

COVID-19 spreads rapidly among children in India

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The spread of the delta variant in India is sickening ever-larger numbers of adolescents and children who had been less affected in the previous wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hundreds are being hospitalized with serious illness in cities across India.

In Bangalore, corona infections were confirmed in 543 children between the 1st and 10th of this month, according to the Karnataka Health Department. In the Union Territory of Pondicherry, 20 children were confirmed to have a COVID-19 infection. In Kanchipuram, in the state of Tamil Nadu, 33 children testing positive with COVID-19 infection have been admitted to hospital. Health officials in the state of Telangana said 37,332 children aged 0-19 were confirmed infected with the coronavirus between March and May this year.

Doctors are stressing the danger to children from the more virulent variant. Dr. Anjan Bhattacharya said: “The double mutant variant has immune escape phenomena. It masquerades as our own body system and then escapes our immunity protection. This is why more children are contracting COVID-19.” He pointed to a large rise in reported cases: “If COVID-19 affected 1 percent of children last year, it is about 1.2 percent now. But it is a huge increase in terms of numbers in India.”

Not only are more children contracting the virus, but the resulting illness is often more severe. Dr. Jaydeb Ray in Kolkata explained that before the emergence of the Delta variant, most COVID-19 cases were asymptomatic: “But now, we are seeing kids coming to hospitals with MIS-C (Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome in Children). This time it is showing parallel to an active infection.”

Such diseases are now leading to severe illness and deaths in children across India. Eighteen children have

died in the Indian state of Rajasthan of a rare inflammatory disease amid the second wave of COVID-19. Similarly, 155 children have been admitted in the Jaipur hospital. Four children have been admitted to a hospital in Maharashtra with shortness of breath and low blood pressure.

Dr. Thiren Gupta, an intensive care pediatrician at Kangaram Hospital in Delhi, has treated more than 75 patients between the ages of 4 and 15 for MIS-C. He estimates that there are more than 500 such cases in Delhi and its suburbs. Gupta told the press that 90 percent of the children treated at the hospital were suffering from COVID-19 without showing any symptoms. There were 30 such cases in Pune and 20 in Solapur in children between the ages of 10 and 15.

The danger of serious illness comes atop the other burdens the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed on India’s children. Many are orphaned. A study in *The Lancet* found that 119,000 children and adolescents in India lost their primary or secondary caregivers to COVID-19 in the first 14 months of the pandemic. Currently, this number has increased further, leaving 43,139 children orphaned. In Tamil Nadu alone, more than 3,600 children have lost a parent to COVID-19.

Chronic poverty in India further exacerbates these intolerable conditions. A 2016 National Family Health Survey (NFHS) report, prior to the pandemic, found that a staggering 38.4 percent of Indian children suffer from stunting due to malnutrition. This has been exacerbated during the pandemic, together with child labor, which affected 11 million children in India before the pandemic. The proportion of children aged 6 to 10 out of school rose by 1.5 percent in 2017 to 5.3 percent in 2020.

These reports expose as politically criminal the attempts by governments in India and around the world

to force children back to school for in-person learning, so their parents can be kept at work generating profits for the banks and major corporations. Hundreds of children are dying or becoming seriously ill in Indonesia and in the United States, as well as in India. Yet capitalist governments are responding only by escalating their war on children.

Given the massive under-reporting of COVID-19 cases in India, any increase in the rate of serious illness could have devastating consequences for India's 1.37 billion population.

The COVID-19 pandemic utterly swamped India's poor health care infrastructure. Officially, the total number of COVID-19 cases in India is 32.6 million and the death toll is 437,400. However, a July 2021 study by the US-based Center for Global Development estimated that the true COVID-19 death toll in India is between 2.9 and 5.8 million. Of these deaths, half had come just in the period since March 2021 and the emergence of the Delta variant.

All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) director Randeep Gularia said 50 percent of Indian children had been exposed to COVID-19 and would test positive in antibody tests. Nonetheless, he said, they are still vulnerable to the more virulent Delta variant: "The general feeling is that adults are getting vaccinated, children are not being vaccinated and therefore if there is a new wave it will affect those who are more susceptible. Children will be more susceptible."

These reports underscore the necessity, as the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, of imposing strict social distancing and lockdown measures to halt the contagion, end the spread of COVID-19, and fight for the global eradication of the coronavirus.

In India, there currently is no vaccination program for children and adolescents. While the vaccine is free for those over 45 years of age, others must spend money out-of-pocket to get vaccinated. This is only possible for those who are rich.

In fact, only 10 percent of India's population is fully vaccinated, and only 34 percent have had any vaccine doses at all. This means that broad layers of workers as well as school-aged youth are desperately vulnerable to contracting the disease.

Moreover, when the second wave of COVID-19 peaked in the state of Maharashtra in May and June, it

was revealed that nearly 2,500 people in several places, including Mumbai, had been injected with ordinary salt water. This led to charges that officials, including doctors, had embezzled a total of \$28,000. Similar fake vaccination scams have been reported elsewhere in India over the last two months.

Indian scientists are warning of a new catastrophe, particularly if the vaccination campaign is not accelerated. A study by Pandit Deendayal Upadhyay Energy University and Nirma University has found that India could see as many as 600,000 new COVID-19 infections a day. Other studies have projected a third wave that is expected to increase to 100,000 to 150,000 recorded infections per day by October with a peak of cases expected in November.

Despite warnings from leading epidemiologists, microbiologists and other scientists, several state governments, including the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, have decided to open all business premises, including schools and cinema, from early September. They are pursuing a ruthless policy of sacrificing human lives to protect the financial, commercial, and geopolitical interests of the ruling elites. This will lead to further spread of the pandemic and to millions of deaths.

The critical question is the political mobilization of the working class to prevent such a disaster and to fight for the eradication of the virus. As the WSWs has written, "The implementation of the eradication strategy requires the development of a powerful international and unified mass movement of the working class. Only a mass movement that is not driven by the profit motive and fettered to the obsessive pursuit of personal wealth can generate the social force required to compel a change in policy."



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