New York City digging mass graves for coronavirus victims

Josh Varlin
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New York City has hired workers to dig mass graves on Hart Island for unclaimed victims of the coronavirus pandemic amid a surge in deaths. As of this writing, 5,820 have died from COVID-19 in New York City alone, out of 92,384 confirmed infections. Statewide, the toll stands at 7,844 deaths out of 170,512 cases.

Burials on Hart Island, the city's burial site for unclaimed bodies for over a century, have gone from 25 a week before the pandemic to about 25 a day—a five-fold increase. Those interred on the island have been unclaimed by any family members and are overwhelmingly poor. The quintupling of burials is due both directly to COVID-19 and indirectly, as every aspect of medical, social and governmental infrastructure gets overwhelmed by the death toll.

While recent reports indicated that burials in City Cemetery, as the graveyard is officially known, were part of the city's pandemic plan, drone footage released April 9 showing the scope of the burials shocked people in New York City and internationally.

Workers are shown burying what appears to be dozens of boxes in a short section of a long trench that can clearly accommodate hundreds of bodies. Accompanying articles have explained that each body is placed in a pinewood box with the victim's name written on top in large letters and that the position of each person is documented for later retrieval from among the one million bodies buried on the island.

Burials on Hart Island are managed by the Department of Correction and normally done by Rikers Island prisoners, although the city says that the work is not currently being done by prisoners due to social distancing measures.

Rikers Island prisoners have the highest known COVID-19 infection rate of any population on the planet, and many low-risk and older prisoners have been released in a delayed attempt to mitigate the spread. At least one inmate has died, a 53-year-old man named Michael Tyson who was jailed for a non-criminal parole violation, which could be as simple as failing to report an address.

Few things could demonstrate the complete and utter bankruptcy of global capitalism more than the fact that the center of world finance needs to bury victims of a predictable and foreseen pandemic in trenches on an island just 16 miles from Wall Street.

The markets, taking the news in stride, finished the trading week on a high note, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average closing 285 points up Friday, an increase of more than 1 percent. Over the course of the week, which saw record-breaking death tolls in New York state three days in a row, the Dow rose almost 11 percent. The S&P 500 rose 12 percent on the week, its best performance since 1974.

According to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo, who sounded bored announcing the statistics at his daily briefing, 731 died due to the pandemic in New York on Monday, 779 on Tuesday, 799 on Wednesday and another 777 on Thursday.

The state has more cases than any country other than the United States itself. New York City, with a population of about 8.4 million people, now has more cases and deaths than mainland China, home to some 1.4 billion people and the original source of the coronavirus.

The pandemic has hit workers the hardest, as evidenced by the fact that the working-class immigrant neighborhood of Elmhurst, Queens, has been identified as the "epicenter of the epicenter." Transit workers, educators and others have died due to a lack of protective measures and the delayed closure of public schools.

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As staggering as the case and fatality figures are, they undercount the true scope of the pandemic. Almost everyone who dies either at home or on the street would not be counted in either the state or city figures, and hospitals may be tracking confirmed and probable cases differently, according to the *New York Times*.

Even just counting deaths at home, which totaled 1,891 for the period April 1–8, an increase of about eight-fold compared to the same period last year, it is immediately clear that a substantial portion of deaths due to the coronavirus—mostly directly, some indirectly due to the overburdened health care system—is not being counted.

Hospital morgues have been overwhelmed for weeks, with some hospitals resorting to forklifts to move bodies to external refrigerated trailers brought in to add extra capacity. The Federal Emergency Management Agency announced April 1 that they were sending in 85 refrigerated trucks to add yet more space to store victims of the pandemic.

Despite these measures, the city's ability to store bodies is clearly at the breaking point. While normally unclaimed bodies are not transferred to Hart Island until 30 days have passed, the deadline is now 14 days. While the official guidelines seem to indicate the body must be claimed within 14 days, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio's Press Secretary Freddi Goldstein told CNN that as long as family members make contact with a morgue official, their loved one's body will remain in a morgue.

The 14-day limit—which will no doubt result in dozens, if not hundreds, of families attempting to reclaim their loved ones from the mass graves—is actually an increase from the mere six days announced to funeral directors by the city and reported by *Business Insider*. After *Business Insider* reported the six-day limit, the city announced that families would have 14 days.

For those who need to retrieve their loved ones from Hart Island, the process could take years, according to a funeral director who spoke to *Business Insider*, who said, "they get prisoners to dig the body up; they put it in a special holding cell. Then you have to take a special ferry, which only accommodates one funeral director at a time."

As the death toll continues to mount, Hart Island may become the temporary burial place for COVID-19 victims other than those unclaimed by family members. If the scope of the pandemic increases still further, according to a tweet by New York City Council member Mark Levine, New Yorkers may be temporarily interred in a public park.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio was quick to deny that anyone would be buried in the parks and, after the video of mass graves went viral, tweeted: "There will be no mass burials on Hart Island. Everything will be individual and every body will be treated with dignity."

Apparently individual pine boxes stacked in a trench does not constitute "mass burials," and is indeed dignified.

For the ruling class, from de Blasio, who came to office as a "progressive," to fascistic US President Donald Trump, workers deserve little better than a burial in a potter's field. Wall Street, on the other hand, gets trillions of dollars to continue its speculation.

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