

Coronavirus spreading at faster rate in Louisiana than anywhere in the world

J. L'Heureau
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In just two weeks, the southern US state of Louisiana has gone from identifying one case of COVID-19 to becoming a glaring example of not only the rapid spread of the novel coronavirus if left unchecked, but of the potential impact the health care and social crisis can continue wreak on the US.

As of this writing, there are 1,388 reported cases, and 46 deaths. Forty-three of the 64 parishes (or counties) in the state have reported cases, with Orleans Parish, which includes New Orleans, reporting 675 cases and 26 deaths. The number of confirmed cases has grown by 73.9 percent per day since the first case was identified, even faster than New York City which is one of the main epicenters of the pandemic.

Orleans parish, which has a population of 391,006, is in the top ten counties in the country that have the highest rates of COVID-19 cases. It is also the only county on this list—so far—that is not in the New York metro area. This can be largely attributed to the New Orleans carnival season, which culminated on February 25 with Mardi Gras, and saw around 1.4 million people visit the city. “This was really the perfect storm, perfect conditions for this virus to spread,” Dr. Rebekah Gee, the state’s former health director and current head of Louisiana State University’s (LSU) health care services division, told the *Times-Picayune*.

From March 22 to March 23, the Louisiana state testing lab reported 335 new cases, the largest single-rise in confirmed infections thus far, with total of 837 cases of COVID-19 diagnosed. This increase is due to commercial labs receiving the green light to process test results.

“What we’re really finding out is the level of coronavirus that was already in our state,” Dr. Alex Billioux, assistant secretary with the state’s Office of Public Health, explained to the *Advocate*.

A study released by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette has found that Louisiana currently has the fastest growth rate of confirmed cases in the world. The rate at which confirmed cases are increasing is similar to the growth rate in Italy and Spain, where health systems have been completely overwhelmed and thousands have died from the disease. “There is no reason to believe we won’t become the next Italy,” Democratic Governor John Bel Edwards said in a press conference on Sunday.

This places the state firmly in the top five US states that have the highest per capita cases of infections, ranking third behind New York and Washington state. Yet, of the 5,948 tests processed by March 23, 20 percent have tested positive, whereas in Washington state, for example, the rate is around 7 percent. A scenario of the state’s healthcare system being inundated in a matter of days as a result of a steady rise in positive tests is an ever-looming reality. “Nobody knows how long this is going to last but we do know right now Louisiana’s trajectory threatens our ability to deliver care,” Edwards said on Monday.

Dr. Gee stated in an interview with local news station KLFY-TV on Sunday that without stringent and urgent measures to combat the virus, “Louisiana is set to become the epicenter” in the US. Susanne Straif-Bourgeois, an associate professor at the LSU Health Sciences School of Public Health, said that “my concern is our health care capacity.” She continued: “In some models, looking at the growth rate, we estimate that in three to five days, we are over capacity.”

On Sunday, Governor Bel Edwards issued a “stay at home” order for the entire state, making Louisiana the ninth state to do so. It is to remain in effect until April 12. This measure follows a “stay-at-home mandate” issued in New Orleans by Mayor LaToya Cantrell on

Friday.

It was reported on Monday that St. James parish, around 55 miles west of New Orleans, is experiencing “active community spread” of COVID-19 amongst its 21,567 residents. There are currently eight confirmed cases, and one death in the parish. It was also reported on March 20 that a graduate student at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, which has a student population of over 30,000, tested positive for the virus.

A worker on the medical staff at New Orleans jail, which has an inmate population of 948, tested positive for the virus, a statement from the Orleans Parish Sheriff’s Office confirmed on Saturday. Prisons in Louisiana and across the United States, notorious for unsanitary conditions and crowding, are primed to be ravaged by the coronavirus.

Bleakly underscoring how unprepared and negligent officials from the local to the federal level have been in responding to the health care crisis, a 39-year-old health care worker at CrescentCare in New Orleans, Natasha Ott, took a test for the virus on March 16 after showing symptoms. Due to the long turnaround for test results, which at that point were still only being processed by state laboratories, she was unable to receive her results back in a timely manner. Four days after her test, she died of complications from COVID-19. “She could have gotten a test last Friday, but they only had five tests, and she didn’t want to use one of them,” her partner Josh Anderson told the *Times-Picayune*.

A respiratory therapist told ProPublica, “I have patients in their early 40s and, yeah, I was kind of shocked. I’m seeing people who look relatively healthy with a minimal health history, and they are completely wiped out, like they’ve been hit by a truck. This is knocking out what should be perfectly fit, healthy people. Patients will be on minimal support, on a little bit of oxygen, and then all of a sudden, they go into complete respiratory arrest, shut down and can’t breathe at all.”

An employee at the University Medical Center in New Orleans was quoted in local news publication *The Lens* stating that the recent rise in COVID-19 patients has “been dramatic.” On the demographics of the patients, the employee stated, “We have pretty critically ill people in their 30s and 40s. ... That’s kind of what’s scary about this thing. You don’t know who’s going to be critical.”

The coronavirus pandemic has been rapidly and deeply affecting workers in New Orleans’ service and hospitality sector. Tens of thousands have been applying for unemployment benefits. Nearly 50,000 had applied by March 19. The following day, that figure shot up to 71,000. In a report released on March 17 entitled, “The places a COVID-19 recession will likely hit hardest,” the Brookings Institution found that New Orleans ranks third in the nation’s 100 largest metro areas most vulnerable to the economic impacts of the pandemic.

Workers who are successful at filing their unemployment benefits claims are only entitled to a derisory maximum of \$247 per week for up to 27 weeks. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reported that this figure places Louisiana in last place amongst the nation’s average weekly benefit payout. According to the federal Department of Labor, the average pay per week in Louisiana amounts to just \$216. Michael Leachman, senior director of state fiscal research for the CBPP, told the *Times-Picayune*, “Louisiana’s unemployment system is one of the weakest in the country, if not the weakest.” He continued, “That’s a system that’s barely functioning.”

Only those who receive W-2 tax forms are eligible for unemployment payments. Self-employed contractors and workers who receive their wages “under the table” are less fortunate. “I can’t work, and I can’t get unemployment,” a laid-off cook at a restaurant told the *Advocate*. “It feels like the whole system is letting me down.” Speaking on behalf of the entire criminal capitalist ruling class, Governor Bel Edwards merely stated in response to the mass layoffs that his “heart goes out” to workers.



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