

# Johnson government forced into new national lockdown, but schools, universities and factories must stay open

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On Saturday, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced a limited nationwide lockdown in England that will come into operation Thursday. It is planned to last less than a month, ending on December 2, but the government has already indicated it might be extended.

As Johnson addressed Saturday night's press conference, the number of cases passed 1 million in the UK. Another 326 deaths were announced bringing the total to 1,530 deaths in the week prior. The Office for National Statistics confirms at least 61,000 coronavirus related deaths across the UK, while other studies cite more than 65,000.

The lockdown was forced on Johnson because coronavirus has escalated out of control since the government reopened the economy from early May, threatening to swamp the National Health Service and result in deaths on a scale dwarfing the first phase of the pandemic. Even so, in announcing the new measures Johnson reassured the corporations, "We're not going back to the full-scale lockdown of March and April, the measures I've outlined are less restrictive."

Only non-essential shops will be required to shut, as will bars and restaurants, leisure centres, gyms, and sporting venues. Factories and construction sites are permitted to remain open, as are playgrounds, schools, nurseries, universities, courts, childcare providers, and other public services--meaning that millions of people will continue to contract and spread the deadly disease. Premier League football and other elite sport will continue behind closed doors.

Beyond December 2, the government intends to return to its current three-tier regional system of restrictions, pending a "review".

In May and June, the Johnson government flung open the economy allowing the virus to spread. These

measures, predicated on the homicidal policy of herd immunity, were fully backed by Labour and the trade unions, leading to a catastrophic rise in cases and deaths. This includes the "Eat Out to Help Out" scheme offering subsidised food and non-alcoholic drinks at restaurants and pubs throughout August. Research published by University of Warwick economist Thiemo Fetzer found this policy may have directly caused almost one fifth of new coronavirus case clusters over the summer. Reopening the travel and tourism industry was also a disaster, with the vast majority of new infections coming from a new virus strain originating in Spain.

Johnson's "rule of six" policy (introduced September 14) restricting gatherings of more than six people, and the localised three tier system (introduced October 12), did nothing to arrest the renewed spread of the virus created by the government's own profit-driven policies.

Finally, the spread of COVID-19 was massively accelerated by the government's reopening of schools, colleges, and universities from September.

For months, the government ignored every warning that a national lockdown was required including from its own Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), and dozens of epidemiologists, scientists, and public health experts, including those in the Independent SAGE group.

On September 21, SAGE called for an immediate two week national "circuit breaker" lockdown. No action was taken. In the weeks since, over 4,000 people have died, with at least 300,000 new cases of COVID-19.

On October 12, Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty stated that putting areas of the country under even the highest "Tier 3" level was not enough to stop the spread. On October 14, scientists warned that the crisis was exceeding even the predicted worst case scenario. SAGE had estimated, according to a leaked document made

public last August, that there would be 85,000 deaths from COVID-19 in a "reasonable worst case scenario" over winter. This equated to around 800 deaths a day.

In another SAGE document released Friday, but dated October 14, scientists estimated there were between 43,000 and 74,000 people being infected daily with coronavirus in England. The report warned, "This is significantly above the profile of the reasonable worst-case scenario, where the number of daily infections in England remained between 12,000-13,000 throughout October." But again, the government failed to act.

Prior to his announcement, Johnson was shown new projections, estimating up to 4,000 deaths a day during the winter if no action was taken.

SAGE's estimates were exceeded by research from Imperial College London's REACT-1 study. Released last week, the study, based on testing 85,000 people, showed an infection rate corresponding to 96,000 cases a day by October 25. It found that infections had increased across all age groups and areas of the country. The highest prevalence was among the 18-24 age group, with the steepest rise seen in adults aged 55-64.

An infection rate this high means that the UK already has infections almost at the level of the pandemic's height in spring. Almost 11,000 people are being treated for COVID-19 in hospitals nationwide, with nearly 1,000 people on ventilators. Nineteen NHS Trusts in England are treating more coronavirus patients than during the first wave.

At his Downing Street press conference, the horrific consequences of Johnson's herd immunity policy were illustrated in a series of graphs presented by Whitty and Chief Scientific Officer Sir Patrick Vallance. Describing one slide, Vallance said it showed that "50,000 plus was most likely the number" catching the virus each day "and perhaps half a million or more overall with the disease".

The devastating public health impact of prematurely reopening the economy, without any systematic mass test, track and trace operation in place, despite the government having months to organise this, was revealed in a slide showing an upwards surge in the  $R$  (Reproduction) rate of the virus. Vallance said, "The  $R$  was relatively flat and below 1... You can see from August onwards [the government reopened most of the economy by July 4] the  $R$  went above 1, the epidemic grew and continues to grow... it's still growing and that number from a high baseline gets very big quite quickly".

Another slide showed modelling compiled by academic groups—commissioned by SAGE—based on a continued

rise of  $R$  to 1.5 or above throughout winter. The groups came up with varying predictions of fatalities, explained Vallance, "but what is clear from all of them, in terms of deaths over the winter, there's the potential for this to be twice as bad, or more, compared to the first wave."

Since May, Johnson has repeatedly stated that the last thing he would consider was another national lockdown. Interviewed in the *Sunday Telegraph* in July, he described lockdown as equivalent to a "nuclear deterrent, I certainly don't want to use it." Johnson added, "And nor do I think we will be in that position again."

The government's refusal to close school and other education settings will lead to thousands more deaths. Around 9 million people (15 percent) of the UK population attend or work in schools. According to the Tory Fibs Twitter group, 8,000 schools have already had coronavirus infections, with schools accounting for 29 percent of COVID-19 clusters. Last week, more than 600,000 pupils were forced to self-isolate at home. The infection rate among those aged 11-16 has climbed 2,000 percent since September 1.

Johnson has the backing of the Labour Party opposition in this policy, with Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer saying on Sunday that schools "must stay open but we've got to manage the risk".

As part of the new nationwide lockdown, the government's jobs furlough scheme—due to expire on Saturday--will be continued for one month. But under the reinstated furlough scheme, the self-employed will receive just 40 percent of their previous earnings. Businesses closed due to the new measures will get grants of up to £3,000 per month.



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