UK: Pandemic death toll among care home residents soars past 50,000

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The prolonged and deadlier second wave of the pandemic has had a catastrophic impact on care homes, with the UK's overall death toll ballooning to almost 130,000 where COVID-19 is recorded on the death certificate. This is double the number of deaths in only three months since early November.

More than 20,000 care home residents, some of society's most vulnerable, elderly, disabled and chronically ill people, lost their lives directly to COVID-19 in the first wave last year, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). As of early February 2021, this figure had shot up to 42,000, including 37,895 deaths in England and Wales, 3,189 deaths in Scotland and more than 1,000 in Northern Ireland.

The true number deaths in care settings, however, is now well over 50,000. Researchers at the University of Manchester have found that COVID-19 deaths were "hugely underestimated" in the first wave, when 10,000 fatalities went unrecorded in England alone, due to the tardy introduction of mass testing.

The scale of death and suffering provides a grisly illustration of what the *British Medical Journal* (BMJ) has described as a policy of "social murder", in a recent editorial excoriating the "herd immunity" response to the pandemic pursued by governments internationally. Predicated on mass infection and the prioritisation of corporate profits over the lives and health of millions, this policy has been aggressively advocated by Boris Johnson's Conservative government and carried out with the full backing of the Labour Party opposition, the devolved Scottish National Party government, and the trade unions.

Notwithstanding the terrible earlier loss of life, care homes had largely recovered from the first wave by mid-September due to the UK's first national lockdown. Weekly deaths due to the virus had fallen to a few dozen from a peak of more than 4,000 per week at the end of April 2020. Then, beginning in September, schools were reopened at full capacity for an entire term so that parents could be forced back into unsafe and nonessential workplaces. From this point, weekly coronavirus-related deaths began to surge in care homes, from an average of 115 in October in England and Wales, to 471 in November and 770 in December.

Defying repeated scientific warnings of a far deadlier second wave, the Johnson government then ended the limited regional lockdown system introduced in November and recklessly flung open the economy in the lead up to Christmas. As a result, care homes were progressively overrun by high levels of community transmission and weekly deaths more than tripled by the end of January to 2,505. More than 10,000 care home residents died of COVID-19 in the first five weeks of 2021 in England and Wales.

The first weeks of the New Year saw horrific reports of some care homes losing a large proportion of residents to the virus, as several highly transmissible mutations were allowed to spread uncontrolled. Edendale Lodge in East Sussex lost half of its residents (13 deaths) in a widely reported outbreak over Christmas. In January, the Old Hall care home in Lincolnshire suffered 18 death, two thirds of its residents; Pemberley House Care Home in Basingstoke lost 22 residents; and Thorney Croft care home located in Stranraer, Scotland, reported 14 deaths in an outbreak infecting more than 90 residents and staff.

Similar devastation has been reported up and down the country. Norfolk county in eastern England was among the hardest hit by the second wave with 253 COVID-19 care home deaths in January—57 percent of

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all COVID-19 deaths in care homes since the beginning of the pandemic in the region. The Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole area on England's south coast saw a 21 percent surge of COVID-19 deaths in the last week of January and 55 percent (133 fatalities) over the course of the month.

The scrapping of lockdown restrictions in December was peddled by Conservative government Health Secretary Matt Hancock based on the lie that a "protective ring" had been erected around care homes and other vulnerable people. The truth was that reopening the economy went ahead despite the known inadequacies of the UK's dysfunctional test and trace system and ignored widespread concerns over the inappropriate standard and low-quality of personal protective equipment procured by government.

The criminality of the British ruling class is underscored by the fact that this all unfolded during the initial rollout of the highly effective Pfizer vaccine in care homes. The inoculation provides immunity after several weeks if correctly administered with a 21-day gap between two doses. Instead, Johnson's Tory government opened the economy even before the first dose had been administered and then instituted an improvised 12-week dosing gap against the manufacturer's guidelines.

Speaking to the *Financial Times*, Professor Martin Vernon, a consultant geriatrician in Greater Manchester, likened the delay in the vaccine to the deadly decision by the Tory government to discharge masses of people from hospitals into care homes without testing for the virus during the first wave. "We are knowingly being instructed to expose one of the most vulnerable groups a second time around to a level of risk that we cannot easily quantify but can anticipate to be higher than if we had followed the available scientific evidence," Vernon said.

The UK and devolved governments on Scotland and Wales are now in the process of ending the third national lockdown, introduced in late December, with thousands of COVID-19 deaths still reported each week and before most care home residents will have received the second dose of the vaccine. As many as 40 percent of the workforce at HC-One, the UK's largest private care home provider, have yet to be offered the first dose, according to the *Guardian*. Many vulnerable groups who live in the community, including the majority of disabled people, have not yet received the vaccine despite accounting for 60 percent of all COVID-19 deaths in England last year (ONS).

The impact of the pandemic in residential care provides a partial impression of the devastation wrought in the broader social care sector. There is no comprehensive data for the prevalence or deaths of coronavirus among the much larger number of individuals dependent on or provided with home care, most of which is unpaid and provided informally by family or friends. According to Carers UK, there are currently 13.6 million informal carers—20 percent of the UK population—including an increase of 4.5 million during the first wave of the pandemic.

Decades of privatisation have reduced residential care beds to 465,000—down 55,000 since the year 2000—and the formal social care workforce stands at just 1.6 million. Care has consistently been one of the deadliest of occupations, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), with COVID-19 accounting for 109.9 deaths per 100,000 males and 47.1 deaths per 100,000 females caused by COVID-19. Overall, more than 850 health and social care workers died of the disease in England and Wales last year.

If even a fraction of the death rate among patients and carers in the formal sector exists in the informal sector, it would mean that the overall death toll in social care is considerably larger.

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