

2020-10-07 Public health seeks to curb COVID-19 spike in Outremont's Hasidic community

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[Aaron Derfel](#) • Montreal Gazette

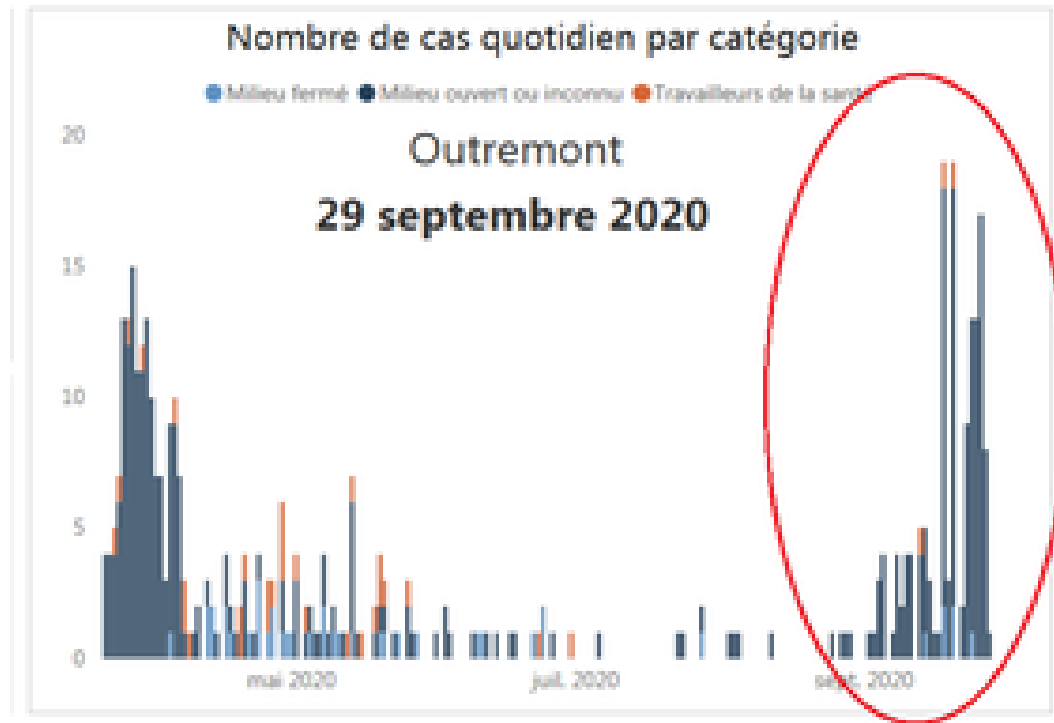


A Hasidic Jewish man leaves a grocery store on Bernard Ave. in the Outremont borough of Montreal Wednesday October 7, 2020. PHOTO BY JOHN MAHONEY /Montreal Gazette

Public health authorities have dispatched a so-called SWAT team into Outremont to curb spiking transmission of the coronavirus in the Hasidic community after its council produced a letter asserting it reached an agreement with Quebec exempting its synagogues from the 25-person restriction on public gatherings, the Montreal Gazette has learned.

For the past three weeks, Outremont has posted far more COVID-19 cases than during the first wave — a resurgence being blamed mostly on heightened transmission within the close-knit Hasidic community. Authorities have been

reluctant to make their intervention public for fear of playing into anti-Semitic stereotypes against Hasidim and the Jewish community in general.



The intervention is similar to ones in Montreal's Haitian and Latinx communities over the summer, but has been complicated by the Sept. 24 letter by the Jewish Hasidic Council of Quebec. That letter states "our meeting with the government (has) yielded favourable results," adding synagogues would be "permitted to have up to 250 people," which is an increase from the previous limit of 25 that was announced on Sunday (Sept. 20)."

The unsigned letter reminds Hasidic members to maintain social distancing, wear masks indoors and practise proper hand hygiene. Meanwhile, the premier's office has denied it concluded an agreement exempting synagogues from the 25-person limit.

"Neither the premier's office nor the government has allowed the Hasidic community to accommodate up to 250 people, on the contrary," Ewan Sauves, Premier François Legault's press attaché, said in an email Monday.

"When the letter to which you are referring started to circulate, the premier's office reiterated to various religious leaders that this was false information, and that the limit was being maintained at 25 people."

Article content

But Max Leiberman, a member of the Hasidic council, said his community had been informed unofficially on the evening of Sept. 23 that the government was going to restore the 250-person limit to all houses of worship.

Rabbi Reuben Poupko, co-chair of the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs-Quebec (CIJA), suggested the Hasidic council's letter was based on a misunderstanding of Quebec's evolving position on gatherings.

"That was a fiasco," Poupko said of the letter, adding he has "intimate" knowledge of what transpired between the council and the government.

Poupko explained the misunderstanding arose shortly after Health Minister Christian Dubé's Sept. 20 announcement of new restrictions for orange zones, including reducing the size of gatherings in churches, mosques and synagogues from 250 to 25. At the same time, the 250-limit for cinemas was maintained.

In the days following that announcement, a representative of Outremont's Hasidic community pointed out to the government the discrepancy in the permitted size of gatherings between cinemas and houses of worship, noting that the Jewish High Holidays had already begun.

"What happened was the day before (on Sept. 23), the government quietly informed the community that the number would go (back) up to 250," Poupko recalled.

On the morning of Sept. 24 in the National Assembly, Robert-Baldwin MNA Carlos Leitão asked Dubé "why public health is treating our places of worship in our towns and villages the same way we treat bars."

Dubé replied to Leitão: "I think we will be able to make important announcements where we would adjust, over the next few hours, elements to ensure that in certain religious gatherings other arrangements could be made as long as the protection rules are followed."

Following Dubé's remarks, the Hasidic council drafted the letter stating "later today the government will announce that Shuls (places of worship) will be permitted to have up to 250 people."

"No one wants to get entangled in intra-Hasidic politics, but one group of Hasidim jumped the gun and issued that statement, and then that was the day that the numbers spiked and the idea of raising (public gathering) numbers anywhere began to look very absurd," Poupko said.

Article content

On the afternoon of Sept. 24, Dubé declared at a news conference 582 more infections and a net increase of six hospitalizations. Dubé urged Quebecers to limit their social contacts and to cancel Thanksgiving gatherings.

Another prominent Jewish leader corroborated Poupko's version of events.

"Before Yom Kippur (the most solemn Jewish holiday), they (the Hasidic council) thought they had an agreement with somebody in Legault's office to exempt synagogues from the reduction from 250 to 25," said the source, who agreed to be interviewed on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

"Public health was against what Legault's office was going to recommend. (The Hasidic council) put out that letter and then the government never followed through."

Poupko acknowledged there are "risk factors for outbreaks that are certainly present in the Hasidic community" such as "multi-generational families and population density."

"With an uptick in numbers generally, those communities tend to suffer in a more profound way," Poupko said. "There's no question that whether it's in Brooklyn, Israel or Montreal, ultraorthodox communities seem to be particularly affected."

Article content

Poupko conceded although "compliance could be better in some communities," Jewish leaders have acted responsibly in conveying the importance of stringent public health measures. He noted that "mask-wearing in Canada started here in Côte-St-Luc," home to a significant Jewish population.

"Jewish culture and Jewish ethical teaching has always prized human life, above all," he added.

Poupko praised the government for not stoking anti-Semitic prejudices during the pandemic. "The government has been fastidiously careful about avoiding any of that, even when prodded by some journalists about Outremont. They have never, ever said a word which would stigmatize the Hasidic community."

Dr. David Kaiser, of the Montreal public health department, said Tuesday that when "we're looking at (COVID-19) rates, Outremont absolutely has the highest rates in terms of boroughs over the last couple of weeks."

"Yes, there is absolutely increased transmission in some of the communities in Outremont, the Hasidic and orthodox communities."

As a result, an eight-member “SWAT team” of doctors, nurses and epidemiologists has met with members of the Hasidic community to highlight public health measures. In situations where viral transmission has taken place in a large intergenerational family, the team has recommended that older members be isolated.

Article content

“From the public health perspective, the idea is not to target one group or to stigmatize one group,” Kaiser added. “If we want to work well together, we have to do that with respect.”

Kaiser noted health authorities responded quickly to the Hasidic council’s letter.

“(The letter) came from rumours that were going around that the government was going to change their position, and that didn’t end up happening,” he recounted. “This happened during the time we were having very regular meetings with members of the Jewish community, including members of the Conseil des Juifs Hassidiques du Québec, and so we made sure to clarify that with the leadership, and with the SPVM (Montreal police) — to make sure everybody is on the same page.”

Leiberman disagreed COVID-19 is spiking in his community. Rather, he said, it’s a “slight uptick” that’s almost over.

“We did not observe a community-wide outbreak or cluster,” Leiberman said. “We worked very closely with public health. They also didn’t see that. But we knew of cases and we went to work. Anecdotally, just from knowing from within, I think we are on the other side of it.”

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