

Tens of thousands of UK COVID-19 cases and contacts went unreported

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The UK recorded 12,872 new coronavirus cases on Saturday and 22,961 new cases Sunday. These figures included 15,841 cases registered between September 25 and October 2 which were not previously reported because an Excel spreadsheet containing the data became too large and failed to update.

There are two clear conclusions which flow from this fiasco: the pandemic is continuing to accelerate rapidly across the UK, and the government's test and trace system, six months into operation, is completely dysfunctional.

In the last week, the media was filled with reports that the increase in COVID-19 infections in the UK had "levelled off" or was "slowing". Not one organisation sought to investigate how this seeming miracle had occurred. It was left to the government to admit that the figures used to support these claims were wildly inaccurate—out by some 4,000 a day.

The truth is that the seven-day rolling average for daily new cases has increased from 4,964 on September 25 (when cases began to go unreported) to around 9,500 as of Monday morning—rapidly approaching the peak averages of 11,000 and 12,000 recently recorded by Spain and France. Another 12,594 cases were reported in the UK on Monday evening.

According to the COVID-19 Symptom Study app, whose data is increasing being relied upon by the government as more accurate than its own, there are in reality more than 20,000 new cases in the UK each day. The reproduction rate (R number) of the virus nationally has increased for the fourth consecutive week, up to between 1.3 and 1.6, but these figures are trailing by two to three weeks current infection rates. The 7-day average for COVID-19 patients admitted to UK hospitals has increased from a low of less than 100 a day at the end of August to 380 as of September 26.

The north of England is suffering significantly worse rates of infection than the national average. Manchester's infections increased to 495.6 cases per 100,000 in the week to October 1, from 223.2 the week before, according to official figures. Liverpool climbed from 287.1 to 456.4, Knowsley from 300.3 to 452.1, Newcastle from 256.6 to 399.6, Nottingham from 52 to 283.9, Leeds from 138.8 to 274.5 and Sheffield from 91.8 to 233.

Spiralling case numbers in these towns and cities highlight the fact that so-called "local lockdowns"—comprising restrictions on household mixing and 10pm curfews for pubs and bars—are nothing of the kind. In the majority of cases there has been no public health benefit whatsoever to measures which leave schools, shops, workplaces, and public transport untouched and which leave people required to self-isolate in dire financial straits.

No data has been produced by the government to support its exclusive focus on household mixing and social contact. On the other hand, there is ample evidence of mass outbreaks linked to pubs, workplaces, and universities, and of rising numbers of infections in schools.

The *Guardian* reported last Thursday that 11 out of 16 towns and cities placed under long-term restrictions nine weeks ago saw their infection rates at least double. Wigan, Bolton and Bury, placed under restrictions on July 31, have seen cases quadruple since.

The other geographic feature which unites areas seeing the largest rise in recent infections is the presence of large universities. Northumbria University in Newcastle currently has an outbreak of 770 cases, Manchester University over 380 and Sheffield University 474 students and five staff. In the south of the country, Exeter saw its number of virus cases triple

over the course of last week—taking its infection rate higher than the national average for the first time—following outbreaks at its local university.

Besides giving a completely false picture of the spread of the disease, the failure to report 15,841 cases has left tens of thousands of their potentially infected contacts untraced for up to a week. Their details were only passed on to contact tracers by 1 o'clock on Saturday morning. The likely number of close contacts missed is around 50,000. Even when cases are recorded, less than 40 percent of in-person tests are returned within 24 hours and 2.9 percent of home tests. Three in ten close contacts of infected people are never reached by tracers.

The universal response of the government and the corporate media to the announcement of this epidemiological explosion has been to minimise the threat to life, in line with the ruling class' homicidal policy of herd immunity. Reports in the press have largely written the event off as a “technical glitch” which sowed “confusion”—rather than confirmation of the catastrophic trajectory the UK is set on—and continue to focus on the “good news” that “the infection is still most prevalent in younger people,” in the words of ITV's Robert Peston.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the population to “live fearlessly but with common sense” and, in a revival of his summertime slogan, that he had “hope... things can be significantly different by Christmas.” He insisted that it was “right to reopen the economy.”

This policy, dictated by the profit concerns of big business and the banks, has set the limits to the government's fraudulent new “three-tier system” for coronavirus restrictions. The highest alert level will only be considered when the virus is already far out of control and stops well short of the national lockdown begun in March, leaving open schools, universities, and non-essential businesses outside of leisure and hospitality. This comes as a leaked Public Health England document seen by the *Observer* reveals that even the March-April lockdown left the virus “endemic” in deprived areas of Britain.

The feeble three-tier proposal is meeting the resistance of an increasingly vocal section of the Tory party, however, who want an immediate end to all restrictions on companies' ability to pursue profit at the

cost workers' lives and health. Backbenchers around Tory MP Sir Graham Brady are preparing to challenge the government over the introduction of any additional public health measures.

Chancellor Rishi Sunak is also being looked to as a counterweight to what these frothing right-wingers consider to be Johnson's abundance of caution. In a recent interview with the *Sun*, he repeatedly described the 10pm curfew on pubs and bars as “frustrating” and said he had “no regrets” about the Eat Out to Help Out scheme linked to rises in infections.

The Labour Party remains utterly beholden to these reactionary forces. Shadow Health Secretary Jonathan Ashworth described the weekend as “shambolic” before stumbling over his own party's record in an interview with BBC journalist Andrew Marr.

Marr asked, “[Labour leader] Keir Starmer said on Thursday, 'it was an inevitable risk that when we got our children back into school and our students back at university the infection rate might go up. That was a known risk.' So why, at the time, did he say, 'I expect them back in school, no ifs no buts, no equivocation?' You were trying to have your cake and eat it.”

Ashworth stammered a denial before saying “you've always got to manage different risk.”

In reality, the only “risk” the ruling class are concerned with is to their bottom lines. The bipartisan reopening of the economy, made possible by the return to school, is producing a devastating resurgence of the pandemic which will cost hundreds of lives a day even before the winter season sets in. Workers in all sectors must take their safety and that of their communities into their own hands through the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace and the preparation of a general strike against the Johnson government's deliberate endangerment of lives in the interests of the financial oligarchy.



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