



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on September 17, 2020

## Nashville Officials Hid Data Showing Few COVID-19 Cases Tied to Bars and Restaurants

While Nashville's tourism industry reels from shutdowns imposed by Mayor John Cooper (D) and the city health department, new evidence has emerged that officials concealed evidence that bars and restaurants were not major sources of COVID-19 transmission.

Emails obtained by Nashville Fox affiliate [WZTV](#) show that the mayor's office and the health department deliberately sought to keep the seemingly good news under wraps, in part by giving misleading answers to reporters' questions.



According to WZTV, "On June 30th, contact tracing was given a small view of coronavirus clusters. Construction and nursing homes were found to be causing problems with more than a thousand cases traced to each category, but bars and restaurants reported just 22 cases."

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In an email responding to this information, health department official Leslie Waller inquired, "This isn't going to be publicly released, right? Just info for Mayor's Office?"

Benjamin Eagles, Cooper's senior advisor, replied, "Correct, not for public consumption."

Still, word got out that COVID-19 was not being traced to bars and restaurants. A month later, the rumor was that only 80 cases had been connected to such establishments.

At that time, *Tennessee Lookout* reporter Nate Rau asked health department official Brian Todd about the rumor. Todd told him there had been "more than 80 cases ... traced back to clusters at bars."

Rau followed up: "The figure you gave of 'more than 80' does lead to a natural question: If there have been over 20,000 positive cases of COVID-19 in Davidson [County] and only 80 or so are traced to restaurants and bars, doesn't that mean restaurants and bars aren't a very big problem?"

Todd forwarded Rau's question to five other health department officials, asking for their advice on how to respond to it.

One official replied: "My two cents. We have certainly refused to give counts per bar because those numbers are low per site. We could still release the total though, and then a response to the over 80 could be because that number is increasing all the time and we don't want to say a specific number."

All this occurred against the backdrop of plummeting revenues and significant tax increases.

"Last month," wrote [Newsweek](#), "the Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp. estimated that the city's businesses have lost \$2.4 billion so far in visitor spending during the coronavirus pandemic and are reportedly losing \$100 million every week, according to the *Tennessean*. Cooper sent a letter last week to Tennessee Governor Bill Lee to request an additional \$82.6 million in COVID-19 relief to assist



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Nashville's tourism industry, music venue[s], small businesses and expand social resources."

Thus far, at least 24 Nashville restaurants and bars have been forced to close as a result of lockdown orders, according to a running list compiled by the website [Eater Nashville](#).

Meanwhile, the city council, with Cooper's blessing, passed a record [34-percent property-tax hike](#).

The mayor's office and health department aren't commenting publicly on the emails. However, a city staff attorney, at the request of city councilman Steve Glover (R), was able to obtain confirmation from both that the emails are genuine.

Glover accused Cooper and health officials of a cover-up.

"They are fabricating information," Glover told WZTV. "They've blown their entire credibility.... It's gone. I don't trust a thing they say going forward — nothing."

Glover told the station "he has been contacted by an endless stream of downtown bartenders, waitresses and restaurant owners asking, 'Why would officials not release these numbers?'"

"We raised taxes 34 percent and put literally hundreds and thousands of people out of work that are now worried about losing their homes, their apartments, et cetera, and we did it off of false information and bogus data," said Glover. "That should be illegal."

The mayor's office hasn't denied Glover's charges. It merely told WZTV to file a Freedom of Information Act request for the data it seeks, leading the station to ask, "Why are you keeping this from us?... What could possibly be an honorable motive?"

To ask those questions is to answer them. And in an era in which information about a virus is routinely manipulated or ignored in an effort to prop up unscientific, tyrannical policies, the obvious answers are all too believable.

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