

National Guard deployed to New York City suburb as coronavirus outbreak intensifies

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New York Governor Andrew Cuomo declared a state of emergency Tuesday and deployed the National Guard to New Rochelle, the suburb of New York City which now has the largest concentration of novel coronavirus cases in the United States, to enforce a “containment area.”

As of this writing, the state has 173 confirmed cases of Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, of which 108 are in Westchester County, which includes New Rochelle. This is an increase of 31 from the day before in New York state; there are 973 confirmed cases nationally.

All large gathering places in the New Rochelle containment area, such as schools and houses of worship, will be shut down through March 25. Non-quarantined residents can leave their homes, and grocery stores will remain open. According to Cuomo, the National Guard are being deployed to clean public surfaces and distribute food to quarantined residents. It is unclear if the soldiers will play any role in enforcing quarantines.

The “containment area” has a 1-mile radius centered near the synagogue attended by a local attorney who works in Manhattan and contracted the coronavirus. While he had no known links to areas where the virus had been prevalent before his diagnosis, many connected to him have since contracted the pathogen, officially named SARS-CoV-2.

It is now known that the man was diagnosed with pneumonia for four days after arriving at a hospital before being diagnosed with Covid-19, and during that time SARS-CoV-2 spread to at least one health worker, while others are in self-quarantine after being exposed to the man.

The calling in of the National Guard makes clear that every social problem, whether a pandemic,

homelessness or mental health issues, is viewed as a military-police problem. Public concern over the deployment of the National Guard compelled New Rochelle Mayor Noam Bramson to declare: “It’s not as though New Rochelle is going to become a militarized community. ... I want to be real about this: When you see someone from the National Guard on your street and outside your home, it is natural and human to find it unsettling.”

To the extent that the working class is not independently politically organized, the “containment area” could well morph into a “militarized community” directed against the population under the cover of this genuine public health emergency.

The 108 cases in Westchester County now account for 13 percent of all cases across the United States, meaning that the New York City area is rapidly becoming an epicenter of the virus in the US, and easily the epicenter on the East Coast. It is clear that the nation’s largest city is unprepared for the epidemic to spread.

As of Tuesday several counties in the New York City area have reported cases: 108 in Westchester County, 19 in Nassau County, 6 in Rockland County, and 36 in New York City itself (an increase of 16 from the day before). There are two “presumptive positives” in Connecticut and 15 in New Jersey, where a man died Tuesday of Covid-19. Reported cases are an underestimation given the dismal rate of testing in the US.

Among the cases is Rick Cotton, executive director of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, who directs Port Newark, the PATH rail system, six crossings between New York and New Jersey, as well as all the major airports and bus depots in the immediate New York City area. He and those who had

close contact with him are working from home under self-quarantine.

City officials have not yet canceled public events or instituted major measures beyond reportedly disinfecting the mass transit fleet every three days and subway stations every day. However, as someone could walk onto a train and unknowingly cough respiratory droplets with SARS-CoV-2 onto poles or turnstiles an hour after cleaning, it is unclear if this is a sufficient rate of cleaning.

CEO of NYC Health + Hospitals Dr. Mitchell Katz said that hospitals are preparing to discharge patients and cancel outpatient surgeries in an emergency situation.

Many private universities in the city and across the state, including New York University, Columbia University and Hofstra University, have canceled classes or are moving to all-online instruction. Columbia, for example, after canceling classes Monday and Tuesday, announced that classes would be online-only through at least March 27. With spring break next week for many universities, it is unclear how the situation will develop for students over the coming weeks.

New York City public schools, which were a center of transmission of the less fatal H1N1 “swine flu,” could well play a similar role with Covid-19. While children are luckily much less susceptible to the virus than adults, they could still transmit the virus to their parents and guardians—to say nothing of the risks facing school staff of all ages.

However, it is clear that, if and when schools are closed, it will likely be when it is too late. New York City Schools Chancellor Richard A. Carranza said that closing the schools would be a “last resort.” This is because about one-tenth, or over 100,000, New York City public school students are homeless, and almost all of them are poor.

For many of these students, public schools are their sole source for a hot meal, and often of medical care and internet access, the latter being necessary to move to online instruction.

Instead, if a student or school staff member tests positive for SARS-CoV-2, then the school will be closed for 24 hours and disinfected. However, this may prove too late to limit transmission within the schools.

The hashtag “#CloseTheSchools” was trending

yesterday on Twitter as students and others were demanding the closure due to Covid-19 of New York City public schools, as well as the state’s public university systems, the City University of New York (CUNY) and State University of New York (SUNY), which likewise remain open.

That the home of Wall Street cannot guarantee the safety of public schoolchildren from a predictable pandemic because 10 percent of them are homeless is an indictment of the entire social order.

Indeed, as if to further demonstrate the bankruptcy of capitalism, Cuomo has proudly touted the fact that the state is manufacturing its own hand sanitizer for distribution in public buildings. This has become necessary in part due to price-gouging and panic-buying. At a news conference, he flippantly joked about the sanitizer’s “very nice floral bouquet.”

While Cuomo mentioned the company manufacturing the 100,000 gallons per week of sanitizer, Corcraft, he did not mention the workforce creating the sanitizer: prisoners paid less than \$1 per hour, who are unlikely to use any of the sanitizer in their overcrowded and unsanitary prisons. Prisoners will have another job if the pandemic worsens: digging mass graves on Hart Island.

Public defenders and others have noted that the city’s prisons and jails are Covid-19 clusters waiting to happen, with Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, a federal prison, reportedly lacking hand sanitizer and soap.



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