

Scientists warn Canada's health care system could collapse within weeks as Omicron infections explode in Ontario and Quebec

Roger Jordan
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The explosive growth of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 in Canada is causing infections in the two most populous provinces, Ontario and Quebec, to skyrocket. While Quebec currently leads the way with new cases more than doubling in the four days from Tuesday to Friday, experts from Ontario's Science Table warned Thursday that the province's hospitals will face "unsustainable" demands for care in January if infections continue to rise at their current trajectory.

Quebec announced 3,760 infections over the previous 24 hours Friday, up from 1,747 on Tuesday. This was the highest daily total since the pandemic began. Analysis of positive tests revealed that the Omicron variant made up 20 percent of all infections on Tuesday. Based on the understanding that the highly infectious variant doubles every two to three days, Omicron appears set to dominate new infections in the province by this weekend.

Record high daily infections were also announced in the Atlantic provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

A similarly disastrous situation is developing in Ontario. Daily infections surpassed the 3,000 mark for the first time since the third wave in the spring, with authorities announcing 3,124 new infections over the preceding 24 hours Friday morning.

The Science Table advised that its dire prediction of overwhelmed hospital wards within a matter of a few weeks, which would result in thousands of preventable deaths, could only be averted if social contacts are reduced by 50 percent. A reliance on booster vaccines alone would not prevent daily infections from rising to an unprecedented 6,000 to 10,000 within the next two weeks, the assessment added.

Yet immediately after presenting this sobering scenario, Science Table co-chair Adalsteinn Brown rejected out of hand any talk of lockdowns or other comprehensive public health measures to avert the impending crisis. "I don't think that we need to necessarily stop things full out," he commented. "I believe we can do this without closing schools or shutting down businesses that have suffered during previous waves."

This will have been music to the ears of Ontario Premier Doug Ford, who is determined to avoid implementing any

measure that will restrict the accumulation of profits for the province's major corporations and super-rich. Underscoring his reckless disregard for the protection of human life, all Ford offered in an appearance Friday was the restriction of certain venues, such as restaurants, bars, gyms and retail stores, to 50 percent capacity. Quebec Premier François Legault announced similar measures a day earlier, declaring that bars, restaurants, retail stores and places of worship will only operate at half capacity.

Legault refused to even countenance moving forward the Christmas break by a few days for the province's schools, despite the fact that almost half of them currently have COVID-19 outbreaks. He announced that the Christmas break for high schools would be extended by a few days until January 10, while elementary school students will be forced to return to their COVID-infested classrooms a week prior. Ford, for his part, has refused thus far to state his government's intentions for schools in the new year.

In the face of the tsunami of infections already under way, governments at the provincial and federal levels have been spending their time relaxing already inadequate public health measures and scrapping pandemic-related support programs. Alberta Premier Jason Kenney announced this week that effective immediately, unvaccinated people would be allowed to congregate again indoors. Kenney also overturned the restriction on social gatherings to two households. Instead, people from any number of households can gather over the holiday period, so long as the number of adults does not exceed 10. The number of those under the age of 18 allowed to be present is unlimited.

The federal Liberal government led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau secured the passage of a bill in the House of Commons Thursday to complete the gutting of what little remained of financial support for workers. According to the new measure, a worker is only entitled to the pitiful sum of \$300 per week if they are ordered into lockdown by their employer, province or local authority for 14 consecutive days—a virtual impossibility given the ruthless open economy/open schools policy enforced by governments from coast to coast. Even if these conditions

are met, the federal cabinet retains the power to determine what constitutes a lockdown. The very same bill extended a generous financial support program to businesses through May 2022. After ensuring this Christmas present for corporate Canada passed parliament, MPs, including from the New Democratic Party (NDP), voted unanimously to begin their six-week Christmas recess a day ahead of schedule.

Trudeau sought to blame the population for his government's inaction in response to Omicron, claiming in an interview with the CBC that "widespread pandemic fatigue" and people being "tired of restrictions" were major reasons helping Omicron spread, not the government's repudiation of basic public health measures in the interests of defending corporate profits.

Canada's political elite could hardly make clearer its commitment to a policy of mass infection and death. Dr. Caroline Quach-Thanh, a member of Quebec's immunization committee, asserted last week that if Omicron causes mild infections, "maybe what you should do is let people get it and, as long as it doesn't cause hospitalization and death, that boosts the immunity naturally and that will protect the population."

Quach-Thanh's musings about enforcing a murderous "herd immunity" policy, which has produced over 170,000 deaths in the United Kingdom and millions more worldwide, enjoy widespread support within ruling circles. This fact is underlined by the shambolic character of the federal and provincial governments' rollout of booster vaccinations, which are critical to providing a substantial degree of protection against infection and serious illness. As of December 16, just 9.2 percent of Canada's population had received a third dose, compared to almost 40 percent in Britain and around 30 percent in Germany.

The slowing of the vaccination campaign to a snail's pace is not the product of a lack of vaccines. On the contrary, a report yesterday noted that the federal government is currently hoarding over 4 million doses. Rather, it is the outcome of the systematic dismantling of the infrastructure needed to distribute and administer the vaccines following the rollout of second doses.

Governments scrapped the infrastructure at the very point where scientific investigation was revealing the urgent necessity of third doses to protect against waning immunity among those with two doses of vaccine. This need has become all the more urgent with the emergence of Omicron. According to the latest scientific data, the protection for someone who is double vaccinated from an Omicron infection is as low as 22 to 33 percent. Six months after their second dose, virtually no protection against Omicron exists. Only with the administration of the third "booster" dose does infection protection rise to roughly the equivalent of the protection provided by two doses against the original strain of the virus.

In British Columbia, which is governed by the NDP, authorities have gone so far as to close vaccine clinics for up to two weeks for the holidays, leaving people desperately seeking protection from the highly infectious Omicron variant with

nowhere to go. According to the CBC, vaccine clinics in Prince George, Prince Rupert and Terrace are closed from December 20 to January 4. Even Vancouver, the province's largest city, is organizing no vaccine clinics between December 24 and 28. Jean Fares, a 62 year old who received his second dose over six months ago and has been unable to book a third due to the holiday closures, told CBC, "They're playing with our lives. I'm not going out, not seeing anyone. I want my vaccine."

Even the task of getting tested has become a major challenge for thousands of workers across the country. Twitter users have shared videos and pictures of long lines forcing people to wait hours at local test centres. Those seeking rapid tests in Ontario report being directed by the government to stores that have yet to be supplied with stock.

Public anger is mounting over the ruling elite's criminal pandemic policy, which has focused on protecting corporate profits at the expense of people's lives from the outset. Despite a propaganda campaign in the corporate-controlled media incessantly promoting right-wing opposition to even limited mitigation while proclaiming Omicron to be "mild" and the worst of the pandemic to be over, a poll conducted by Ipsos on behalf of Global News revealed that 56 percent of respondents, a clear majority, would support a full lockdown to suppress the virus.

This mass popular support for a science-based response to the pandemic must be mobilized in a worker-led struggle for a strategy to eliminate COVID-19. Workers must take up the demands for the immediate closure of schools to in-person learning and all nonessential production with full compensation for workers and a comprehensive public health program of mass testing, isolation of infected people, contact tracing and quarantine, and mass vaccination to bring cases down to zero.



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