Residents of nursing homes have accounted for a staggering proportion of Covid-19 deaths in the US, according to incomplete data gathered by healthcare researchers.

Privately compiled data shows such deaths now account for more than half of all fatalities in 14 states, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. Only 33 states report nursing home-related deaths.

“I was on a phone call last week, where four or five patients came into our hospital just in one day from nursing homes,” said infectious disease specialist Dr Sunil Parikh, of Yale School of Public Health in Connecticut. “It’s just a staggering number day to day.”

Despite early warnings that nursing homes were vulnerable to Covid-19, because of group living settings and the age of residents, the federal government is only beginning to gather national data.

In Connecticut, 194 of 216 nursing homes have had at least one Covid-19 case. Nearly half the Covid-19 deaths in the state – more than 1,200 people – have been of nursing home residents. The proportion is higher elsewhere. In New Hampshire, 72% of deaths have been nursing home residents.

Parikh said limited testing and a lack of personal protective equipment such as masks hampered efforts to curb the spread of Covid-19 in care homes. Due to limited testing capacity, most state nursing homes are still only able to test residents with symptoms, even though the disease is known to spread asymptomatically.

“What I would like to see is the ability to test the entire nursing homes,” Parikh said. “This symptomatic approach is just not cutting it. Many states, including Connecticut, are starting to move in that direction ... but I hope it becomes a national effort.”

Nursing homes have been closed to the public for weeks but a bleak picture has nonetheless emerged. In New Jersey, Governor Phil Murphy called in 120 members of the state national guard to help long-term care facilities, after 17 bodies piled up in one nursing home.
In Maine, a 72-year-old woman who went into a home to recover from surgery died just a few months later, in the state’s largest outbreak.

“I feel like I failed my mom because I put her in the wrong nursing home,” the woman’s daughter, Andrea Donovan, told the Bangor Daily News. “This facility is responsible for so much sadness for this family for not protecting their residents.”

Fifteen states have moved to shield nursing homes from lawsuits, according to Modern Healthcare.

Nursing home residents were among the first known cases of Covid-19 in the US. In mid-February in suburban Kirkland, Washington, 80 of 130 residents in one facility were sickened by an unknown respiratory illness, later identified as Covid-19.

Statistics from Kirkland now appear to tell the national story. Of 129 staff members, visitors and residents who got sick, all but one of the 22 who died were older residents, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

By early March, most Covid-19 deaths in the US could still be traced to Kirkland.

“One thing stands out as the virus spreads throughout the United States: nursing homes and other long-term care facilities are ground zero,” wrote Dr Tom Frieden, the former head of the CDC, for CNN on 8 March.

That day, Frieden called on federal authorities to ban visitors from nursing homes. US authorities announced new measures to protect residents several days later.

The CDC investigation into Kirkland was released on 18 March. It contained another warning: “Substantial morbidity and mortality might be averted if all long-term care facilities take steps now to prevent exposure of their residents to Covid-19.”

It was not until 19 April that the head of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services promised to track all deaths in nursing homes. That requirement went into effect this Friday, but there is still a two-week grace period for compliance. During the period from 19 April to 8 May, 13,000 people died, according to an NBC News analysis.

“This is really decimating state after state,” said Parikh. “We have to have a very rapid shift [of focus] to the nursing homes, the veteran homes … Covid will be with us for many months.”