

# As winter wave of COVID-19 infections looms, Canada's political elite plans to let Omicron variant rip through population

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The detection of the first infections involving the Omicron variant of COVID-19 in Canada has coincided with a sustained spike in cases over recent weeks. As of Tuesday afternoon, authorities in Ontario and Quebec had recorded five cases of the new variant, which was first identified in South Africa, and appears to be more infectious and possibly resistant to vaccines.

The travel history of the five confirmed Omicron cases in Canada, four of which are in Ontario and one in Quebec, suggests that the variant has been spreading widely throughout Africa for some time. All five, none of whom are related, returned from Nigeria via Montreal. To date, the focus by most governments internationally has been on South Africa and its immediate neighbours.

In the face of these dangerous developments, the lack of any response from the political establishment at the federal and provincial levels is nothing short of criminal. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has not even bothered to address the public in the four days since the World Health Organization declared Omicron a variant of concern, its highest alert level. He merely uttered a vague non-committal response to a journalist's question as he entered a cabinet meeting yesterday that "there may be more we need to do" to combat the pandemic. The Liberal government is "watching" the new variant "very, very closely," he said, i.e. sitting on their hands while it spreads.

At a hastily-convened press conference later Tuesday, Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos unveiled a handful of new travel restrictions. Egypt, Malawi, and Nigeria were added to a list of seven southern African countries from where travel to Canada is banned. In addition, all travelers arriving in Canada, other than those from the US, will have to get tested at the airport and remain in quarantine until they receive their result. None of these measures will prevent the continued transmission of Omicron cases already inside the country, of which there could now be dozens.

The response, or rather the lack of one, at the provincial

level was similarly chilling. In British Columbia, where over 200 travelers have recently arrived from countries in Africa where Omicron is spreading, Health Minister Adrian Dix stated explicitly Monday that the New Democratic Party government has no intention of bringing in any new restrictions to prevent the spread of the variant. Nor will it escalate the program of booster vaccinations, which currently commits to giving everyone over the age of 12 a third dose between six and eight months after their second. Most of BC is currently allowing indoor venues to operate at full capacity, with the requirement that people wear a face mask. However, there is no requirement that these masks meet the minimum N95 standard to protect against aerosol transmission, the main route by which the virus is transmitted.

In Ontario, chief medical officer of health Kieran Moore likewise insisted that no new restrictions were required. "We are investigating other cases so I would not be surprised if we find more in Ontario," Moore blandly declared of the spread of the Omicron variant, before insisting that there would be no retreat from the government's plan to scrap all public health measures by March 2022.

Even before the Omicron threat emerged, Canada was confronting a resurgent wave of Delta infections driven above all by the murderous reopening policies pursued by governments of all political stripes across the country. The daily average of infections nationally has steadily climbed over recent weeks to over 2,800, following a decline to 2,300 cases in late October. When hard-right Ontario Premier Doug Ford presented his plan to abolish all public health measures in less than six months at the beginning of November, around 300 people were being infected each day in the province. Now, the seven-day daily average is approaching 800.

On Tuesday, Ontario's official pandemic death toll surpassed 10,000. Fully 40 percent of these fatalities occurred in the province's long-term care facilities, which

were transformed into death traps throughout much of 2020. Nationally, the death toll is approaching 30,000. As terrible as this death toll is, the true figure is undoubtedly much higher. Statistics Canada reported that from March 2020 to July 2021, there were 19,500 excess deaths across Canada not related to a COVID-19 infection.

Troubling reports from Quebec raise questions about whether Omicron may have already spread much more widely than authorities realize. According to the public health director of Eastern Township, Dr. Alain Poirier, cases and hospitalizations in the region, which includes the city of Sherbrooke, have risen rapidly over recent weeks. “In five weeks, we went from 35 cases on average, and last week we had reached 125 cases on average,” he told CBC News. He confirmed that seven local residents who recently returned from southern Africa are in isolation awaiting the results of tests to determine whether they were infected by Omicron.

Medical experts are warning that Canada’s health care system is in no condition to cope with a surge of patients over the winter months. In a dire assessment of the current stage of the pandemic released Tuesday, Ontario’s Science Table made an urgent call for additional public health measures to prevent a crush of patients overwhelming the province’s hospitals.

“Recent modelling suggests that there may be an increased number of patients with (COVID-19-related critical illness) alongside influenza over the 2021/2022 winter months, driving an increase in potential ICU admissions,” wrote the group of medical experts. “There is a growing ICU staffing shortage with increases in nurse vacancy rates in particular across the provinces’ ICUs. Burnout, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and in particular impacts nurses, is a significant contributor to staffing shortages.”

Such warnings are falling on deaf ears. From the Trudeau government on down, every level of political decision-making is enforcing a reckless reopening policy that threatens to produce an unprecedented surge of infections and deaths. Last week, the Trudeau government tabled legislation in parliament that effectively ends all pandemic-related financial assistance for working people.

Under conditions in which all provincial governments have ruled out lockdowns, the federal government declared it would tie any support payments to workers to the condition that they be off work due to a lockdown for 14 consecutive days. At the same time, the Trudeau government extended its lavish support for big business through wage subsidies and other slush funds through May 2022. In other words, while workers are forced to continue labouring in infected workplaces, facing the risk of infection by a variant that could potentially evade the immunity provided by the

vaccines, the profits of corporate Canada will be secured.

A similar degree of callous indifference towards the health and very lives of the population is visible at the local level. On Monday, Toronto Public Health reported five further outbreaks at schools across the city. According to CBC News, this takes the total number of schools in the city currently dealing with an outbreak to 26. Parents of children aged between 5 and 11 only got the chance to begin booking vaccine appointments last week, which leaves the vast majority of this age cohort totally defenceless against infection due to the criminal decision to open schools with almost no restrictions.

A tweet from Toronto Public Health noted blandly on the situation, “We continue to work closely with all TO schools to support a safe environment for all of our school communities as we live with #COVID-19.”

The reality behind this Orwellian propaganda is that schools are dangerous hotspots for the virus, and students, staff, and their relatives are being hospitalized and dying. CTV News reported Monday that a child under the age of 10 in Ottawa became the latest young victim to be hospitalized following a COVID-19 infection. The child is the 11th to require hospital care in the city since the beginning of the pandemic. Earlier in November, authorities in Alberta confirmed that the death of a child under the age of two was linked to a COVID-19 infection.

In addition to the threat of hospitalization and death, children remain exposed to the risk of long-term complications associated with COVID-19 infection. Studies have shown that approximately 10 percent of children infected go on to suffer from Long COVID, which can include debilitating symptoms lasting months or years.

The disastrous situation developing in Canada is the product of the ruling elite’s homicidal “profits before life” strategy, which it has pursued throughout the pandemic. The only way to stop yet another winter of mass infection and death is through the development of a mass working-class-led movement fighting for the elimination of COVID-19. In the face of the Omicron variant’s rapid spread, nonessential production and in-person learning in schools must immediately be halted, with full compensation paid to all workers so they can shelter at home. This must be accompanied by a comprehensive range of public health measures, including isolation of infected contacts, contact tracing, testing, mask mandates, and mass vaccinations.



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