

Coronavirus hitting hard in Missouri cities

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13 April 2020

While the majority of COVID-19 infections, deaths and media attention has been devoted to New York, the impact of the virus has been felt throughout the country, including in the Midwest state of Missouri, the geographical center.

Missouri borders Illinois to the east and Kansas to the west, and has a large metropolitan center at each border. The city of St Louis has a population of 302,898 and over 2.8 million total in the extended metro area, which straddles the Mississippi river with Illinois. On the opposite end of the state is Kansas City, with approximately 491,918 residents in the city proper and over 2 million residents in the five counties and two states that constitute the greater metropolitan area.

The Republican Governor of Missouri, Mike Parson, first issued a “stay at home” order on April 6 that limited social gatherings to 10 or fewer people and advised residents against leaving their homes. Initially the governor's order was set to expire on April 2, but it has since been extended by only two days until April 24.

Missouri was the 40th state to issue a stay home order, a month after the first case of COVID-19 was discovered in the state on March 7.

As is the case throughout the country, social distancing guidelines have devastated retail, hospitality and restaurant jobs throughout the state. Beginning in the two weeks ending March 14, fewer than 10,000 unemployment claims were filed with the Missouri Department of Labor and Industrial Relations; a week later 42,207 additional claims were filed. The last two weeks in which data is available ending on April 4 over 205,000 more unemployment claims have been filed.

Governor Parson's “stay at home” order came too late to prevent a steadily rising number of cases throughout the state but concentrated in the cities of St Louis and Kansas City.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 confirmed in

the state was a 20 year-old student who had been studying abroad in Italy. The student flew back from Italy the first week in March and went through the US customs without being screened, tested or quarantined. Upon arriving in Chicago, she continued her journey home aboard an Amtrak train to St. Louis on March 4. Three days later, Mercy Hospital in St. Louis confirmed its first positive case of COVID-19.

St. Louis

In the month since, the city of St. Louis has confirmed 645 positive cases, with 204 currently under observation and quarantine and 17 deaths within the city limits. Limited data is currently available regarding infection rates as the city is only operating two appointment-only COVID-19 testing sites and one mobile site, all of which require registering by phone before one is eligible to receive a test.

The St. Louis metropolitan area encompasses over 8,000 square miles, mostly in Missouri, but also extends across the Mississippi River into impoverished East St. Louis, Illinois. Within the metroplex, the 20th largest in the US, income inequality and the social ills that follow define the region.

The four wealthiest zip codes in the state, according to the *St Louis Business Journal*, are in St. Louis County, the suburbs west of the city. These include Chesterfield, 63005, with an average median household income of \$160,354, Ladue, 63124, and a median income of \$149,423, Frontenac, 63131, with an income of \$144,159 and finally Glencoe, 63038, with a median income of \$125,441.

Comparatively the three poorest zip codes are in St. Louis city. The average median income for a family residing in 63106 and 63107, both located in North St. Louis is \$15,0531 and \$20,758. While those who live in the third poorest zip in the state, Pagedale, 63133, earn on average \$21,983. Across the river in East St. Louis, Illinois, is where the three poorest zip codes

outside of Chicago are located. 62201, 62207 and 62204, all located in East St Louis with an average median income of \$15,089, \$17,139 and \$17,180, respectively.

Income inequality this obscene has predictable and tragic results. Details have begun to emerge within the city regarding those who have succumbed to the preventable pandemic. In the lead article for *The St. Louis American* St. Louis health director Dr. Fredrick Echols revealed that 12 of the 17 deaths so far have been African-American. This tragic fact is seized by sections of the Democratic Party and the corporate media to blame “white supremacy” or “structural racism,” rather than the capitalist system, for the disproportionate amount of deaths among blacks.

This narrative, put forward to disorient the working class, comes precisely at the time city officials predict a leap in cases and therefore fatalities within the city. The head of the St. Louis Metropolitan Pandemic Task Force, Alex Garza, in a press conference this week, stated that he expects 80,000 people within the city limits to contract the disease by the end of the month. “We are on the steep part of the curve right now, the next few weeks are going to be extremely difficult for the St. Louis region,” Garza gravely intoned.

Kansas City

On the opposite side of the state, the city of Kansas City and the surrounding metropolitan area encompasses five counties: Johnson and Wyandotte in Kansas, and Jackson, Clay and Platte counties in Missouri. As of this writing over 1,200 cases have been confirmed within these counties and at least 53 have died.

As is the case in St Louis, those who don’t have the luxury of working from home such as package delivery drivers, Amazon workers, and grocery store workers have been forced to continue to put themselves at risk providing, in some cases, essential services.

Also like St. Louis, local Democratic politicians have sought to inject racial politics into discussion of the coronavirus crisis. Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas and his health director, Dr. Rex Archer, held a press conference this past Monday where they revealed that Kansas City’s Third Council District had the highest number of confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Dr. Archer offered a few reasons as to why the urban center of Kansas City had more cases, compared to the

rest of the rest of the state, outside of St. Louis: “Often, the urban core is more affected, there’s higher concentration of folks,” as well as, “less health insurance, less access to prevention techniques.”

The Third District is nearly 60 percent black and had the highest unemployment rate in the city, above 6 percent, prior to the onset of the virus. Dr. Archer’s limited statistics indicate that black residents have constituted 50 percent of the positive results, while only accounting for 30 percent of the population within the city.

The doctor also offered another explanation as to why lower income residents are becoming infected at a higher rate, “Under our stay-at-home order, a large percentage ... with college degrees, can work from home,” he said. “People of color, particularly, people of color who may only have a high school degree, their ability in their work environment to work at home is very low.”

As is the case throughout Missouri and the US, the lack of effective and widespread testing has resulted in public health officials offering best guesses and hypotheses as to the true extent of the contagions spread. The Kansas City Health department estimates that barely 10 percent of coronavirus cases within the city are being reported.

Health officials in the Johnson County, Kansas, suburbs of Kansas City, announced back on March 20 that they would be rationing tests to those that needed to be hospitalized, while they suspected that community spread had already taken hold throughout the metropolis. In addition, no tests would be administered without a doctor’s note.



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