

The Spread



I think most of you already know that we live in Chattanooga, TN. We moved here from Chicago a year ago.

Recently the NY Times announced that Chattanooga was #2 in hot spot cities ready to explode with COVID-19. I could not believe it. I'm sort of a data driven person. I looked around my environment and could not relate to that prediction.

We live in a fairly small city. It's peaceful here. There didn't seem to be any pressure on the hospital capacity. For a long time, we couldn't even get testing. Thankfully, it's here now but no alarms have been sounding. The whole mask wearing thing has been very political here. Until two weeks ago, when they mandated masks, about 50% of people didn't bother wearing one. Mask wearing has improved some. Our restaurants are open – even for indoor dining. Most events are canceled but our life as it is now has not been interrupted that much. The state is open. Most folks are still working from home, but some do go to the offices downtown. Construction never stopped and the buses are running with passengers.

So what's the deal?

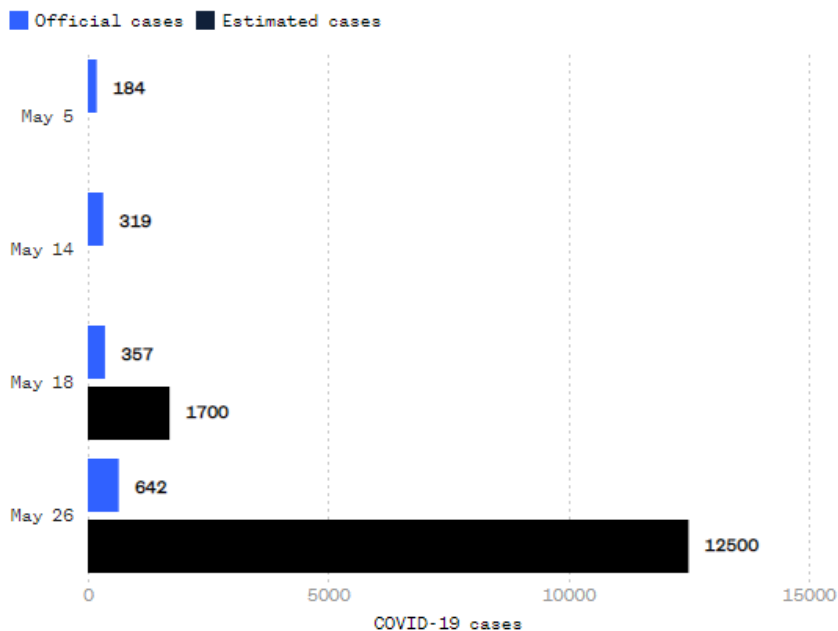
I went to the internet for information and the data I was

seeking was right there, but I have never seen it featured on our local news. I hadn't seen it on the national news either until yesterday, which prompted me to sit down and write this column. What I found locally is this. (Put on your seat belts and hold your nose). They have a way of detecting the spread of coronavirus that has not been widely discussed.

It's all about the water. The Tennessee River runs through Chattanooga. The Tennessee Valley Authority is headquartered here. Water is widely studied here. The secret (Well, it's not really a secret. It's just not polite conversation for most folks.) is that they are testing the wastewater for coronavirus and they can readily detect the amount of danger any city is in for cases ramping up and getting out of control. They are testing what we flush down the toilet folks. Ew. Gross. I know. But look at this chart I found.

Below the surface

Sewage tests indicate that COVID-19 is spreading far faster in Hamilton County than recorded cases show.



Source: Biobot Analytics

Graphic: Nigel Chiwaya / NBC News

Starting in May in Chattanooga they were already looking for COVID-19 in wastewater. They didn't find much of anything. By May 26, the official number of cases in Hamilton County (where Chattanooga is located) was 642. But the estimated number of cases based on wastewater detection was 12,500. No wonder the NY Times put Chattanooga on the "danger list".

It's now mid-July and as of today, the cases are up to 3939. Deaths are 39 and starting to rise. Because the hospitals are not screaming it looks to me like there are a whole lot of people walking around with COVID-19 that are asymptomatic. But alarmingly, the largest group testing positive now are in the age bracket of 21 – 30. There are 862 of them so far. So much for opening the bars and restaurants.

Yesterday I got more news. I was watching a news report on a big cable network and sure enough they featured this same story. They were talking about cities all over Europe who are studying wastewater to predict the spread of COVID-19. And they profess that this type of work has been going on for decades (regarding other viruses) and that it is accurate.

All during the lockdown we were not really in danger here. Now it appears we are, or at least, we could be. As a result, we are being extra careful. We wear our masks. We socially distance. We eat at home. We do everything at home. Check into the wastewater data in your neck of the country. What does it say?

A handwritten signature in red ink, appearing to read "Zola", with a stylized flourish at the end.

P.S

If you're looking for more concrete data, check THIS out.