

One-quarter of Macomb County Jail inmates test positive for coronavirus

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7 December 2020

Another outbreak of coronavirus is now under way at Macomb County Jail in suburban Detroit.

During the spring, the jail had at least 50 known cases. The county as a whole has had more than 39,000 cases throughout the year, equal to nearly 4.5 percent of the entire population.

More than a quarter of the inmates at the Macomb County Jail now have COVID-19. Of the 550 inmates, 143 have tested positive for the novel coronavirus, said the Macomb County Sheriff's office. Officials say they aren't sure how the disease spread through the Mount Clemens facility.

The infected inmates are being quarantined in their units, the sheriff's office said. In response to the outbreak, new inmates are now being tested for COVID-19 before entering the lockup. In the past, only inmates showing symptoms of the illness were tested.

The jail will continue to quarantine new inmates for two weeks before they enter the general population. The facility had been doing that before the start of the outbreak.

Those infected with the virus are not just the incarcerated but also prison officers and other staff. Sheriff Anthony Wickersham says several staff members at the jail have tested positive for COVID-19, with one being hospitalized. There is also one inmate currently in the hospital with the virus. Both Wayne County Sheriff Benny Napoleon and Macomb County Sheriff Wickersham have announced they have tested positive.

It should come to no surprise that the jail and prison system has become a major hotspot for the virus, given widespread overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in American prisons. According to the federal Bureau of Prisons, more than 25,000 federal inmates have tested positive and 149 have died. An August study by

Harvard researchers found that the infection rates in Massachusetts prisons were nearly three times that of the population as a whole.

In November, 120 inmates who have tested positive for the coronavirus were placed at the separate Macomb County Correctional Facility. These inmates came from other state prisons as far away as Michigan's Upper Peninsula, according to a spokesperson with the facility.

The unit inside the prison will be secure and fenced-in for only prisoners with COVID-19. Also, staff who work within the facility caring for those prisoners will not be entering the main part of the prison to prevent the possible spread of the virus. Officials at the prison have conferred with local hospitals and health care officials ahead of this move.

While medically necessary to contain the disease, the fact that prisoners in the county jail are being tested before entering the facility sheds light on the absence of similar measures in auto plants, including Fiat Chrysler's Sterling Heights Assembly Plant in Macomb County, where more 7,000 people work. Indeed, unlike the county sheriff's office, Fiat Chrysler and the United Auto Workers have not even made public the number of infections and deaths in the plant, in spite of a major outbreak which workers say has already claimed the lives of at least one worker. In the nearby Warren Truck plant, another worker was reported to have died last week, at the least the sixth worker to die at this single facility.

With the number of COVID-19 cases surpassing 425,000 over the weekend, schools and workplaces have served as centers for the spread of the disease. However, Governor Gretchen Whitmer's lockdown order, which expires on Wednesday, exempts much of the public school system, daycares and most

workplaces. These measures have succeeded, at most, in halting the acceleration of new cases, with the seven-day rolling average at 6,917 on Saturday, virtually unchanged from mid-November. Over the past week, the state reported an average of 7,024 daily new COVID-19 cases, a record high.

The steady increase in cases is not limited to Macomb County jails and prisons. The Saginaw County Jail is currently experiencing a rash of COVID-19 cases, with 22 inmates testing positive as of December 2. Twelve guards and prison employees have also tested positive, as well as the county sheriff.



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