

LARGE MEAT OPERATIONS IN COVID HOTSPOTS

Highest case counts per 1,000 people in counties with meat plants

By Peter Fisher and David Osterberg

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The COVID-19 outbreak in the United States might be easily viewed as an urban problem with the sheer numbers and high levels of infection from cities like New York, Chicago, New Orleans and Los Angeles. In Iowa things are different.

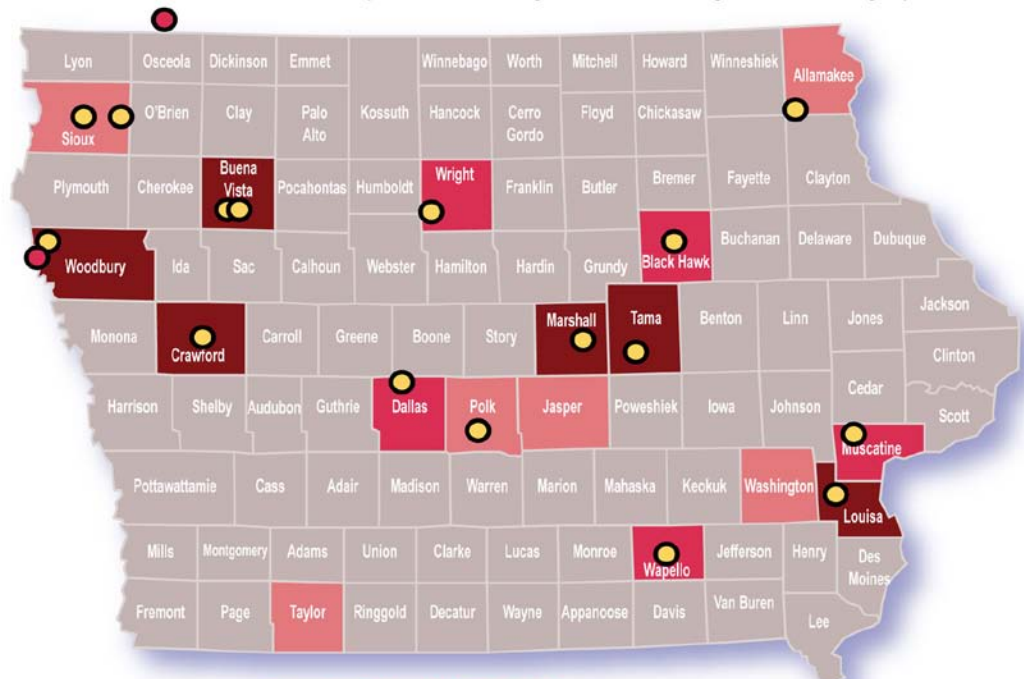
The number of COVID-19 cases in Iowa was 19,688 as of 10 a.m. on Monday, June 1.¹ Iowa's population of 3,170,000 leaves an overall case count of 6.2 citizens with COVID-19 per 1,000 population. Eleven of Iowa's 99 counties had 10 or more confirmed cases per thousand residents at that date. Each has one thing in common — a large pork or beef or turkey plant.

Not only that, but every county with a large pork plant (slaughter capacity of 8,000 or more) ranks in the top 11 in terms of case count, as does the county with the largest beef plant.

The next block of six counties with more than seven cases per 1,000 includes counties that border meatpacking counties or that contain smaller meatpacking plants. Only one county, Taylor, does not fit that pattern.

The biggest county, Polk, with Des Moines, the state's largest city, had eight cases per thousand. Black Hawk has received national

Highest COVID-19 Case Counties Are Either Packing Plant Hosts or Neighbors
Coronavirus Cases Per 1,000 Population and Large Livestock Slaughter or Packing Operations



Cases Per 1,000 Population
 Iowa Policy Project

Over 20 10 to 20 7 to 9.9

Packing Plants: Iowa  Neighboring state 

Source: Analysis of IDPH data as of 10 a.m. 6/1/2020, www.coronavirus.iowa.gov

attention for an outbreak at a Tyson plant and makes the above 10 list. However, large counties without packing plants have lower numbers. The second-largest county, Linn with Cedar Rapids, had 4.2 cases per thousand and the third-largest county, Scott, with Davenport, had 2.1 cases per thousand. The fourth-largest county, Johnson, with Iowa City had 4.1.

While COVID-19 cases may be centered in urban areas nationally, meat packing shows a strong connection in Iowa to the largest number of infections.

The obvious question: Why can't the meat producers protect their workers and their communities?

And why didn't the state take proactive measures as soon as the first outbreak occurred, at the Tyson Plant in

Columbus Junction in early April, by making mandatory the national OSHA guidelines for the safe operation of packing plants during the pandemic? Instead, for the next eight weeks, outbreaks have occurred at one packing plant after another.

Iowa counties with leading COVID-19 case counts all have meat operations

Counties' cases per 1,000 population, with locations of meat processing operations

| County | Cases per 1,000 Population | City | Meat Plants | Company | Employees |
|-------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|----------------------------|-----------|
| Buena Vista | 40.8 | Storm Lake | Pork/Poultry | Tyson (2 plants) | 3,267 |
| Louisa | 30.8 | Columbus Junction | Pork | Tyson | 1,300 |
| Crawford | 30.7 | Denison | Pork | Smithfield | 1,250 |
| Woodbury | 26.9 | Sioux City | Pork | Triumph-Seabord | 2,400 |
| Tama | 23.8 | Tama | Beef | Iowa Premium Beef | 500 |
| Marshall | 22.4 | Marshalltown | Pork | JBS | 2,700 |
| Wapello | 17.0 | Ottumwa | Pork | JBS | 2,200 |
| Wright | 13.9 | Eagle Grove | Pork | Prestage | 867 |
| Black Hawk | 13.2 | Waterloo | Pork | Tyson | 3,000 |
| Muscatine | 13.0 | West Liberty | Poultry | West Liberty Foods | 994 |
| Dallas | 10.1 | Perry | Pork | Tyson | 1,500 |
| Taylor | 9.0 | | | | |
| Allamakee | 8.7 | Postville | Pork | Agri Star | 400 |
| Polk | 8.7 | Des Moines | Pork | Smithfield | 500 |
| Washington | 8.5 | | Pork | | |
| Sioux | 8.1 | Sioux Center, Hospers | Pork | Sioux-Preme / Premium Iowa | 640 |
| Jasper | 7.0 | | Pork | | |



Counties' cases per 1,000 population calculated from IDPH daily reports

¹ COVID-19 in Iowa. Iowa Department of Public Health dashboard. <https://coronavirus.iowa.gov/>, accessed 10 a.m., June 1, 2020.

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