

# French state covered up mass COVID-19 deaths in retirement homes

Jacques Valentin  
6 April 2020

Over the weekend, the reported number of daily COVID-19 deaths in France nearly tripled from the levels earlier in the week. According to initial data, it appears this increase was almost entirely due to the French government's decision to acknowledge that COVID-19 has run rampant across the country's retirement homes—leading to thousands of deaths that the government had not even bothered to acknowledge.

After a record high of 509 COVID-19 deaths announced on April 1, April 2 saw 1,355 deaths, followed by 1,120 on April 3 and 1,053 on April 4. These three days by themselves roughly doubled the overall death toll in France in the epidemic. With Sunday's figures of 2,886 new cases and 518 new deaths from COVID-19, this brought the official national totals to 93,780 cases and 8,093 deaths so far.

Though the pandemic is the most serious global health crisis in a century, official data published by the French state is a farce. Only cases confirmed in hospitals are counted, while at the same time state policy is to demand that anyone suffering from COVID-19 monitor themselves and not come to hospital. As such, most COVID-19 patients in France who are resting or dying untreated in their own homes or in rest homes are not included in the official toll.

The state has acknowledged that its figures are wild underestimates. When the official toll in France was 16,018, Health Minister Olivier Véran said he believed the true total was 30,000 to 90,000. The lack of accurate information, while it serves to mask the depth of the crisis from working people, hampers scientific analysis of the epidemic and the implementation of necessary protective measures.

It is now emerging that President Emmanuel Macron's government oversaw decisions that would block reporting of the disaster unfolding in the

retirement homes, acting with barely disguised contempt for the homes' roughly 700,000 elderly pensioners and their families. The government has made slashing social spending, including healthcare spending, a centerpiece of its plan to shovel hundreds of billions of euros into the pockets of the superrich and the army.

On April 2, after news of COVID-19 outbreaks in a few retirement homes made national news, Professor Jérôme Salomon, France's chief medical officer, announced that at least 884 elderly people living in retirement homes had died in the country since the beginning of the pandemic. He added that 14,638 "confirmed or possible" cases had been noted in these homes. Salomon said that this data was incomplete, stating, "This is an initial partial estimate due to the great unevenness in reporting between regions, and critical work is being done to bring together all of the data."

Salomon gave no estimated data for other social institutions for the elderly or for deaths of working age people in their homes.

The Macron government has claimed that it is desperately trying to set up an agency that would gather and analyze COVID-19 pandemic data. On March 25 LCI reported, "The General Health Directorate (DGS) informed us that an app allowing for daily reporting of the number of deaths that have occurred in medical-social establishments will be operational in the coming days."

This is an attempt to mislead the public. In fact, the DGS and the Health Ministry can already rely on the existing data collection program of the "Weekly Flu Bulletin" assembled to monitor and provide real-time data on the spread of acute respiratory infections and deaths, including among the elderly. It compiles data

from the general population, hospitals and rest homes.

There is no benign explanation for the Macron government's decision to ignore this existing agency, whose own rules specify that it should be compiling data on COVID-19.

In 2012, the High Council on Public Health laid out a "Code of Conduct for acute respiratory infections (IRA) in collectivities of elderly residents." It specified that data collection should be launched and a national report sent if interhuman spread of an IRA led to a situation in which at least five IRA cases emerge among residents in a four-day time period, not including institutional staff. COVID-19, like the flu, is an acute respiratory infection that meets the criteria for reporting.

Indeed, the 11th "Weekly Flu Bulletin" posted on March 18, the last one available online, proposed creating a weekly report on the situation in elderly care institutions, noting that "655 episodes of grouped IRAs have been reported," and that at least three of these were confirmed COVID-19 IRA outbreaks.

The bulletin added that given the relatively mild nature of the regular flu season this year, the new outbreak was "likely linked to the COVID-19 epidemic in France." It also noted, however, that "it is difficult to know to what extent these are individuals with flu symptoms who more frequently resort to care, fearing a COVID-19 infection, and to what extent they are genuine COVID-19 patients." This uncertainty stems from the fact that the state did not place COVID-19 test kits at the disposal of retirement homes.

Thus, contrary to the claims of the Health Ministry, the state administration not only had an established mechanism to monitor the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, but this mechanism was in fact producing statistics on the spread of the disease. However, a decision was taken at top levels of the state to ignore and hush up these reports.

As a result, thousands of people have been dying for weeks in retirement homes with virtually no public discussion and often with minimal response from authorities.

In one instance, at the Thise retirement home near Besançon, 10 residents were infected with COVID-19 by a nurse's aide returning from Mulhouse, a center of the epidemic in France. On March 7, a local newspaper *Ma Commune* reported the outbreak and added: "Asked

to comment, the Regional Health Authority (ARS) indicated that their situation was not cause for concern and that they would have been hospitalized if it had been such. Residents who have the virus are confined to their rooms to avoid infecting others in the retirement home."

A month later, France3 television news reported on the now catastrophic situation at Thise: "Since the detection of the first COVID-19 cases at the home on March 5, 25 people have died, that is, more than a quarter of the 80 residents of the home, whose average age was 88."

At the time of the initial infections, Macron and the government were repeating that the epidemic would be uncontrollable and that measures to block the spread of the disease could not be allowed to harm the economy. Some, echoing British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, made the fascistic argument that the population should be forced to acquire immunity by allowing the disease to spread—contained only by limited mitigation measures.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**