



Bikers ride along the road to Mt Rushmore near Keystone, South Dakota. — AFP photos

Bikers flock to giant South Dakota rally despite COVID surge

Tens of thousands of leather-clad bikers roared into a small town in South Dakota this week for a mass motorcycle rally, despite a renewed surge in coronavirus cases across the United States. Health officials have warned that the annual rally—set to draw as many as half a million people—could turn into a COVID-19 “superspreader” event, as was the case last year, with the more infectious Delta variant heightening concerns. But organizers said the 10-day event, held in Sturgis for the 81st time, was too important for the local community and economy to pass up. Asked about health concerns, town spokeswoman Christina Steele emphasized the ready availability of vaccines and the fact most events are being held outdoors—with the city letting bikers consume alcohol outside to avoid crowding in bars.

“This year people are just happy to be out

and to be traveling again and having fun and meeting up with their friends they haven’t seen in a while,” Steele told AFP. “People are not concerned about COVID right now,” she said. The rally has no vaccine, testing or masking requirements—but it is providing visitors with free tests and vaccines, even though it takes several weeks for immunity to kick in. Sanitizer and face masks were available on request, though most participants were choosing to stay mask-free. “There are free masks available, but I don’t think anybody is coming to get one,” Steele said. Last year, the rally drew 445,000 visitors from around the country and was blamed for a large outbreak of the virus.

According to a study published in the Southern Economic Journal in December, the event may have been responsible for more than 260,000 new COVID cases in the United States. While South Dakota has stabilized



infections in recent weeks, there are fears that attendees coming from out-of-state will bring the virus with them. This year, authorities expect even more visitors and Steele said the crowd already looks bigger than in 2020. As motorcycles hummed through the streets of Sturgis, Kristi Noem, South Dakota’s Republican governor donned a black leather

jacket, got on a bike and joined the rally. In the Midwestern state’s Meade County, where Sturgis, a town of 6,600 people, is located, only 37 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, compared to some 50 percent nationwide.

President Joe Biden’s top infectious disease advisor Anthony Fauci warned last week that holding the rally was too risky given the surge in COVID cases. “This could be a superspreader. We don’t want it to be but that’s the reality,” Dr Shankar Kurra, vice president of medical affairs at Monument Health Rapid City Hospital, told CBS News. Kurra said his entire hospital team would be staying in place through the rally, with vacations put on hold and extra staff hired in anticipation of a rise in COVID cases. — AFP

