

UK government pandemic policies lead to several suicides among students

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28 November 2020

Many young adults in the UK have been driven to breaking point during the surge in COVID-19 cases due to the murderous “herd immunity” policy pursued by Boris Johnson’s Conservative government. Millions of young people are suffering from acute stress, anxiety, and depression.

Medical experts predicted that social isolation and economic stress caused by the coronavirus pandemic would have a damaging impact on mental health. The *Lancet* medical journal noted that young people would likely suffer the most mental distress.

Stress levels among students intensified when it was announced in September that they were expected to return to campuses and would face fines if they did not. The *World Socialist Web Site* warned that forcing pupils and students back into schools and campuses would have devastating consequences.

Not only did the return to campuses lead to a quadrupling of coronavirus cases between September and October, but it also provoked a sharp deterioration in students’ mental health. In some cases the tragic result has been students taking their own lives.

A survey carried out by University College London, University of Sussex and Imperial College London found almost 10 percent of respondents reported suicidal ideation or thoughts of hurting themselves in some way.

Finn Kitson, aged 19, was found dead at the Fallowfield campus of the University of Manchester on October 8, following a surge of coronavirus cases at the university and throughout the city. Police said they were not treating the death as suspicious and the university maintained that it was not coronavirus related. Finn’s father, Michael Kitson, an academic, disputes this and highlighted the toll of being locked down on students’ mental health as a key factor in his son’s death. Michael said in response to a news article claiming Finn’s death was not COVID-19 related, “This is not true. If you lockdown young people

because of Covid-19 with little support, then you should expect that they suffer extreme anxiety.”

The Tab, a youth and student culture web site, reported October 28, “Eight university students have died since the beginning of term one, meaning that at least one student has died every single week for the past month.”

The pressure students are under can result in some falling prey to drug dealers. Several deaths of students this term are reportedly drugs related. The media reported two mothers having to return and identify the bodies of their 18-year-old daughters within hours of dropping them off at Newcastle University last month.

A National Union of Students (NUS) survey found that 42 percent of participants reported having contemplated self-harm and that 30 percent have self-harmed.

Suicide prevention charity PAPYRUS stated that student life under lockdown is threatening the fragile mental health of thousands of young people. Papyrus’s Ged Flynn, said, “Right now students who have never been to university, or have been away from university and gone back, are suddenly plunged into a new reality that very few of us have ever encountered... Some are frightened, away from home, trying to navigate new ways of learning and new relationships and that’s incredibly challenging for anyone.”

The NUS found that 53 percent of respondents reported increased levels of stress. Moderate to high symptoms of anxiety were reported in 69.6 percent of participants with previous mental health problems and in 45.7 percent of those without previous mental health problems. 55.3 percent reported overeating in response to their mood during lockdown. 54.9 percent reported eating less to control their weight and 64.2 percent reported weight concerns.

As if the stress and fear of living away from family and support networks, many for the first time in their lives, in the middle of a deadly pandemic was not bad enough,

students and young people have been targeted by the right-wing media and government as being one of the primary reasons for the spread of COVID-19.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock warned that young people ignoring social distancing rules risked triggering a second wave of the pandemic and urged them not to “kill their grandparents” by spreading the virus. Despite the lurid claims, it was the government that instructed over a million students to travel to campuses in universities nationwide and then provided neither support nor a test and trace network.

The additional strain on young people’s mental health has been sanctioned to keep afloat university institutions, which require students on campus paying extortionate tuition and accommodation fees.

Stigmatization has resulted in students being disproportionately targeted and effectively locked up on campuses. Students have reported difficulties in accessing food. In Oxford University, a student told the WSWS that while in isolation, due to a member of their household testing positive, they were provided with only one meal a day by the university. Friends and family were denied access to supply food. An email was then circulated falsely boasting of how the university had provided three meals a day to students.

Students have been obstructed by security and police surrounding accommodation buildings, denying entrance or exit, as was the case at the University of Manchester. There the authorities spent £11,000 in a security operation to surround Fallowfield Halls to stop students leaving after coronavirus cases were reported. Students broke down the fences in protest.

The NUS survey found that “80 percent of respondents reported being worried about how they would manage financially as a result of the pandemic.” This points to a major cause in the rise of anxiety and other mental health issues. As a result of economic uncertainty, the numbers enrolling for university have increased by 3.5 percent.

Students are still expected to pay the same inflated tuition fees of £9,250 for online learning and with limited access to resources available during in person learning. With 2.2 million people filling out jobless claims in the last month, young people are the hardest hit. As most work at events or in the service industry, young people have seen their employment opportunities vanish over the last six months.

Many students are struggling to support themselves, with one in five unable to pay their rent, and a further 72 percent worried about their ability to pay rent; having to

resort to selling their clothes and other possessions to make ends meet. Swansea University reported an average increase of 190 percent in applications for its hardship fund, while Cardiff Metropolitan University said it had seen a 125 percent increase.

Despite surges in COVID-19 cases, the government is again lifting national lockdown restrictions next week, in part using student and young peoples’ deteriorating mental health as a pretext. Another NUS survey discovered that “62 percent of respondents say that they are either somewhat or very scared about catching the coronavirus.”

Lifting lockdown restrictions without providing financial support will lead to students and youth being forced back to unsafe workplaces, with 62 percent having to work alongside study. This would lead to an enormous increase in students becoming infected and in turn infecting many others. This would render obsolete even the inadequate “bubble” and “household” system put in place at schools and universities to supposedly minimise contact.

The mental health crisis among young people and workers brought about by the malign neglect and homicidal policies of the Johnson government, and by ruling elites across the world, can only be confronted by the organization of the international working class and youth.

This struggle must be carried out independently of the National Union of Students, and education unions, who despite carrying out surveys and making occasional perfunctory denunciations of government policy, have made no attempt to mobilise the student body to protest the deplorable situation on campuses. On the contrary, the NUS defended sending students back to campuses.

Students and educators must form their own independent safety committees, not just to ensure safe working and studying conditions, but as a vital means to ensure the provision of the urgent and necessary resources and treatment to all those suffering under the prolonged strain of the pandemic.



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