties that went for Joe Biden. And King County might be the reddest county in Texas.

“There was one Democrat, and they moved last month,” McNiel said, matter-of-factly.

On this account she’s not quite right: Eight votes countywide went to the Democrat in the last presidential election, up from five in 2016. By percentage vote share — 95% for Trump — King County was the third-most Republican county in the U.S. Even in 2012, no county had a higher vote share for the Republican presidential candidate than King County.

CNN once sent a reporter to Guthrie to find a single Democratic voter. CNN found one, but he didn’t want to share his name, lest the rest of the town find out.

McNiel insisted that the county’s conservatism is not the reason its vaccination rates are so extraordinarily low. “It’s not a Republican or Democrat thing; it’s a government thing,” she said. “They can tell me it’s safe all they want to, but how many drugs have they said was safe and 10 years later— ‘oh, by the way, that wasn’t safe.’”

That skepticism appears to extend to the county’s top administrator, County Judge Duane Daniel, who has so far declined requests from the Texas Department of State Health Services and the Texas Division of Emergency Management to host a walk-up clinic in Guthrie to address the alarming vaccination gap.

Daniel would only respond to the American-Statesman over email and said that he declined to hold clinics because of a lack of community interest. He did not elaborate further on how these proposed clinics were advertised to residents, or why it was in the county's interest to cancel the clinics even if they have low attendance.

## **Everyone prefers the vet**

Hostility to the vaccine isn’t the full story, though. David Jeffrey, Guthrie School’s girls sports coach and Kaitlin Jeffrey’s husband, hasn’t gotten the vaccine but he’s not against it.

“My personal stance is not like I’m anti-vaccine, but I just haven’t felt the sense of urgency. If I lived in a place where there was a higher population density and I was around people with more at-risk or preexisting conditions I’d feel more compelled to do it,” he said. “It’s just a different world out here.”

Even if Jeffrey did want to get vaccinated, he would have a hard time doing so. If you plug Guthrie’s ZIP code into the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s online

vaccination finder, you get an error. The nearest hospital with an intensive care unit is an hour and a half away in Lubbock. The health infrastructure in King County is one doctor and the horse veterinarian, and everyone prefers the vet.

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While opening vaccination sites in pharmacies might benefit the suburbs, it won't help you if you live 100 miles from the nearest Walgreens. This issue is compounded when much of the population works long hours outdoors — you can't artificially inseminate a mare on Zoom — and can't take a work-from-home day to deal with vaccine side effects.

People in King County are very self-sufficient, Kaitlin Jeffrey said, adding, "They don't go seeking medical attention unless it's life or death."

Ronald Gilbert and his wife, both 82, own Gilbert Ranch near the northwest corner of King County. The two of them singlehandedly represent 6% of the county's vaccinated population of 33.

"A lot of people have got reservations about it. But our doctor, he suggested we take it," Gilbert said.

For the octogenarian rancher, whose eyesight is failing (though he bragged he could still see the moon) a trip to the doctor involved a perilous 60-mile drive to Childress. Even if county leadership relents and allows a mobile clinic, it will never be easy to get the shot in King County.

## Parents against masks

King County has always been a place where the normal rules just don't apply. Mitch Cullin, a Los Angeles-based artist who grew up in the area, said the urban East and West Coasts might as well be in Europe for most folks in Guthrie. He's not surprised the vaccination rate is so low, but said he is saddened by it.

"You have a place with a grand sense of its own importance and its own sense of a kind of self-rule without outside influence," he said. "When you live that far from everything, there is a tendency to see social problems as being a million miles away and, therefore, not a threat."

At some level, that insular perspective is warranted. What makes sense for Austin during the pandemic doesn't make sense for Guthrie. The 131 children in Guthrie School went to class

in person last year and never wore masks. But with an average class size of 6, and all the social distancing that entails, did they really have to?

“We didn’t have factions of parents that were demanding social distancing. In fact, we had parents demanding that we just go back to school and they don’t want to wear masks,” Principal Kaitlin Jeffrey said. “And I’m like, ‘I’m good with that if you’re good with that.’ We’re very blessed that it didn’t blow up on us.”

**'It's just overwhelming':** COVID patients see firsthand strain on Texas hospital staff

While some parents were resistant to the very idea of vaccine precautions, others were concerned that alterations to the normal school environment would affect their kids’ learning. And they had good reason to be worried. Test scores all over the state dropped catastrophically during the 2020-21 school year. At Guthrie, routinely ranked among the best schools in the region, they didn’t budge.

“We seem to be a kind of haven. If you don’t want your kid to be wearing a mask, if you don’t want your kid to have to sit behind plexiglass, send them to Guthrie,” Jeffrey said.

“(Parents) just wanted their kid to be a kid and not have to feel like they’re in a hospital bed.”

Pre-pandemic, King County residents already lived the kind of life that could make it a tough place to be a virus. While the rest of the world had to learn to order clothes and school supplies online, Guthrie didn’t have to.

“You have to live and die by Amazon out here, because if you need something you don’t just run to the store,” Jeffrey said.

Most folks get groceries once a month or so. People rarely leave town. The kids play together outside, digging tunnels between pallet forts and swimming at the pool. Keeping your distance is baked into the experience of life in a county with a population density of 0.3 people per square mile. Life didn’t change much because it didn’t much have to, by most residents’ logic.

To show for it, Guthrie has a per capita rate of infection that’s half that of the country at large, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services, which tracks confirmed and likely COVID-19 cases. No kids at school got infected, as far as anyone knew, though the limited testing infrastructure in King County makes it impossible to know how many people have actually contracted COVID-19.

The mother of two students died of COVID-19, but the family didn't live in King County. It was sad, but people didn't think much of it. It wasn't any different than if she had died in a car wreck. Those children quarantined for two weeks and then came back to school.

“So far, it's worked out for us” Kaitlin Jeffrey said.

Yet, in parallel with the antiviral benefits of rural life during a pandemic are some significant drawbacks. The nearest hospital, in Lubbock, has limited ICU beds for the 62 counties it serves. And as good as the vet is at mending broken bones and handing out Z-Packs for Strep throat, he doesn't own a ventilator. Rural areas like King County often have an older, less healthy population — factors that can compound the danger of a coronavirus infection.

Carrie Henning-Smith, a public health professor with the University of Minnesota's Rural Health Research Center said a cluster of coronavirus infections could burn through Guthrie — a place where just 20% of the retirement age population is fully vaccinated. In the nation at large, that number is 80%.

“I would worry a lot about what would happen,” she said. “If you're just going about your regular business and you're unvaccinated, and all the folks you're interacting with are unvaccinated, it's a much more dangerous situation.”

While low population density affords some protection, the virus has such high levels of asymptomatic spread, it could infect half the town before anyone knew to quarantine. This is an even more frightening scenario because the delta variant has transformed the coronavirus into a menace as infectious as the chickenpox, according to the CDC.

“All it takes is one person,” Henning-Smith said. “The vaccine is the way that we can get out of this.”