

## Out with the old, in with the few: The pandemic has changed New Year's Eve



Pedestrians walk in a nearly empty Times Square ahead of the New Year's Eve celebration on Thursday. (Frank Franklin II/AP)

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NEW YORK — When the iconic Times Square Ball drops in Manhattan come midnight, it will descend before an unusually small live audience. Most of the confetti will fall to the ground, landing on the shoulders of just a few hundred partygoers rather than the 1 million who typically pack the streets for the new year. When the clock strikes 12, no one is likely to kiss a stranger.

For 2021 in New York and around the United States, it's out with the old, in with the few.

At the intersection of 44th Street and Seventh Avenue in Manhattan, a few hundred feet from where the ball would drop, a small crowd gathered in the early afternoon. Normally, it would be difficult to get so close.

Georgienne Millen, 65, a New York City tour guide, stopped by to snap a few photos. She hadn't done the New Year's Eve Times Square experience — partying amid the massive throng — since she was 16.

"It was crazy," she said. "I was never kissed by so many people in my whole life."

Now, the words escaped her. Millen's older brother had recently tested positive for the coronavirus but was asymptomatic so far. "This whole year has messed with my vocabulary," she said. "It's so sad."

The area where she was standing would have been impossible to do in a normal year. Space would have been a precious commodity. "This gets booked a year in advance," she said. She was sad for those who had to cancel their plans.

Times Square on New Year's is "something everybody should do once in their life," Millen said. But not this year.

Now people were standing in small groups, snapping photos six feet apart. Come midnight, the only live witnesses to the ball drop will be the few hundred front-line workers invited to the square.

Indoors, New Year's celebrations are expected to be even smaller. Restrictions on indoor dining across the United States and curfews on liquor sales in some areas are expected to dull bars and restaurants on what's typically one of the most lucrative nights of the year.

The pandemic has been crushing for the hospitality industry and the prospect of thin winter months ahead has driven some establishments to try to salvage what they can of the usually bustling New Year's Eve.

At the Royal D.C., a popular bar in Washington's LeDroit Park neighborhood, customers usually flood in to watch the Times Square ball drop on a projector. This year, the D.C. government banned alcohol sales after 10 p.m., forcing bar manager Alonzo Freeman to reach for a backup plan: \$90 take-home cocktail kits with four alcoholic drinks, as well as cold brew and a guava pastry for the next morning.

"If we could have people here until midnight, 1 a.m., we probably would," Freeman said. "But since you can't experience a countdown here, there's really no point."

Chicago chef Oliver Poilevey was more optimistic Thursday afternoon after capping the number of orders for a New Year's Eve carryout menu at his French bistro, Le Bouchon.

"I think people are anxious to do something since they're not going out," said Poilevey. Even as he anticipates a much-needed sales bump from the New Year's Eve orders, he's wistful for the dinner services of New Year's past.

"It's not the same as being in a restaurant, everyone clinking glasses all the same time," he said. "It's a little bit of a reminder of the good times."

The Times Square ball drop's raucous past and lonely present

Southern California residents are planning little fanfare, with the majority of the state's residents under stay-at-home orders.

The fireworks displays typically deployed across the Los Angeles area, from Disneyland to Long Beach, are all canceled and tourist hot spots including the Venice Boardwalk and the Santa Monica Pier have been shuttered to foot traffic. Bars, breweries, movie theaters and campgrounds were also closed.

Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti (D) this week urged people to stay at home and not gather in groups of any size. Garcetti said the L.A. Police Department would be patrolling in significant numbers on Thursday night to break up parties before they can become superspreader events.

On a Santa Barbara bluff where visitors and locals typically jockey for the best views of beach fireworks, the area was instead largely empty, dotted with dog walkers and passersby.

"Restaurants and bars aren't open, so people can't go out and toast champagne, so that's all different," said Kier Smith, 33. He and his wife, who is pregnant, watched their 3-year-old son scooter around.

In normal years, the couple would get a babysitter and listen to live music at a local concert venue. This year, they plan to be asleep before midnight.

"We'd love to have it with friends, but we're being very cautious. It's close to my due date. That's just another factor as well. Normally, we'd be with friends but I think we're just going to lay low," said Maria Smith, 34, a high school teacher.

Jill Schroeder, a Texas gallery owner, said she was hopeful for a return to good times, but wonders what the lingering impact of the pandemic will be on people's collective psyche. After 2020 scattered wits and expectations and plans of all kinds, what will normal look like, she wondered.

"Are people going to be odd and standoffish? Are we going to know how to interact in crowds?" Schroeder mused.

She and her husband, Mark, a paramedic who spent the year transporting covid-19 patients, normally spend New Year's Eve putting the finishing touches on a party — a 100-person affair with projected videos, photo booth and a balloon drop — held at her Austin-based grayDuck Gallery.

"New Year's Eve is our only holiday that we usually celebrate — it's the biggest one for us," Schroeder said.

This year, the couple delivered a dozen party-in-a-box kits to friends. Nestled inside were noisemakers, hats, and all the spirits and mixers required for Mark's special New Year's Eve punch recipe; they even included individual limes.

The box itself can even be converted into an at-home balloon drop where recipients can stick the underside to the ceiling and pull the lid off with a little string.

"It's a very sad balloon drop — maybe four balloons," Schroeder said, laughing. She was optimistic after looking at the photo booth images from last year. "Everyone looked so happy. I'm hoping we can have that again."

Not all of Thursday's reimagined gatherings are centered on parties; for some, New Year's Eve is a time to reflect on powerful themes of renewal.

Many of the nation's Black churches, which have been hubs for community and healing during a particularly devastating year, mark New Year's Eve with food, worship and prayer in celebration of Watch Night, which commemorates the date in 1862 when African Americans waited in prayer for the promised arrival of the Emancipation Proclamation.

It's a celebration congregations such as at Pennsylvania Avenue Baptist Church in Washington have carried on for more than 150 years.

"It's the anticipation of moving from oppression to liberation," said the Rev. Kendrick Curry, who leads the congregation. "It's an idea of moving into a brighter and better tomorrow."

Most years, more than 200 congregants would gather for games and music and plates filled with black-eyed peas and greens. They would pray together in the sanctuary and, one by one, share testimonies reflecting on the hardships and milestones of their year: a surgery, a death in the family, a new baby, a new job.

"It's this idea that we are better, we are moving forward," Curry said. "There is a brighter day on the horizon. The worst is behind us, at least that's what we'd like to hope for."

Back at Times Square, as the hours inched closer to midnight, drizzling rain and police slowly dispersed the selfie-snappers at the heart of the square.

"It's all closed up," one teenage girl said to another. "Let's just go home."

A young couple who had flown in from Miami for a spur-of-the-moment trip wandered through the heart of Manhattan, disappointed they couldn't see the Times Square Ball but still enchanted by the city, they said.

The couple, who declined to give their names, planned to stay for a few more hours but would ultimately ring in the new year from a hotel room.

Nearby, a woman asked a policeman if she could get through the barricade surrounding Times Square.

No, he said, but you can if you come back tomorrow, in the new year.

*Guarino reported from New York, Iati and Schmidt from Washington, and Bellware from Chicago. Miranda Green in Santa Barbara, Calif., contributed to this report.*