

Missouri coronavirus infection rates spike, creating havoc in schools, economy

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A third wave of the coronavirus pandemic is sweeping over the Midwest region of the US. Missouri state officials reported the positivity rate for coronavirus tests over the last seven days stands at 21.1 percent, and the state recorded 159,625 cases and 2,615 total deaths as of Tuesday.

Six counties—Holt, New Madrid, Osage, Stoddard, Dekalb and Moniteau counties—reported positivity rates of more than 50 percent, with Holt County reporting a positivity rate greater than 60 percent. Local media report that more than 1,000 people have been hospitalized with the virus since September 16.

Not only have regional state governors failed to enact measures to prevent the spread of the virus, leading to this hit to the center of the country, but a bipartisan “reopening” led by the White House has been enforced and is driving with uncontrolled spread, with infection highest in rural counties. These figures are worsened by the lack of basic containment measures in Missouri, such as mandated mask wearing, mass testing and contact tracing.

The official Missouri COVID-19 dashboard is working again as of Wednesday after having been down since October 10. The outage is blamed on a “database extract error” that saw a spike of 5,000 additional cases in one day immediately before the service was paused. No explanation has been given for the reported error or the delay in fixing the problem, sparking concerns about accuracy in reported figures amid runaway infection.

As expected, students returning to in-person instruction in schools has led to outbreaks. Nearly 500 students of the Fort Zumwalt School District, serving the largest cities in St. Charles County, were ordered to quarantine last week after it was determined they were in potential contact with someone infected with the virus. For the week of October 4 through October 10, 10 faculty members and 10 students had tested positive. In-person instruction was allowed to resume for the district August 31.

Beginning October 19, kindergarten through grade 2 students will return to St. Louis City's school district, Saint Louis Public Schools. Third through fifth graders are scheduled to return October 27. Kirkwood School District will have middle school students return to class in November.

Mehlville School District in St. Louis County announced that K-12 students will return to class on a hybrid model at the end of October. On the western side of the state, near Kansas City, 200 people were quarantined from the Olathe, Kansas school district after 25 students and 11 faculty tested positive. The Olathe Northwest football team has also been ordered to quarantine until October 21.

In addition to schools opening for in-person instruction across the state, high-risk extracurricular activities such as youth sports are being encouraged to resume. “High school football will be played in some schools this Friday,” St. Louis County Executive Sam Page said October 7. School districts had their “health and safety plans” approved by the state prior to reallowing youth sports.

Over 1,600 students at the University of Missouri-Columbia (Mizzou) have tested positive. Surveys taken by students show that there has been increased need for mental health services in 2020. College sports games are being delayed due to outbreaks. The Mizzou Tigers football team had their SEC game against Vanderbilt postponed. This game was scheduled to be played in Columbia and would have been the Mizzou team's homecoming game. The Mizzou volleyball team had their two-game opener against Alabama delayed until October 21 and 22.

Online learning poses challenges for working-class and poor families in Missouri and Illinois who can have trouble accessing high-speed internet for their children. East St. Louis, Illinois, separated from downtown St. Louis by the Mississippi River, is a city where nearly 40 percent of households are below the federal poverty line. These households have trouble affording internet service for their homes. Local school districts must give families internet hotspots so students can participate in at-home instruction.

“Sometimes, we would go to a McDonald's parking lot and use their Wi-Fi, and even with that, you only get so much with the hotspot. Then you run into the problem of what if my laptop or my iPad dies. And I don't have a nice car, so it doesn't have the plug-ins to charge your phone and things like that,” Melissa Lawson, single mother of three children, told the Associated Press.

In the face of growing opposition from teachers to the policy of mass infection, the Jefferson City School District decided

not to implement a proposal to classify teachers as essential employees, which was an attempt to address staffing shortages brought on by the spread of the disease throughout the community.

The Board of Education proposal, had it been approved, would return teachers to work after a seven-day quarantine period, instead of the recommended 14 days. The district received 27 pages of comments from staff and 45 from families. The district has announced it will consider hiring substitute teachers to help with staffing.

The dangers of in-person voting have inspired a surge in mail-in voting for Missouri, with three times more mail-in ballots being requested than in the 2016 election. Officials reported that 140,000 absentee ballot requests have come in and over 30,000 have already been returned.

Nearly 2,500 inmates with the Department of Corrections (DOC) have been infected, with two deaths. 710 DOC staff have tested positive, with one death. There are nine prisons with over 100 confirmed inmate cases, with St. Francois County's Farmington (468) and Bonne Terre (366) being the worst-affected.

The city of Springfield has increased capacity for special events to 50 percent. Springfield has reported 113 COVID-19 deaths so far. The surrounding rural counties are seeing a continued rise in cases.

Though the office of Governor Mike Parson wants the working class to move on and get back to work, expressions of gratitude continue to pour in for first responders as well as commemorations for local victims of the pandemic. Jessica Murray of St. Louis launched the St. Louis COVID Memorial to memorialize the hundreds who have died in the region. Missouri as a whole has seen over 2,500 deaths.

The pandemic is severely affecting the Missouri economy. The Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) is not giving small businesses in Missouri the assistance they need to survive. "I've had to reduce my prices tremendously," Andy Shifter of Hats N More in Maryland Heights told KMOV News.

On the PPP he reported, "It did nothing for the small business in terms of paying the bills to vendors and in terms of loss of business." Scott Schumaier of the physician recruiting firm Source Medical said of the White House's current stalled negotiations on distributing a second round of assistance to nationwide businesses, "It was devastating news. It took me down from thinking we had a 50 percent chance of making it through this, to a 25 percent chance."

Only now is St. Louis County beginning to distribute CARES Act funds to 88 municipalities. A total of \$47 million will be granted among the municipalities, which will not be enough to prevent additional layoffs of city employees or cuts to municipal services.

Warrensburg, with a population 20,400 in Johnson County, projects that its budget for fiscal year 2021 will be \$25.8 million. A \$3.3 million deficit is projected. According to

Finance Director Marcella McCoy, "We were anticipating declining sales tax revenue along with other revenue, such as franchise fee permits, etc. So, in light of that it was difficult to pick and choose what expenses we could manage to complete." City employees will receive no wage increase in FY2021 and will pay additional costs in health care premiums. The city-owned Old Drum and Friends Animal Shelter will be defunded and transitioned to the control of a nonprofit.

Small cities and towns for which tourism is a substantial portion of annual income have fallen on desperate times. Kimmswick, Jefferson County, which has a population of 143, is soliciting community donations to offset a "financial black hole," according to Mayor Phil Stang. Nearly 80 percent of the city's income comes from its annual Strawberry and Apple Butter festivals. Both festivals see thousands of people flock into the city, with the Apple Butter Festival seeing close to 100,000 attendees for the two-day event. The city has cut several positions from full- to part-time. The city needs \$200,000 by the end of the year or it will be forced to lay off city employees, asking employees to switch to unpaid volunteering.

Six Flags Entertainment Corp. has announced that it will lay off an unknown number of workers from its St. Louis theme park. Kindred Healthcare plans to lay off 60 workers at its Clayton rehabilitation services facility as part of selling the business.

If workers, youth and students and other community members do not act, the coronavirus will continue to infect and kill people with no serious effort against it from the state government. Missouri residents need to form local rank-and-file committees in every workplace and neighborhood. The first step has been taken with workers at the Ford Kansas City Assembly Plant forming a rank and file safety committee to defend against the spread of coronavirus in their facility. The WSWs will assist in the building of a fightback against the callous policies of the Missouri government and the capitalist system it defends.



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