

# Coronavirus outbreak takes hold in New York

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Developments over the past few days have underscored that New York City, the largest in the United States, may well be on the verge of a medical and social catastrophe. There are now 11 confirmed cases of novel coronavirus infection in New York state, and about 1,000 people are quarantined or self-quarantined in Westchester County, just north of New York City.

Most of the cases are tied to a New Rochelle-based attorney who works in Manhattan with no apparent links to people who traveled to coronavirus hot spots, indicating community spread.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19, the official name of the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, in New York was of a health worker who returned from Iran to Manhattan and shortly after began experiencing symptoms of the disease and was diagnosed on Sunday. She is not currently believed to have transmitted the virus to anyone else.

Earlier this week, the New Rochelle attorney was diagnosed with COVID-19, and on March 4 New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced that several people tied to the man, including his entire family, the neighbor who drove him to the hospital and his neighbor's entire family, had been diagnosed as well. About 1,000 people are now quarantined or self-quarantined due to their connections with these cases, including members of the man's synagogue, where he attended a funeral and a bat mitzvah recently.

Yeshiva University, where the man's son is a student, and the Bronx high school where the man's daughter is a student are temporarily closed, and those who interacted with the since-diagnosed children have been ordered to self-quarantine.

Two members of the man's family are asymptomatic and were only tested for COVID-19 due to their known

close connection with the attorney. Given the number of people who exhibit few or no symptoms and the lack of widespread testing, it is highly likely that the disease is much more widespread than presently known, in New York and globally.

The attorney's coworkers are currently being tested, and it is known that he commuted via Metro-North Railroad, which may have exposed other passengers to the virus. What is known about COVID-19 indicates that it is highly contagious and can spread via respiratory droplets and physical proximity. It also has an incubation of up to 14 days. China's National Health Commission now recognizes both feces and urine as possible modes of transfer as well, raising new difficulties.

There are other possible cases of the virus in New York, including a New York City public school teacher in self-quarantine after showing symptoms and a Brooklyn man who returned from Tokyo with symptoms yet was not tested while in the hospital because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said he was not sick enough.

A number of universities in the New York area have canceled nonacademic events and travel, and Governor Cuomo announced that students in New York's public university systems studying abroad in five countries hit the hardest by the epidemic would be flown back to the US on chartered planes and quarantined for 14 days.

One especially disturbing development in the coronavirus epidemic in New York has been the media's tendency to fan anti-Chinese xenophobia. The *New York Times* and the *New York Post*, in reporting on New York's first coronavirus case, used photos of Flushing, a well-known neighborhood in Queens with a large Asian-American, especially Chinese-American, population. Both of the photos showed residents who

appear to be Asian wearing masks.

Given the facts of the case—a virus contracted in Iran by a patient who lives in Manhattan—along with the fact that presumably those involved in selecting the photos know about New York City, it is hard to believe that these were both honest mistakes. The *New York Post* is a right-wing, Rupert Murdoch-owned tabloid, while the *Times*, the liberal “paper of record,” in an October 2019 editorial, denounced the “dangerous and growing threat” posed by the “aggressive ... Communist [Chinese] state.”

There are a number of factors that make the US a “perfect storm” in terms of the coronavirus despite its status as the world’s wealthiest country. These include the high cost of healthcare and lack of paid time off. The New York metropolitan area has more undocumented immigrant workers, who have even fewer rights to sick leave than other workers, than any other city in the country.

As of this writing, there are 158 confirmed cases in the US and 11 deaths, all in Washington state with the exception of a death Wednesday in California. The interplay of the “perfect storm” factors helps explain how 11 people have died from COVID-19 while countries with more cases have between zero and six deaths.

New York City combines these factors with a public transit system that is used by over 5 million people daily, by far the largest public transit system in the country. Especially during rush hour, passengers are in close proximity. It is not clear what role this could play in disease transmission, with one study finding that the subway would account for 4 percent of transmission in a flu epidemic.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which runs the subways, buses and commuter rail in and around New York City, has announced Monday that it is disinfecting every subway car and bus every 72 hours in response to the epidemic, and that stations are being cleaned on a daily basis using outside contractors—an expansion of a loophole allowed by the Transport Workers Union in the latest contract.

A number of medical professionals have sounded the alarm on the criminally negligent response of the Trump administration in particular to the epidemic. Matthew McCarthy, a professor at Weill Cornell Medicine and author of *Superbugs: The Race to Stop*

*an Epidemic*, tweeted Sunday: “Coronavirus has been circulating in the United States for weeks. We didn’t detect it because we weren’t testing it properly. There may have been cryptic transmission in Washington State since January. If I sound alarmed, it’s because I am.”

Howard Forman, a professor at Yale University who teaches radiology and healthcare management, told *Business Insider*: “It is well within the realm of possibility that there are 100,000 people infected with this right now in the United States. Healthcare providers may be being exposed, other patients may be being exposed, and until you can give confidence to people about those answers, we are in a crisis here.”

When the first case was diagnosed in New York this weekend, the CDC had run fewer than 1,000 tests, despite having several weeks of notice since the novel coronavirus began spreading rapidly in Hubei Province, China, where it is thought to have originated. COVID-19 has spread internationally, with over 80,000 cases in mainland China, over 5,000 in South Korea, about 3,000 each in Italy and Iran, and over a hundred each in Japan, France, Germany, Spain, Singapore, Hong Kong and the US.

In an initial indication of the explosive class implications of the epidemic, workers at the Chipotle restaurant chain protested Wednesday in New York City demanding paid sick days, a crucial demand in any initiative to combat the epidemic. That workers must demand basic rights such as sick time off—all the more necessary during a public health emergency—in the same city as Wall Street firms receiving yet another interest rate cut to inflate the stock market illustrates the inability of capitalism to solve any major issue in a socially progressive way.



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