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Why Contra Costa County's most Latino city has its highest rate of coronavirus cases

After casino reopening, San Pablo now has one of the highest COVID-19 rates in the Bay Area



RICHMOND, CA - SEPTEMBER 1: America Beauty Salon owner and hairstylist America Aquino prepares to color highlights on customer Susy Arellana's hair on the first day salons were permitted to reopen in Richmond, Calif., on Tuesday, Sept. 1, 2020. Aquino's 22-year-old daughter was in quarantine after she was infected by COVID-19 in May, she said. Aquino continued paying rent, despite the salon and several businesses were closed. "I had my savings but those are shrinking," Aquino said. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

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SAN PABLO — America Aquino was happy to be back behind her salon chair last week, highlighting a regular customer's hair. It had been a tough few months.

Her 23-year-old daughter contracted coronavirus in May while working at an Oakland grocery store cash register. And under county health orders Aquino's 23rd Street salon had been closed since March, reopening only last Tuesday. Her rent was due the same day, so that meant dipping into her savings again to pay the \$1,200.

"I have to keep paying the bills," she said.

But much of the 23rd Street corridor running from Richmond to San Pablo was still quiet.

At Portumex, a longtime 23rd Street eatery, manager Omar Gonzalez said that a handful of people come in each week, but often just to see if he's hiring. Even though he has a patio, business is down.

"People are still afraid to be dining with a lot of people," Gonzalez said.

Best known as the home of the San Pablo Lytton Casino, San Pablo now has one of the highest rates of coronavirus of any city in the Bay Area — and its economy has been ravaged as well as its health. The city of 30,000, which is 62% Latino and among the poorest in the area, accounts for 8% of the county's cases, despite making up about 4% of the population, with about 396.6 cases per 10,000 residents — more than three times Contra Costa's rate overall.

Even as California's July surge in coronavirus cases subsides in other parts of the Bay Area, the community remains disproportionately vulnerable as the virus continues to spread among a younger population of essential workers, unable to distance themselves at work or isolate once home in crowded homes with older relatives.

Meanwhile, the casino — the city's largest employer — reopened in June, and now operates 24 hours a day. The city is heavily dependent on the casino: about 60% of general fund revenue used to keep the city running comes from the casino, the state's largest urban gambling hall, which opened about 20 years ago and has since expanded.

San Pablo city officials pushed for the reopening, publicly questioning county and state health orders aimed at slowing the spread of the coronavirus.

Addressing County Supervisor John Gioia at a May 18 city council meeting, San Pablo Councilman Rich Kinney suggested that the restrictions were causing more harm than good. At the time, San Pablo had 74 cases. It now has 1,256.

"I'm grateful that you get to enjoy the fact that you may have led the county to be the first one in the state to shelter in place, that's noble. It's too bad we can't be the first county to open up all of our businesses so that we can begin to get our revenues going," Kinney said. "I really would like to see some work on your part to help our casino to get open."

Though other card rooms and casinos are still closed under health orders, county officials were ultimately powerless to stop the reopening; San Pablo Lytton is a tribal casino, which means county and state regulations don't apply.

“They basically said to us we are opening June 15, that’s how they approached it,” Gioia told this news organization. “It’s frustrating that we can’t exercise control over an unhealthy and risky operation. Being inside a casino is a high-risk activity and leads to transmission that’s a threat to the community. Unfortunately we didn’t have the authority to stop them.”

A spokesman for the San Pablo Lytton Casino said they are following safety protocols and had sent a reopening plan to county health for review. Guests are required to wear masks and have their temperatures taken before entry, the spokesperson said. Capacity is also limited to 1,100 people at a time, with the same number of gambling machines operating and partitions set up between them.

But after an employee tested positive for coronavirus in June, the casino shut down food operations. Though the tribe is also not required to report cases to the county, a spokesperson for the casino confirmed that seven employees have tested positive for the virus.

Since then, a second wave of coronavirus infections spread within families and crowded households in the city, and many other largely Latinx communities in the state. Across California, deaths among working-age Latinos increased five-fold between May 11 and August 11, according to a study released last month by UCLA Health’s Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture.

“It’s not a surprise the case rate is high because our Latinx community has been the hardest hit by far,” Gioia told this news organization. “I’ve had long discussions with our health folks about this, their conclusion always to me is the household size is significant and your employment is significant. Clearly, the Latinx community residents are front line workers who have more exposure and risk and live in larger households where it’s harder to self isolate.”

Among those infected were the family members of Councilman Abel Pineda. Everyone in his three-bedroom San Pablo house — his mother, his father and older sister — contracted coronavirus but somehow he did not. Another sister who lives across the street also tested positive for COVID-19.

The 28-year-old has spent the past week caring for his family, while trying to keep himself healthy, wearing masks and gloves and keeping his distance as much as he can. His mother moved into the living room. His sister and father isolate in separate bedrooms. Pineda takes their temperatures and monitors their oxygen levels daily. The virus has attacked each family member in different ways.

“It’s an emotional rollercoaster,” he said. “At times they are doing very well and then in a moment’s notice it deteriorates,” Pineda said. “That’s the most difficult thing to experience over and over and over again. It takes an emotional toll. It’s hard to see the ones you love going through this. You want to be there for them but there’s only so much you can do.”

At San Pablo’s Lifelong Brookside Health Center, Dr. Desmond Carson begins each day expecting to send at least one patient to get tested for coronavirus — and one out of every 15 people he sees is testing positive.

Like many San Pablo residents, the people who come in work in construction, landscaping, food service and grocery stores — essential jobs that tend to take them outside of the city limits and back to crowded family homes. About 23% of San Pablo’s Latinx households are overcrowded; countywide, just 6% of households have more than one occupant per room.

“The reason rates are spreading is because people are living on top of each other,” Carson said. “One lady was telling me two families lived in one room.”

On Tuesday, Carson sent a San Pablo man who was commuting to South Lake Tahoe for a construction job to the testing site, based on his symptoms. “I think he’s going to be positive,” Carson said.

Most of people contracting the virus are young adults with mild or no symptoms, he said, who work in close quarters within fast food restaurants or grocery stores, or commute with others to labor jobs.

“The carriers are young people. We are starting to recognize that younger people are not only at risk for being positive for COVID, but some of them are now more in need of hospitalization,” Carson said inside the Vale Road clinic.

Deaths are also skewing younger — countywide, two people in their 30s have died, five people in their 40s and 15 others between ages 50 and 60 have perished.

“I just really want the public to heed this warning: the coronavirus is real, we have to understand just how dangerous it is,” Pineda said. “This is really hurting our families, our community, our households and we have to do everything we can to stop this and we have to do it together.”

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