

1 **Abstract**

2 **Objectives:** There are few standards for what information about an infectious disease outbreak
3 should be reported to the public and when. To address this problem, we undertook a consensus
4 process to develop recommendations for what epidemiological information public health
5 authorities should report to the public during an outbreak.

6 **Study design:** We conducted a Delphi study following the steps outlined in the ACCurate
7 CONsensus Reporting Document (ACCORD) for health-related activities or research.

8 **Methods:** We assembled a steering committee of nine experts representing federal and state
9 public health, academia, and international partners to develop a candidate list of reporting items.
10 We then invited 45 experts, 35 of whom agreed to participate in a Delphi panel. Of those, 25
11 participated in voting in the first round, 25 in the second round, and 25 in the third round,
12 demonstrating consistent engagement in the consensus-building process. The final stage of the
13 Delphi process consisted of a hybrid consensus meeting to finalize the voting items.

14 **Results:** The Delphi process yielded nine core reporting items representing a minimum standard
15 for public outbreak reporting: Numbers of new confirmed cases, new hospital admissions, new
16 deaths, cumulative confirmed cases, cumulative hospital admissions, and cumulative deaths,
17 each reported weekly and at Administrative Level 1 (typically state or province), and stratified
18 by sex, age group, and race/ethnicity.

19 **Conclusions:** This minimum reporting standard creates a strong framework for uniform sharing
20 of outbreak information and promotes consistency of data between jurisdictions, enabling
21 effective response by promoting access to information about an unfolding epidemic.

22 **Key Words**

23 Epidemic, Outbreak, Data Reporting, Reporting Guidelines, Reporting Standards, Public
24 Reporting

25 **Introduction**

26 Situation reports are the regular updates that jurisdictions issue to describe the latest
27 developments in infectious disease outbreaks. Situation reports, as well as other forms of public
28 reporting, serve as vital sources of information for public health professionals in other
29 jurisdictions, elected leaders, researchers, media, and the public.^{1,2} These reports often provide
30 information that can guide the development and implementation of disease spread control
31 measures.^{1,2} During the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak, for example, the information
32 published by each jurisdiction was critical for helping other communities increase situational
33 awareness and better understand the nature and trajectory of the growing pandemic.³⁻⁵

34 Existing frameworks, such as the International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005) and the
35 European Center for Disease Prevention and Control's EpiPulse, contain mechanisms for
36 information sharing, however these are primarily aimed at technical agencies and states.^{6,7}
37 Currently, no guidelines exist to assist jurisdictions in deciding what and when to report to the
38 public.^{8,9} This has resulted in substantial heterogeneity in the information available across
39 jurisdictions for various outbreaks. More uniform reporting would allow more consistent and
40 reliable information to be available to stakeholders, enhancing the ability of decision makers to
41 prepare for and respond to outbreaks.

42 To address this gap in guidance, we undertook a consensus process to develop recommendations
43 for what epidemiological information public health authorities should report during an outbreak,
44 including the administrative level and frequency of reporting. The Outbreak Reporting Best
45 Practices in Transparency (ORBIT) guidelines aim to set a minimum standard for publicly
46 available information during an outbreak to augment data reporting consistency and
47 transparency, with a focus on the United States. As part of this process, the research team also
48 developed recommendations for types of outbreak situations where these guidelines would apply.
49 However, we recognize the need for flexibility and professional judgment in these decisions.

50 As part of our efforts, we undertook a literature review to identify previous efforts to develop
51 reporting guidelines. Although the research team identified several papers prioritizing
52 epidemiological information, we did not find guidelines overlapping or conflicting with our
53 project aim in the systematic review. To our knowledge, practitioners have only recently started

54 developing standards for public reporting. The CORHA Principles and Practices for Healthcare
55 Outbreak Response, for example, provide guidance to public health and healthcare practitioners
56 on when and what to notify patients and the public when an outbreak occurs in a healthcare
57 setting, including how to communicate information in a way that helps mitigate risk.¹⁰ Additional
58 information about the companion systematic review is available at
59 <https://doi.org/10.1101/2024.05.22.24307752>.

60 **Methods**

61 We followed the steps outlined in the ACCurate COnsensus Reporting Document (ACCORD) for
62 health-related activities or research, as documented in the EQUATOR network database.¹¹ First,
63 we assembled a steering committee of nine experts representing federal public health, state
64 public health, academia, and international partners. Due to scheduling conflicts that precluded
65 synchronous meetings, the principal investigator and research team met with steering committee
66 members individually or in small groups to plan and finalize the project methodology.

67 The research team developed a preliminary list of candidate reporting items, which was informed
68 by the literature review. Items proposed at this stage, for example, included confirmed, probable
69 and suspected cases and deaths. We shared the draft list with steering committee members, who
70 provided feedback regarding the relevance and wording of proposed items. Steering committee
71 members also offered new candidate items for inclusion in the draft list and nominated
72 individuals with relevant expertise to serve on the Delphi panel.

73 After finalizing the preliminary list of candidate items, the research team assembled a slate of 45
74 potential Delphi¹² panel members based on the recommendations of the steering committee and
75 invited them to participate in the development of a consensus on reporting items. This panel
76 included 45 experts from various jurisdictions, expertise and career stages, who were invited via
77 email to participate in a four-phase Delphi panel. Of the 45 invitees, 35 agreed to participate
78 (Table 1). Of the 35 participants, 23 were current or former public health practitioners with
79 significant expertise leading public health outbreak response at the local, state, or national level
80 (Table 2). The remaining 12 were global or academic experts in public health outbreak response.

81 The research team sent each confirmed participant a spreadsheet with the candidate items.
82 Participants were asked to assign each item on a scale of one to ten, with one being not important
83 and ten being most important. Participants were instructed to vote only on the importance and
84 practicality of each item, not the wording, and to remember that the list only represents the
85 minimum set of reporting items. Of the 35 individuals that agreed to participate, 31 submitted a
86 voting sheet and/or attended the consensus meeting.

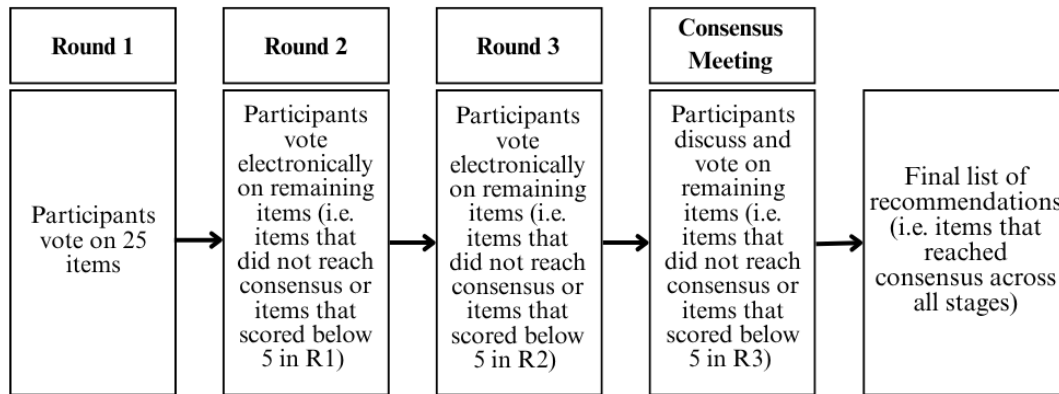
Jurisdictions		Number of individuals that agreed to participate
Australia		1
Hong Kong		1
South Africa		1
United States	HHS Region 1	2
	HHS Region 2	1
	HHS Region 3	1
	HHS Region 4	8
	HHS Region 5	2
	HHS Region 8	1
	HHS Region 9	1
	HHS Region 10	2
U.S. Federal		4
United Kingdom		7
World Health Organization		1
Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists		2
Total		35

87 **Table 1.** Participant jurisdictions. This table provides a broad overview of the countries and
88 regions represented in the Delphi panel. The United States jurisdiction was further broken down
89 into U.S. Federal and the respective Health and Human Services (HSS) Regions. Of the 35
90 individuals that agreed to participate, 25 participated in each of the three rounds. The
91 composition of participants that voted across the three rounds differed.

Expertise	Number of individuals that agreed to participate
Administrative Level 0 (Federal)	6
Administrative Level 1 (typically state or province)	9
Administrative Level 2 (Local)	6
Academic	11
International	1
National	2
Total	35

92 **Table 2.** Participant expertise. This table provides a broad overview of the range of expertise
93 represented in the Delphi panel.

94 After a one-month voting period, the research team calculated the mean score for each item.
 95 Items that received a score of at least eight were judged to have reached consensus, and therefore
 96 admitted to the final stage of candidacy. Similarly, items that received a mean score less than or
 97 equal to five were dropped. Items with a score between five and eight were sent to participants
 98 for a second round of voting. This process was repeated for a total of three rounds of voting
 99 (Figure 1).



100

101 **Figure 1.** Delphi voting process. This figure provides an overview of the voting process at each
 102 Delphi stage.

103 Of the expert participants who agreed to participate in the project, 25 participated in voting in the
 104 first round. Twenty-five participants returned round two spreadsheets, and 25 returned round
 105 three spreadsheets, demonstrating consistent engagement in the consensus-building process.
 106 Across all three rounds, 30 unique individuals participated in voting.

107 Following the three rounds of emailed voting, a final consensus meeting was held to finalize the
 108 reporting items. All Delphi participants were invited to attend the hybrid meeting in January
 109 2024. Fifteen participants attended in person and seven participated online. The meeting aimed
 110 to discuss the remaining items that asynchronous voting had not resolved. The agenda also
 111 included time for participants to suggest changes to the wording of each item and to develop
 112 justifications for why each reporting item is important.

113 Meeting participants also discussed the types of outbreaks where these recommendations would
 114 be applicable. To resolve uncertainty, they engaged in a 45-minute discussion followed by a vote

115 on the final wording of the recommendation. Items that received a score of at least eight were
 116 included in the final list. Therefore, the recommendations reflect the majority view, not the
 117 unanimous agreement of those present.

118 **Results**

Item #	ORBIT Reporting Item
1	The number of new confirmed cases registered during the previous reporting period.
2	The number of new hospital admissions related to the outbreak (among confirmed cases) registered during the previous reporting period.
3	The number of new deaths related to the outbreak (among confirmed cases) registered during the previous reporting period.
4	The number of cumulative confirmed cases registered throughout each reporting period.
5	The number of cumulative hospital admissions related to the outbreak (among confirmed cases) registered throughout each reporting period.
6	The number of cumulative deaths related to the outbreak (among confirmed cases) registered throughout each reporting period.
7	Establish weekly reporting. This item specifies that public health authorities should, at a minimum, report to the public weekly.
8	Establish Administrative level 1 (typically state or province) reporting of the final reporting items.
9	Stratify reporting items by sex, age group, and race/ethnicity.

119 **Table 3.** Final reporting items. This table provides an overview of the final list of nine reporting
 120 items.

121 This process resulted in a final list of nine reporting items to include in publicly available
122 situation reports (Table 3):

123 1. The number of new confirmed cases registered during the previous reporting period. This item
124 represents the number of new confirmed cases, as defined by the case definition (which should
125 be published with the reporting items), reported to public health authorities since the last report.
126 Although the diagnosis date is preferred, especially for epidemiological modeling and analytics,
127 most jurisdictions will find that the reporting date is most feasible. Therefore, Delphi participants
128 determine this to be an acceptable option and encourages readers to refer to Council of State and
129 Territorial Epidemiologists (CSTE) guidance.¹³

130 2. The number of new hospital admissions related to the outbreak (among confirmed cases)
131 registered during the previous reporting period. This item represents the number of new hospital
132 admissions among confirmed cases, as defined by the case definition, reported to public health
133 authorities since the last report.

134 3. The number of new deaths related to the outbreak (among confirmed cases) registered during
135 the previous reporting period. This item represents the number of new deaths among confirmed
136 cases, as defined by the case definition, reported to public health authorities since the last report.

137 4. The number of cumulative confirmed cases registered throughout each reporting period. This
138 item represents the total number of confirmed cases, as defined by the case definition, reported to
139 public health authorities since the start of the outbreak.

140 5. The number of cumulative hospital admissions related to the outbreak (among confirmed
141 cases) registered throughout each reporting period. This item represents the total number of
142 hospital admissions among confirmed cases, as defined by the case definition, reported to public
143 health authorities since the start of the outbreak.

144 6. The number of cumulative deaths related to the outbreak (among confirmed cases) registered
145 throughout each reporting period. This item represents the total number of deaths among
146 confirmed cases, as defined by the case definition, reported to public health authorities since the
147 start of the outbreak.

- 148 7. Establish weekly reporting. This item specifies that public health authorities should, at a
149 minimum, report to the public weekly. This is a minimum recommendation; jurisdictions may
150 exceed these standards at their discretion (e.g., report every day, every other day, etc.).
- 151 8. Establish Administrative Level 1 (typically state or province) reporting of the final reporting
152 items. This item specifies that public health authorities should, at minimum, report these data to
153 the public with state, province, or equivalent level geographic granularity.
- 154 9. Stratify reporting items by sex, age group, and race/ethnicity. This item specifies that public
155 health authorities should stratify the reporting items by sex, age group, race/ethnicity, when
156 doing so would not compromise privacy or confidentiality. Public health authorities should also
157 use their discretion to prevent the misuse of stratified data and the potential for stigmatization.
158 Where and when the data is available, public health authorities should refer to their jurisdiction's
159 census bureau stratification for sex, age group, race/ethnicity.

160 *Deciding When to Apply the ORBIT Guidelines*

161 Participants discussed and voted on the applicability of the ORBIT reporting guidelines. There
162 was general agreement among participants that small, point-source outbreaks, such as an
163 outbreak of foodborne illness in a restaurant, did not merit a public-facing situation report. On
164 the other hand, participants expressed a reluctance to limit reporting to the most serious
165 outbreaks, such as the novel coronavirus, in recognition that reliable reporting of more moderate
166 outbreaks allows neighboring jurisdictions to take proactive preparedness and control measures
167 based on early information.

168 Ultimately, participants reached consensus that an outbreak that necessitates reporting under the
169 International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005) should trigger use of the reporting guidelines.
170 Participants also recommend that for other outbreaks, the decision to trigger the reporting
171 guidelines falls to in-country public health authorities.

172 Under Article 6 of the IHR (2005), State Parties must report events constituting potential public
173 health emergencies of international concern (PHEIC) to the World Health Organization (WHO)
174 if the situation of concern meets two of the following four criteria:⁶

175 1. Is the public health impact of the event serious?

176 2. Is the event unusual or unexpected?

177 3. Is there a significant risk of international spread?

178 4. Is there a significant risk of international travel or trade restrictions?

179 The WHO Director-General may then choose to declare a PHEIC based on advice from the IHR
180 Emergency Committee, information provided by State Parties, scientific expert
181 recommendations, and risks posed to human health, international disease spread and
182 international travel.^{6,14}

183 Participants agreed that this scenario adequately captures emerging outbreaks of high
184 consequence. The definition also provides sufficient room for in-country public health authorities
185 to exercise their judgment on emerging outbreaks that have not reached an international level of
186 concern under the IHR (2005) but may evolve to outbreaks of higher consequence or still pose a
187 significant risk of jurisdictional spread.

188 *Defining Confirmed Cases*

189 Participants discussed the role of case definitions in the reporting guidelines extensively. They
190 emphasized the need for nuance and flexibility in defining confirmed cases, depending on the
191 outbreak stage. The ability to confirm cases often depends on the availability of laboratory tests.
192 However, this may not be possible at the start of an outbreak with novel pathogens. For example,
193 the first U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) diagnostic test kits for SARS-
194 CoV-2 were approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on February 4, 2020,
195 about two months after the WHO was notified of the first COVID-19 cases in China.^{15,16}

196 Relying solely on laboratory confirmation assumes that tests are accessible and equitably
197 distributed, which is often not the case. Unequal access to testing across U.S. cities and in low-
198 and middle-income countries demonstrates this issue. Therefore, probable cases are important
199 indicators to capture outbreak trends when confirmed diagnoses are difficult.¹⁷⁻¹⁹

200 To reflect this in the ORBIT guidelines, participants agreed that public health authorities should
201 release information about probable or suspected cases at their discretion, considering outbreak
202 timing, evolving case counts, and testing capacity. They also stressed the importance of
203 coordination and transparency among federal, state and local authorities to ensure consistency
204 across jurisdictions.

205 *Implementation Strategies and Best Practices*

206 Implementation of these guidelines should not pose a significant burden on the resources
207 available for response. Most of these data are routinely collected and will need minimal
208 additional analytic effort to facilitate public reporting. However, if this type of data has not been
209 previously reported, preparation in advance of an active outbreak to develop appropriate policies
210 and procedures may be required. These policies and procedures should include careful review
211 and consideration of any privacy concerns associated with the data, as well as the determination
212 of an appropriate spokesperson and venue for reporting. Preparing both leaders and the public in
213 advance of an outbreak regarding the importance of public reporting will help create an
214 expectation of transparency that will facilitate the implementation of the guidelines.

215 It is also important to note that the consensus guidelines provide public health jurisdictions with
216 a minimum standard for what information to include in their regular reporting to the public.
217 Public health jurisdictions may, however, choose to report additional data at their discretion to
218 further inform the public. Additional reporting recommendations discussed and generally
219 supported amongst the participants include:

220 1. The median number of days from sample collection to the earliest known confirmed test
221 result. This item represents an indicator for testing lag and has the potential to be subject to right
222 truncation bias in an exponentially growing epidemic.²⁰

223 2. Administrative Level 2 (county or equivalent) reporting of the final reporting items. This item
224 suggests that public health authorities should report these data to the public with county or
225 equivalent level geographic granularity when permissible considering the protection of privacy
226 and preservation of confidentiality. As the consensus guidelines represent a minimum viable data

227 set, jurisdictions may choose to exceed the reporting standards at their discretion by reporting
228 county or equivalent level data alongside state, province, or equivalent data.

229 3. When the data is available and considerations of privacy and confidentiality permit it, public
230 health authorities should report the onset date, followed by the specimen collection date and the
231 diagnosis date, as per CSTE guidance, when reporting the number of new confirmed cases
232 registered during the previous reporting period.¹³

233 **Discussion**

234 This set of minimum recommended reporting items creates a framework for uniform sharing of
235 epidemic information. If adopted, it will also enhance consistency of data between jurisdictions.
236 The goal is to improve outbreak response by ensuring that the public, media, researchers,
237 healthcare providers, and governments can access detailed information about an unfolding
238 epidemic. Reporting needs may change over the course of an outbreak. Therefore, we encourage
239 coordination among public health authorities to maintain uniformity and comparability of
240 reporting. We also encourage the use of the ORBIT guidelines to complement, rather than to
241 replace, efforts to communicate information to the public about disease etiology, investigative
242 status, and public health interventions.

243 In future work, we will consider disease-specific iterations of these minimum reporting
244 recommendations to increase reporting uniformity and usability. We will also consider how these
245 recommendations can be applied and adapted to low resource settings domestically and
246 internationally. Additionally, we intend to align our current recommendations with other relevant
247 efforts, such as those advanced by the U.S. CDC's Data Modernization Initiative, the WHO's
248 Global Health Observatory and other relevant data systems.²¹

249 Our guidelines were developed with input primarily from the United States and the United
250 Kingdom, along with participation from the WHO. We invite colleagues from other regions to
251 develop similar processes that reflect their local contexts.

252 There are some limitations associated with the ORBIT guidelines. While consensus methods can
253 be subject to some group biases, expert group approaches are more reliable than individual

254 expert opinion.²² In this case, participants contributing to the development process may also have
255 been influenced by their experiences with recent outbreaks, including COVID-19 and mpox,
256 which may not fully reflect the needs of future outbreaks.

257 Additionally, while collecting individual data, such as sex, age group, race/ethnicity, typically
258 allows for more nuanced analysis than aggregate data, it also poses greater privacy and
259 confidentiality risks. Race/ethnicity data, for instance, should be collected and communicated
260 thoughtfully, with consideration for the protection of vulnerable groups. Public health authorities
261 should seek to build meaningful and lasting relationships with their communities and leverage
262 communication best practices, such as using plain language²³ and working with trusted
263 messengers, to communicate effectively with the public.^{24, 25}

264 In conclusion, these guidelines represent a minimum standard for what public health jurisdictions
265 should include in their regular reporting to the public during an outbreak that meets IHR (2005)
266 criteria or when in-country public health authorities have otherwise decided to trigger use of the
267 guidelines. The standards detail reporting items (e.g., the number of new confirmed cases), the
268 frequency, and administrative level of reporting. We hope these standards facilitate timely,
269 standardized reporting for critical public health events in recognition that such events pose a risk
270 to the public and other public health jurisdictions who may wish to develop response plans.

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276 **Ethical Approval**

277 This study did not qualify as human subjects research according to the Johns Hopkins
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290 **Competing Interests**

291 All the authors, except for Vanessa Grégoire, Alex W. Zhu, and Caitlin M. Rivers, participated
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