

Winter pandemic surges in Canada amid warnings Omicron variant could increase infections eight-fold

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The winter surge of the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada is accelerating rapidly, with Ontario and Quebec reporting a sharp increase in cases in recent days. The spread of the more infectious Omicron variant threatens to compound the danger posed by a wave of delta infections.

Modelling released Friday by the federal Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) predicted that infections could rise eight-fold from the current level of 3,300 daily infections to 26,500 in mid-January if Omicron becomes the dominant variant and turns out to be three times more transmissible than Delta. PHAC noted that Omicron's "greater transmissibility" and the potential for "reduced protection from prior infection/vaccination" could drive the surge. Underlining this warning, British researchers reported Friday that people who have been double vaccinated have virtually no protection against an Omicron infection, and those with a booster jab only have a 75 percent protection against symptomatic infection.

Even in the unlikely event Omicron transmission does not take off and transmission rates remain at their present level, the PHAC modellers estimated that Delta infections alone could reach 6,000 to 7,000 per day next month.

Despite this grim picture, both the federal and provincial governments are committed to extending their "living with the virus" policies that have killed almost 30,000 Canadians to date. They cavalierly ignore the fact that even before Omicron established a presence in Canada, experts were projecting that a winter surge of infections would cripple already overstretched hospitals. Their indifference to the devastating health consequences for the population can only be described as criminal.

At a Friday press conference, Canada's chief public health officer Dr. Theresa Tam dismissed the dire modelling projections as "another bump on the road," before going on to acknowledge, "(W)e still don't know enough about the Omicron variant, except it looks like it's very transmissible."

Quebec reported the highest provincial case total in the country with over 2,000 infections Friday. This marked the first time the daily case count had surpassed 2,000 since January, amid the devastating second wave.

Experts predict that with its current trajectory, Quebec will soon surpass the winter peak of 3,127 new cases recorded on January 9. With a reproductive rate of 1.15, second only to the small province of Prince Edward Island at 3.06, the growth of the pandemic in Quebec is exponential and will certainly explode in the days and weeks to come. The Coalition Avenir Quebec (CAQ) government intends to impose only token restrictions on indoor gathering limits.

Health Minister Christian Dubé doubled down on the "living with the virus" rhetoric by stating that the province was "exactly where we should be" in response to the jump in new cases. Insulting the intelligence of Quebec workers, Dubé pointed to the "relative stability in the number of hospitalizations," and concluded, "I think we're okay so far."

In neighbouring Ontario, an alarming increase in new cases is taking place—1,290 infections were recorded on December 9, followed by another 1,453 on Friday. Friday's infection numbers marked a 41 percent increase from a week earlier and the highest daily case count since May 23. For over a month, case rates have been rising, with the Progressive Conservative government of Premier Doug Ford paying lip service to the pending social catastrophe while doing everything in its power to ensure that schools and non-essential workplaces remain open to guarantee corporate profits.

Ontario has already recorded over 30 Omicron cases across almost all local health boards, suggesting that the variant is spreading widely in the community. This total does not include suspected Omicron cases under investigation. On Wednesday, Toronto reported its first school-related Omicron infection under conditions in which the number of COVID-19 outbreaks in schools is at a record

high.

Tam confirmed at her press conference that 87 Omicron cases have been confirmed across Canada. She acknowledged that a growing number of Omicron cases had no links to international travel, underscoring that community spread has begun.

Despite the danger posed by Omicron owing to its increased transmissibility and ability to evade vaccine immunity, federal and provincial governments criminally downplay the threat. Virtually no specific measures have been adopted to block the new variant's spread, other than a few token travel restrictions. This is in keeping with the "profits before life" strategy adopted throughout the pandemic by every level of government, from Trudeau's Liberals on down.

Government officials and corporate media outlets are actively encouraging a barbarous policy of allowing the new variant to run rampant. Dr. Caroline Quach-Thanh, a member of the Quebec Immunization Committee that advises the provincial government, recently argued that booster shots for those under 60 may not be desirable if COVID-19 contracted via the Omicron variant was "mild." Sounding like one of the fascistic advocates of the Great Barrington Declaration, she asserted, "maybe what you should do is let people get it and, as long as it doesn't cause hospitalizations and death, that boosts the immunity naturally and that will protect the population."

In Ontario, the Ford government has indefinitely halted its homicidal reopening plan, which called for the removal of all pandemic-related restrictions, including mask mandates and capacity limits, by March 2022. Although the government claims it wants more time to study the impact of Omicron and the winter surge, it has done nothing to curb the spike in infections already sweeping the province.

Ontario schools are driving the current surge. The majority of outbreaks in the province are tied to schools, with a record-breaking 317 outbreaks, including 255 in elementary schools where children aged five to 11 have just begun receiving their first dose of the vaccine. The government has come under fire from educators and parents for withholding rapid testing kits that could stop infected children from attending school and infecting their teachers and classmates.

Ontario's Science Table, which provides expert advice on the pandemic to the government, recently released new modelling that shows that cases and hospitalizations in Ontario will rise rapidly even without the entry of the Omicron variant. The model shows that even with 50 percent of children vaccinated by the end of December, the province will experience 1,700 cases per day by mid-January. A "worst-case" scenario, where only 30 percent of children are vaccinated, would produce 3,000 daily cases

and 400 filled ICU beds during the same time frame, straining the health care system to the breaking point. This would put the situation nearly on par with the winter and spring 2021 waves that killed thousands.

The maritime province of New Brunswick reported its highest-ever daily case total of 174 new cases on December 9, along with two additional deaths. Since reopening schools to in-classroom learning in September, daily case numbers have remained at their highest levels since the pandemic began. The province has a population of just 760,000, 5 percent of that of Ontario, but has 13 percent of the latter's daily cases.

Progressive Conservative Premier Blaine Higgs admitted that about 50 percent of new cases have been traced to schools, where children, the majority of whom have yet to receive even one dose of a vaccine, are crammed into classrooms with poor ventilation.

Although the winter surge is only in its initial stages, workplaces are already emerging as a breeding ground for the virus. In Montreal, infections jumped by 50 percent over the past two weeks, driven largely by outbreaks in workplaces, schools, and child care facilities.

Montreal's public health unit reported a doubling of workplace infections in one week, representing 48 outbreak sites at workplaces, the highest number since the end of the third wave of the pandemic in the city on June 8. At least 78 cases were traced to a major manufacturing company in Montreal's west end, one of the largest outbreaks so far.

In the rest of the country, new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths are holding relatively steady. However, as the experience of Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick demonstrates, a rapid upturn in infections is only a matter of time. Sharp spikes in infections and hospitalizations are being recorded in northern US states directly across the border.

Other provincial governments across the country have gone even further than Ontario and Quebec in dismantling public health measures. In Alberta and British Columbia, a deadly wave of infections struck during the late summer and early fall. For most of October and November, these two provinces led the country in hospitalizations and deaths, the byproduct of "living with the virus" policies implemented by United Conservative and New Democratic Party governments that effectively amount to the pursuit of a herd immunity strategy.



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