

UK: Official figures inflate COVID-19 testing rate by more than a million

Alice Summers
30 May 2020

The Johnson Conservative government is engaged in a massive campaign of public deception, making cynical claims and pledges about the number of COVID-19 tests being carried out.

Its aim is to cover up the impact of its “herd immunity” policy, which has led to tens of thousands of coronavirus deaths.

Over 1 million more tests have been reported by the government than the numbers genuinely tested, according to Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) figures. This is largely due to a practice of duplicating tests involving two samples from one individual in the official figures. According to Public Health England (PHE), other factors contributing to this discrepancy are tests being repeated due to an inconclusive outcome or being double-checked after a negative result.

Tests that involve taking both nasal and saliva samples from the same person have been counted as two separate tests, the DHSC and PHE have admitted. This double-counting means that daily COVID-19 screening figures reported by the government have been exaggerated by as much as 20 percent, according to the *Daily Telegraph*. On May 21, the newspaper reported, “Almost 350,000 more tests have been reported in Government data than people tested since the start of the pandemic.”

The last day the DHSC published figures on the number of people tested was May 21. From May 22 to May 29, the DHSC have not published any figures on the total number of people tested but have continued to publish the number of cumulative tests. A post on the department’s Twitter page stated that publication has been “temporarily paused to ensure consistent reporting across all pillars [types of testing]. This is due to a small percentage of cases where the same person would have more than one test.”

An analysis of the figures shows that the discrepancy between the number of cumulative tests and the number of people tested is far higher than estimated by the *Telegraph*. The cumulative number of tests as of May 21 was 3,231,921. The number of people tested was 2,144,626. This is a ratio

equivalent to approximately 66 percent. As of May 27, the government claims a total of 3,918,079 cumulative tests, which based on the 66 percent calculation means that around 2.6 million people have been tested. This is approximately 1.3 million fewer than the number of tests the government reported.

The testing debacle confirms that not a word that comes out the mouths of Johnson or his ministers at their daily press briefings can be believed. On Thursday, Professor John Ashton, a former regional director of public health said, “It’s very difficult, even for someone like me whose living has centred on numbers, to know exactly what is going on. We don’t know how many people have been tested. We don’t know how many tests have been satisfactory. There’s a real problem of transparency and trust.”

On April 2, the government announced that it planned to conduct 100,000 tests a day by the end of that month, with a Twitter post on the prime minister’s official account stating that this meant “100,000 people per day.” When this plan was announced, only around 10,000 daily tests were being conducted.

After weeks of the government falling far short of this target, it was only finally “met” on April 30 because official figures included thousands of swab kits bulk posted to UK homes and to satellite testing sites like care homes, which had not yet been used or sent to laboratories for results.

Over 40,000 of the 122,347 COVID-19 tests announced by the government on the last day of April were made up of kits that had been sent out but not yet been processed; 27,497 of these were test kits sent out to private homes and 12,872 were posted to satellite testing sites. Moreover, despite claiming to have exceeded its target DHSC figures show that only 73,191 individual people were screened for the virus on that day.

Many home testing kits like these have still not been analysed, with thousands yet to be returned to laboratories according to Professor John Newton, director of health improvement at PHE and the government’s COVID-19 testing coordinator.

Professor Newton told the parliamentary Science and Technology Select Committee on May 22 that while 762,252 coronavirus tests have been posted to people's homes, around half have not been returned for analysis. Admitting that he did not have an up-to-date figure for the numbers processed, Newton stated, "I think certainly more than half [of tests have been returned], and we would like to get that amount up."

Newton confirmed that tests are counted at the point they are sent out to people or satellite centres, not at the point of being analysed at laboratories and results established.

Taking account of the discrepancy between the number of tests provided and the number of individuals tested, the government has not once succeeded in testing 100,000 people in one day (as of May 26). The number of individuals receiving a test averages around 67,000 a day since the government's target was supposedly met on April 30.

The number of individuals tested in a single day reached 80,297 on May 21—the highest figure yet—still far short of the government's 100,000 a day target. On May 2, the lowest day between April 30 and May 26, a mere 56,397 individuals were tested. Given that these figures are compiled at the point of test delivery, not completion, far fewer tests will have been sent to laboratories.

On May 6, Johnson announced yet another arbitrary testing target, pledging to reach 200,000 tests a day by the end of May. On May 27, Health Minister Matt Hancock stated that this target was in fact based on the UK's "capacity to perform 200,000 tests a day," and will be measured by "asking laboratories each day to set out how many tests they can provide" rather than counting how many tests are conducted.

Even those tests submitted to laboratories for analysis have been found to be unreliable, with many returning false negative results. According to the Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association (HCSA), three in 10 National Health Service staff taking swab tests could be receiving a false negative result.

Many health workers who may have been coronavirus positive were pushed back to work, potentially infecting patients and other staff members and contributing to the rapid spread of the virus in hospitals. PHE research published mid-May indicated that as many as 20 percent of inpatients and 90 percent of medical workers contracted the virus while in hospital.

A study in the *British Medical Journal* found that between 2 and 29 percent of COVID-19 tests wrongly came back as negative. The number of "true positive" results from nasal swabs was as little as 63 percent and just 32 percent from throat swabs, according to the lead author, Dr. Jessica Watson.

In a letter to PHE Chief Executive Duncan Selbie, Dr. Paul Donaldson, the general secretary of the HCSA, wrote of his "deep concern and frustration" at the body's "systematic lack of information" over the reliability of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests for coronavirus. Dr. Donaldson said, "A wall of silence seems to have been erected around the issue, with only the occasional claim or hint emerging regarding the current testing regime."

"Separately, statements by PHE officials and others place the incidence of false negatives somewhere between 20 and 30 percent," he continued. "If confirmed, this is a worryingly high rate which raises the prospect of many infected individuals, possibly without symptoms, being passed fit to return to health care settings where they will transmit SARS-CoV-2 [COVID-19] to colleagues and patients."

Responsibility for the sustained and uncontrolled spread of COVID-19 in hospitals and throughout the population lies with the Johnson government. Determined to impose its criminal herd immunity policy, it refused for weeks to implement a systematic testing programme, on the basis that there was already widespread community transmission and therefore testing was not useful.

On March 12, the day that the government announced its herd immunity policy, Johnson declared that health staff would no longer test people at home—with testing only to be conducted on those already in hospital. Most people were refused tests and simply told to self-isolate at home if they had symptoms. At that point just 10 people had died of COVID-19.

Only when the death toll reached hundreds of people a day did the government announce its 100,000 tests a day plan, limited to only a select group of key workers until mid-May.

The UK ranks at number 20 out of the 31 European countries with available data for coronavirus testing per capita, screening only 31.59 people for every thousand of the population. Impoverished Eastern European countries such as Lithuania (99.14 per thousand), Estonia (57.74), Latvia (52.9) and Belarus (49) have tested far more people relative to their population sizes. Russia, which has more than twice the population of the UK, has tested 61.3 people per thousand.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact