

High COVID-19 infection rates in Barnsley: National disparity mirrors map of social inequality

Tony Robson
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Statistics have confirmed a major disparity between rates of transmission of COVID-19 across England that mirror rates of social inequality.

The current “Stage Two” of the reopening of the economy by Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government includes non-essential shops, hairdressers and nail bars, beer gardens and other areas of leisure and hospitality. It has been accompanied by a major propaganda exercise to claim that the worst of the pandemic is over, allowing a return to economic normality.

Johnson himself gave the lie to such claims when, just 24 hours after the launch of Stage Two, he admitted that the reduction in the numbers of infections, hospital admissions and deaths “has not been achieved by the vaccination programme” but was due to the now abandoned lockdown.

“Of course, the vaccination programme has helped, but the bulk of the work in reducing the disease has been done by the lockdown. So, as we unlock, the result will inevitably be that we will see more infection, sadly we will see more hospitalisation and deaths. People have just got to understand that.”

This impact will be felt nationally, but especially in pandemic hotspots where transmission rates remain high. These are all located in strongly working-class areas where social deprivation is highest.

According to data compiled up to April 3, based on tests in laboratories and in the wider community, of the 315 local areas in England, 30 (10 percent) have seen a rise in case rates. Mansfield in Nottinghamshire has the highest rate in England, followed by Corby in Northamptonshire, and then Barnsley in South Yorkshire.

Northern cities and towns in Yorkshire and Humberside account for six of the top 10 worst affected. They include Wakefield, Barnsley, Doncaster, Hull, Rotherham and Sheffield. This is a region blighted by the closures of heavy manufacturing in steel and mining, replaced by low-paid and casualised work in warehouses, distribution centres, and

food processing plants that have become breeding grounds for the virus.

There is a Tale of Two Pandemics, with the lives of the working class disproportionately sacrificed and their communities bearing the brunt of economic and social hardship, while the super-rich have emerged wealthier thanks to government bailouts and a guaranteed supply of labour to the workplace, regardless of the human cost.

The former mining town of Barnsley in South Yorkshire provides a microcosm of this process, with a seven-day rolling average of 100.9 cases per 100,000 population—three times the national average.

An article in the *Observer*, “Anxiety in Barnsley as a virus hotspot gets ready to open its doors,” drew attention to the sense of unease felt by residents at the lifting of restrictions and pointed to the contrasting impact of the pandemic depending on the class divide.

The impression reinforced in the mainstream media has been that the greatest danger posed from a resurgence is from members of the public failing to adhere to government protocol. In fact, that main risk to public health is the government and the capitalist system, responsible for over 150,000 deaths in the UK.

The *Observer* noted that most people are complying with social distancing and mask wearing and that the risk posed from transmission was linked primarily to social conditions facing the working class. Barnsley was ranked 22nd of 317 local authority areas in England for health deprivation in 2019. Since the start of the year, death rates from COVID-19 have been higher than August, September and October last year, with deaths among older people among the highest in the country.

Angus McKinlay who runs Joseph Cliff Fishmonger in the local market stated, “There are loads of factories and people working in close contact with each other. There are thousands of people working in some of the warehouses. It’s bound to be higher here.”

ASOS, the online fashion giant, is the largest employer in the town with a workforce of 4,000.

The *Observer* interviewed the Labour Party leader of the local council Sir Stephen Houghton and Dan Jarvis, Labour MP for Barnsley Central and Sheffield's City Mayor. These representatives of the Labour bureaucracy bear central responsibility for the creation of the intolerable conditions which they complained of.

Houghton described how the pandemic was becoming a "disease of the poor" and pointed out that local workers are heavily represented in the type of occupations which exclude remote working. He acknowledged that workers responsible for ensuring the production and distribution lines never stop—paid just above the minimum wage—have been forced into potential death traps, and that "family bubbles" are made a nonsense of by parents having to leave their children with their extended families.

As leader of the Labour council, Houghton promoted the creation of a low wage economy to attract inward investment following the coal pit closures, hailed as a regeneration success story and for which he received a knighthood.

Jarvis paid lip service to those who needed to continue to self-isolate as the restrictions are lifted, stating that "no one should face the invidious choice between doing the right thing by their community and feeding their family." But Labour-controlled areas of Barnsley were inundated with complaints last year from workers at depots and distributions centres forced to work in what were cradles of disease.

Jarvis issued empty calls for social distancing rather than for the closure of non-essential businesses such as ASOS and Pretty Little Thing. Neither he nor Houghton raised a demand on the government to suspend its ending of the lockdown. Houghton stressed only, "We would want to unlock, we don't want to be left behind. But we've asked that once we've vaccinated the over-50s and the clinically vulnerable, we want to accelerate the vaccine rollout in places like Barnsley."

Far from it being simply a case of accelerating the vaccine rollout, vaccines are presently not even locally accessible. One woman explained that she had to travel 15 miles to the next town, Wakefield, to receive her jab.

The *Observer* makes no mention of the impact of the reopening of schools on March 8 in driving up the rates of infections. But on March 14, roughly a week after schools reopened, Barnsley had the second-highest infection rate in the whole of England—up from 144.6 the previous week to 173.8, with 429 new cases. In the Kendray area of the town, this reached 550.1 per 100,000 people.

Barnsley Director of Public Health Julia Burrows told *Yorkshire Live*, "Our intelligence shows that the cases in Kendray are part of household clusters, school children, and

people employed in workplaces where outbreaks have recently taken place." A comment posted on the Facebook page of Barnsley Council explained that while they had personally followed the stay-at-home guidance, ASOS, "an employer of non-essential fashion clothing is allowed to continue putting us all at risk – unbelievable!"

In March of last year, 500 workers staged an unofficial walkout on the day shift at the ASOS distribution centre, against unsafe conditions. As reports confirmed at least 9 cases of COVID-19 infections, the Labour council stepped in, alongside the recognised union, Community, to prevent its closure, even for a deep clean. ASOS recently recorded an increase of year-on-year profits for the six months to February of 253 percent to £106.4 million, as revenues soared by £2 billion.

At Cranswick Convenience Foods, a meat processing plant employing around 1,200, there were nine confirmed cases of infection in Spring 2020 and three workers died from COVID-19. Once again, the Labour council and the recognised union, the GMB, worked together to keep the factory open.

In June, postal workers at the Royal Mail sorting office in Central Barnsley staged an unofficial walkout after colleagues tested positive and management failed to organise mandatory testing and the wearing of face masks. The company sought to defend its record by pointing to the agreement it had made with the Communication Workers Union.

The Labour Party and trade unions are dedicated to the suppression of the class struggle and any challenge to the domination of the corporate oligarchy over society. Workers must build rank-and-file committees which fight for emergency measures to contain the pandemic that take as their foundation the needs of the working class, not the priorities of capitalism.



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