

# Amazon workers tally virus cases, voice alarms about risks

April 30 2020, by Emily Kopp

---



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

With each new case of COVID-19 reported at an Amazon warehouse, workers receive a text or voicemail alert assuring them that the best safety procedures recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention are being put in place.

"We continue to follow CDC guidance," messages from the company say.

But some workers say that isn't true. And some say they are pressured by managers to report that social distancing is maintained when that's not the case.

Amazon employees across 125 facilities have tallied at least 606 cases of COVID-19, according to a spreadsheet assembled by Amazon [employee](#) Jana Jumpp and provided to CQ Roll Call. The employees reached that total by sharing the voicemails and texts with each other and monitoring social media posts that a facility had at least one positive COVID-19 case.

The unofficial data suggest far more outbreaks than are publicly known—revealing a potential safety risk for the company's hundreds of thousands of employees and the millions of people who rely on the service as they shelter at home.

Amazon workers report previously unknown outbreaks across the country: more than 60 cases at a warehouse in Hazleton, Pa.; at least two dozen cases at a facility in Houston; more than two dozen cases in North Haven, Conn.; and more than 14 cases in Edison, N.J.

The tally builds on [media reports](#) confirming at least two dozen cases at a facility in Staten Island, N.Y., and more than 30 cases in Carteret, N.J. New Jersey's Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy ordered that facility shuttered this week after a news report.

Jumpp, who worked with University of California, Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism student Mickey Capper to organize each tip she

gets from an Amazon employee, said her estimate for the number of cases is conservative. When the online retail giant notifies employees of "additional cases," the number of additional cases is not specified.

Amazon spokesman Jay Carney said in a CNN interview earlier this month he didn't know how many cases of COVID-19 among Amazon employees have been reported.

"I don't have an overall number, obviously, because it's pretty imprecise ... when there's so much uncertainty about the diagnosis itself," Carney said.

Workers concerned about safety conditions at Amazon warehouses say the risks underscore the need to shut down the company's facilities, most of which operate 24 hours per day, until safe working conditions can be better assured.

"We're going to release the data Jay Carney didn't have. You don't know the answer?" former Amazon employee Chris Smalls said during a call with Amazon workers last week. "We do."

Amazon said in a statement it takes precautions recommended in World Health Organization guidelines.

"We're continuing to monitor the situation in our facilities and corporate offices, and we are taking proactive measures to protect employees and associates who have been in contact with anyone who has been diagnosed or becomes ill," Amazon spokesman Tim Carter said.

He said Amazon has "implemented proactive measures at our facilities to protect employees including increased cleaning at all facilities, maintaining social distance in the facility, and adding distance between drivers and customers when making deliveries."

## Spotty reporting

The employees' count offers the fullest picture so far of safety conditions at the country's second-largest private employer.

The CDC has occupational data for just 16 percent of COVID-19 cases, according to an April report.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has not tracked the workplaces of infected people outside of health care facilities, according to experts.

Typically, employers are required to report incidents to OSHA within 24 hours of a hospitalization, agency spokeswoman Joanna Hawkins said.

"OSHA has said any corona disease case outside of health care should essentially be considered non-work related," said David Michaels, former OSHA assistant secretary of Labor, "unless there is 'objective evidence' that it is work related, which is pretty much impossible to find."

OSHA is "giving employers a pass," he said, which "will lead to more coronavirus cases in the future."

CQ Roll Call has not independently verified every case in the workers' spreadsheet. Some phone numbers to Amazon warehouses connect the caller to an automated messaging system, without the option to leave a voicemail. Others are defunct. Sometimes, human resources representatives at facilities simply hung up and, in one case, blocked the caller.

Meanwhile, some Amazon workers report that managers encouraged them to lie in internal communications about social distancing at

facilities.

An Amazon [worker](#) holds a handout she said employees received at work to guide responses to a company safety survey. (Photo courtesy of Jana Jumpp) Amazon has said it discourages clustering in break rooms and ended "stand-up meetings," when workers huddle at the start of the day to learn their assignments.

Employees are still being asked to gather in stand-up meetings, said William A. Moore III, an employee at an Amazon fulfillment center in New Jersey. But a manager asked him to report in an internal survey that they weren't happening, and that workers were keeping six feet apart.

"I had a manager come over and say, "A lot of people are answering 'yes' to this question about large social gatherings. Can you answer 'no'?" said Moore.

Moore said posters at his facility instruct workers to answer "no" when asked if employees have gathered together.

## **Pennsylvania hot spot**

One worker at a Pennsylvania facility shared a screenshot of a handout given to employees. The handout hints in English and Spanish that workers should answer "no" to the question, "Do you see crowding at breaks, meals and shift changes?"

The handout goes on to say that workers are required to stand six feet apart, and if that doesn't happen, then employees should notify a manager.

More than 60 cases have been reported at that Pennsylvania facility, known as AVP1, located near Hazleton, workers say. It remains open.

Another worker at the facility, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation, shared with CQ Roll Call several voicemails from the company about new cases. The worker said she had received a notification every two to three days since about the second week of March.

"We want to let you know we have additional confirmed cases of COVID-19 at AVP1 as there continues to be an increase of confirmed cases in the Hazleton region," a message from an automated voice says. The employee received the latest message on April 25.

Employees at the facility do not know precisely how many of their co-workers have tested positive because of the alert's vague language. The employee estimated that there have been "more than 60" cases.

Back in mid-April, another employee of the AVP1 facility estimated that there were 60 positive cases, according to an email between two Amazon employees shared with CQ Roll Call.

Hazleton is Pennsylvania's hardest-hit ZIP code, with 911 positive COVID-19 cases as of Tuesday, according to a map developed by the state's Department of Public Health. That translates into a rate of one case for every 30 people in the area.

The state's second hardest-hit ZIP code, with 533 positive cases, is in Philadelphia. It has twice the population of Hazleton's, with a rate of one case per 128 people.

"I fear for my life," one woman said in a Facebook message shared with CQ Roll Call. Her Facebook profile identifies her as an Amazon employee who lives about 10 minutes from the facility, which is named after the airport code for Wilkes-Barre/Scranton International Airport.

The Amazon facility is located in Humboldt Industrial Park, where about 10,000 people work across several companies. A Cargill meat-packing plant in the same industrial park voluntarily shut down earlier this month after union officials reported 164 of its nearly 900 workers had tested positive for the coronavirus.

Rep. Matt Cartwright, D-Pa., who represents the area in Congress, acknowledged that Hazleton has been particularly hard hit because it is home to a number of industrial parks.

"It's a horrendous situation, and it's clear that's what led to the alarming, exponential increase of COVID-19 infections in Hazleton was the employment situation around there," he said.

Cartwright has called for an investigation by OSHA into the Amazon facility. OSHA has opened up inquiries into two claims. The congressman declined to say whether he thought it should be temporarily shuttered.

The Pennsylvania Department of Health confirmed it is not tracking occupational data or information about workplace-acquired infections.

"We are supporting the individuals who are recovering. We are following guidelines from health officials and medical experts, and are taking extreme measures to ensure the safety of employees at our site," said Carter, the Amazon spokesman.

©2020 CQ-Roll Call, Inc., All Rights Reserved  
Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Amazon workers tally virus cases, voice alarms about risks (2020, April 30) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://techxplore.com/news/2020-04-amazon-workers-tally-virus-cases.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.