

School and college outbreaks make Iowa the US COVID-19 hotspot

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4 September 2020

Iowa has become typical of the front line of the pandemic—a tempest brewing, with cases soaring while the political and corporate establishment turn a blind eye to the devastating public health crisis and initiate policies that will make it even worse by intensifying the back-to-school and back-to-work campaign.

With over 67,000 cumulative cases, the seven-day average for COVID-19 cases in Iowa has been steadily climbing. However, the tracking of cases has been mired in willful and calculated ineptitude. With a positivity rate of 18.5 percent, it is a clear indication that the number of cases throughout the state is far higher than reported by authorities. As of September 2, there have been 1,126 total deaths attributed to the infection in a state with a population of only 3.2 million.

Local news reported yesterday that a special education teacher from Des Moines Public Schools died from complications of COVID-19 infection. The teacher, yet to be identified, worked at Ruby Van Meter School for the intellectually disabled. It remains unclear where the teacher contracted the virus. However, Governor Kim Reynolds is demanding that districts open schools for 50 percent in-person instruction, regardless of the deadliness of the infection, with utter disregard for the lives of the communities being put at risk.

On a per-capita basis, Iowa leads with the highest number of COVID-19 cases of any state in the country. With 232 new cases per 100,000 population, it is almost triple the national average of 88 per 100,000. According to the federal coronavirus task force, “community transmission continues to be high in rural and urban counties across Iowa, with the increasing transmission in the major university towns. Mask mandates must be in place to decrease transmission.” Additional recommendations included the closing of bars and restaurants across 61 counties, which Governor Reynolds has chosen to disregard publicly, limiting the shutdown to major towns.

After the July days when COVID-19 cases peaked at more than 70,000 per day in the United States, predominately across the sunbelt states, by August, there were indications

that the virus was surging into rural Midwest and Great Plains states. Presently, the seven-day moving average across the US has gradually declined and settled to approximately 42,500 daily cases. Similarly, since the end of July, about 1,000 people are succumbing to COVID-19 each day. The United States will surpass the 200,000-fatality milestone by mid-month.

At a candid moment that put her in bad stead with the Trump administration, Dr. Deborah Birx, the coordinator of the White House’s coronavirus task force, warned early in August, “to everybody who lives in a rural area, you are not immune or protected from this virus. If you’re in multigenerational households, and there’s an outbreak in your rural area or your city, you need to consider wearing a mask at home, assuming that you’re positive, if you have individuals in your households with comorbidities.”

Specifically, rural regions in states like Kansas, Missouri, Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota are being identified as new hot spots. Still, due to a lack of infrastructure and accurate reporting, the scope of the outbreaks remains challenging to estimate. The positivity rate for these states ranges from 13.6 to 22.2 percent, indicating a significant unidentified community transmission.

Meatpacking plants are notorious for COVID-19 infections, and Iowa counties with the highest rates of infections are also home to these economic centers of rural food processing. Workers in these plants and their families are facing the difficult decision to send their children to school.

Dr. Megan Srinivas, an infectious disease specialist from Fort Dodge, Iowa, told the *Daily Nonpareil*, a local newspaper that serves Council Bluffs, Iowa and the southwest counties, “meatpacking plants present a unique challenge to fighting any pandemic including COVID-19. Plants represent a mixing pot. COVID-19 doesn’t recognize county lines, and carpooling across counties is commonplace for these workers.”

Despite the attempt by the media to racialize the pandemic,

more conscientious researchers are identifying the connection between socioeconomic index and rates of COVID-19 infection. These plants are run by the labor power of migrants and refugees—African and Central American workers—a high-risk population already given the predilection with poverty and health comorbidities of obesity, diabetes, and hypertension. These same low-income laborers live in multigenerational families who depend on the paychecks that keep the lights on at night.

The vulnerability of these areas is compounded by the returning university students who will usually double the population of small towns and cities during the academic year. These students also provide critical economic stimulus to small businesses and commerce that barely eke out a living and have faced significant financial hardship during the last seven months of the pandemic.

Many of the state's many small colleges are in proximity to the meatpacking and processing plants. Prestige Foods sits on 160 acres of Iowa farmland with over five miles of conveyor belts, 100,000 square feet of kill floor, and 20,000 square feet of freezers. Waterloo-Cedar Falls metro area is also home to a Tyson Fresh Meats plant. The Waterloo, Fort Dodge, and Eagle Grove school districts are home to several small communities in driving vicinity.

Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa, and the University of Iowa in Iowa City—accounting for almost 70,000 university students—are within an hour or two of each other, creating a vibrant network of communities perfect for a highly contagious pathogen.

According to the Iowa public health department, Johnson County, home to the University of Iowa, was on a seven-day streak of triple-digit increase of new cases. Since the first day of classes on August 24, there have been at least 1,142 cases of COVID-19 just at the university, including 220 new cases last Wednesday alone. University officials have set aside close to 300 rooms at residence halls for quarantine and isolation purposes. Protests and sickouts have ensued with students challenging the university's deadly decisions to hold in-person classes.

Story County, home to Iowa State University, has a positivity rate of more than 41 percent. As of August 31, an additional 503 people tested positive. Black Hawk County, home to the University of Northern Iowa, ranks fourth out of 99 counties with the highest COVID-19 cases.

What is happening in Iowa is only the worst example of a nationwide process which has seen many other states and universities become flashpoints over the last month, from the University of North Carolina to Notre Dame to the University of Alabama and numerous colleges in Arizona. Some 25,000 cases of COVID-19 have been reported at colleges and universities across 37 states.

The leading US epidemiologist, Dr. Anthony Fauci, publicly urged university officials not to send infected students home. "Keep them at the university in a place that's sequestered enough from other students. But don't have them go home, because they could be spreading it in their home state," he told NBC's Today show on Wednesday. It begs the question, "why were they placed in this predicament in the first place?"

Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Health Security, told Bloomberg, "It's going to be kind of this rolling fire, with certain flare-ups that occur in different parts of the country at different times. This is a virus that's established itself into the population." This assessment is true as far as it goes, but virus conflagration is by political choice and not by mere accident or incompetence.

That is why Dr. Scott Atlas has gained the ear of President Trump, who normally scorns the advice of scientists. Dr. Atlas's credentials, unfortunately, do not include the study of infectious diseases or public health, which accounts for his popularity at the White House.

A senior fellow at Stanford University's conservative Hoover Institution, Dr. Atlas has been pressing to institute a broad policy of herd immunity disguised hypocritically as a policy focused on protecting a small population of at-risk individuals to minimize the risk to the rest of the population. "Once you get to a certain number—we use the word herd—once you get to a certain number, it's going to go away," Trump told Fox News on Monday.

This means a murderous pogrom in which state officials decry the impossibility of mandates, dashboards and statistics are manipulated, medical and public health guidelines change to suit political expediency, all in the name of the financial markets that have seen a return to their pre-pandemic highs. Every effort to save lives, protect communities, and create a cohesive response to COVID-19 is thwarted, and in this regard, the drive to open schools is the reverse of the lockdowns that prevented so many infections and saved countless thousands of lives.



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