

# At least 20 percent of US meatpackers may have contracted coronavirus

**Cordell Gascoigne**  
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Over 50,000 food and agricultural workers have contracted COVID-19 in the United States, according to numbers compiled by the Food & Environment Reporting Network (FERN).

As of its latest figures, 51,453 workers in the meatpacking, food processing and farming industries have contracted the disease since March. The overwhelming majority of these, 38,641, are meatpacking workers. These figures represent at least 635 plants and 89 farms and production facilities across the country, demonstrating that the virus has spread completely unchecked throughout these industries. At least 221 workers, including 174 meatpackers, have died.

These figures, collated from various news sources and corporate press releases, represent the most comprehensive and up-to-date attempt to track the virus among meatpacking and farm workers. However, they are necessarily incomplete because there is no systematic, regular testing of meatpacking workers in the United States, much less a centralized system of publicly reporting the results. Instead, companies have released figures only in piecemeal fashion and from individual locations, often only after battles with local health authorities.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does not keep regularly updated statistics for the sector and its latest figures are from a study released on July 7. Even these figures were likely a massive undercount. The CDC total of 16,233 cases at meatpacking plants was roughly half that reported by FERN at the time.

However, this was enough for CDC to declare that 9 percent of the nationwide meatpacking workforce had already been infected. If FERN's numbers are accurate, this means that more than 20 percent of American

meatpackers have been infected.

By far the largest number of cases at a single employer is at poultry giant Tyson Foods, with a total of 10,104.

Brazilian-owned JBS has outbreaks at 12 of its US-based facilities, with at least 2,660 cases and 14 deaths. This includes six deaths at its beef processing plant at Greeley, Colorado, where workers staged a wildcat walkout last month.

Smithfield Foods has had outbreaks at 13 plants with at least 2,004 cases and 6 deaths. Last month, Smithfield Foods attempted to nullify a subpoena from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to the state of South Dakota that would result in disclosing the number of cases at Smithfield's plants in the state.

Smithfield Foods defended its request to the courts saying OSHA's investigation would "damage how it and other companies work with government agencies in their response to the coronavirus pandemic," that is, in secret and on the companies' terms. Smithfield representatives said that the company gave the South Dakota Department of Health information only because of an agreement that the information would be "adequately protected."

In press releases, Tyson Foods issued a statement saying that its "extensive program of prevention and testing" was being implemented in "more than 40 U.S. locations," a small minority of its total US operations, in partnership with Matrix Medical Network, a private health care provider. According to FERN, Tyson has released testing figures from only 18 plants, with the most recent results announced on June 26. The company has conducted only 40,000 tests out of a total workforce of 122,000.

In their drive to keep workers on the line making

profits, the meatpacking companies are following the lead of President Trump, who signed an executive order in April to keep meatpacking plants open.

Even before the pandemic, the meatpacking industry had some of the highest rates of workplace injuries and illnesses in the country, driven by unsanitary conditions and breakneck line speeds. Packed tightly on the line, meatpacking workers perform the same precise cutting motions thousands of times each day, producing astronomical levels of carpal tunnel syndrome and other cumulative trauma injuries. One federal study in 2013 found that 47 percent of workers at a South Carolina poultry plant had carpal tunnel syndrome.

Trump's Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia, son of the late extreme-right Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, is a former corporate lawyer who led a crusade in the 1990s against ergonomics regulations designed to protect workers from repetitive motion injuries as "junk science."

Last week in the state of Utah, members of the medical community gathered outside the Utah Capitol building to call for the closing of meatpacking plants to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

"What we're asking is that the meat plants are closed," said Dr. Niki Davis of the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, a non-profit with over 12,000 members. "We've already had 168 deaths of meat packing plant workers in the United States."

The group explained that meatpacking workers face the problem of "proving" where they had contracted the virus and of subsequently being denied benefits, creating an incentive for them to work through illnesses resulting in the further spread of the disease.

Davis said doctors have received multiple reports of workers claiming they were forced to work in close proximity with others in unsanitary conditions. Among the 239 meat processing facilities in the United States that have reported COVID-19 cases, only 111 of them have documented their rudimentary "intervention and prevention" tactics to the CDC.



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