

Remaining UK COVID restrictions end as study shows most Omicron deaths occurred in deprived areas

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Despite an overall fall in cases, the UK is still recording hundreds of thousands of COVID infections per week. In the seven days since February 24, the date on which all COVID restrictions were ended in England, 231,973 cases were recorded, and 741 deaths.

This is an underestimate, given that there is no systematic testing nationally, with universal contact tracing already ended. A more reliable picture of COVID prevalence is provided by the regular survey conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). According to the latest estimate, more than 2 million people had coronavirus infections last week.

COVID deaths in Britain are officially counted by the government if someone dies within 28 days of a positive test. On this measure 161,630 people have already been killed by the virus. According to a more accurate ONS measure, which records mentions of COVID-19 as a cause on the death certificate, 183,579 have died up to February 18. According to the latter measure, 969 died in the week to February 18.

The other UK nations are following suit in ending restrictions. Northern Ireland ended all anti-COVID measures even before Johnson did. Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin ministers gave their unanimous backing for ending all legal restrictions on February 15 and replacing them with guidance.

On February 28, Wales's Labour Party-run government ended the legal requirement to wear a face mask in many indoor settings, including gyms, cinemas, theatres, community centres, and museums. After returning from half-term this week, secondary school pupils are no longer required to wear a mask in classroom settings. First Minister Mark Drakeford's government plans to end the use of face masks in all

settings by the end of March.

This week, Scotland's Scottish National Party administration ended the requirement for secondary school pupils to wear face coverings in classrooms and for large venues to implement the vaccine passport scheme. All remaining coronavirus restrictions in Scotland will go on March 21.

Ending all restrictions, after almost 19 million people (almost 28 percent of the population) have recorded a COVID infection, lays the basis for a further spread of the disease and new mutations. By the start of this week, total cases just this year had reached 5.5 million in Britain, driven by the Omicron surge.

More evidence has emerged showing that deaths and cases disproportionately hit the most deprived working-class sections of the population. This week, the *Independent* newspaper reported on a COVID study by Colin Angus, a senior research fellow and health inequalities modeller at the University of Sheffield. It revealed that "a majority of hospital and at-home deaths—close to 25 percent, respectively—are occurring in the most deprived parts of England."

The *Independent* noted, "At least 30 percent more coronavirus deaths have occurred in the most deprived areas of England since the turn of the year..."

"Of the 7,053 deaths registered in the six weeks after 1 January, 1,589 (22.5 percent) were from the most deprived 20 percent of the country, compared to 1,188 (16.8 percent) in the least deprived 20 percent."

It added, "Such figures, which are only available to 11 February, are likely to underestimate the scale of Covid inequalities: the most deprived areas in England tend to be younger in age, while the least deprived have an older population, who are more vulnerable to

coronavirus. Despite this, the poorest parts of the country still account for a higher proportion of deaths.”

The spread of COVID in the most deprived areas will only worsen as the UK’s governments end access to free testing for the general public on April 1, as well as sick payments for those ill with COVID forced to self-isolate. Researcher Angus commented that the “inequalities we’ve seen in recent months *reflect the situation with free mass testing and mandatory self-isolation* [emphasis added].” The *Independent* cited the Health Foundation charity saying that the “figures were ‘concerning and represent a warning sign that the virus may continue to have a disproportionate impact’ in the weeks and months to come.”

The same day as he terminated COVID restrictions, Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson told parliament, “We will also end self-isolation support payments, although COVID provisions for Statutory Sick Pay can still be claimed for a further month [March 24].”

During the pandemic, workers were allowed to claim statutory sick pay from their first day of absence. From March 24, employees off sick will be required to wait for four days to claim sick pay. The cancelled £500 Test and Trace Support Payment was available for those on low incomes required to self-isolate. The ending of even extremely limited support for those infected with COVID will force many to work while ill, jeopardising their health and their co-workers.

Johnson admitted that the last measures in place to protect against COVID were being scrapped due to their cost. He said, “The Testing, Tracing and Isolation budget in 2020-21 exceeded the entire budget of the Home Office. It cost a further £15.7 billion in this financial year, and £2 billion in January alone at the height of the Omicron wave. We must now scale this back.”

There is no such reluctance when it comes to upscaling spending on the military as the NATO confrontation with Russia escalates.

Justifying the measures, Johnson said, “I’ve often heard it said over the last couple of years that we have a habit of going back to work, or going into work, when we’re not well. And people contrast that with Germany for instance where, I’m told, they’re much more disciplined about not going to work if you’re sick.”

German employers are legally required to pay staff

100 percent of their wages for the first six weeks of sickness. In Britain, statutory sick pay paid by employers is set at just at just £96.35 a week, and only up to 28 weeks. The *Guardian* noted, “The proportion of a UK worker’s salary covered by sick pay is just 19%, according to the TUC [Trades Union Congress]. Rates are higher in Spain (42%), Sweden (64%) and Belgium (93%), with support only worse in South Korea and the US, where workers do not have a legal right to any sick pay at all.”

The final ripping up of all protections against COVID includes the axing of mandatory vaccination for social care workers in England on March 15. Care home staff were required to be vaccinated to work in the sector from last November. A proposed move to introduce the mandate for frontline NHS staff had already been abandoned.

Everything is being done to end any acknowledgement of the pandemic’s existence. For the first time, COVID cases and deaths were not officially reported this weekend, with those days’ cases instead added to Monday’s total.

All restrictions are being ditched despite warnings from the government’s own Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) last month that even under an “Optimistic” scenario there could be a “Seasonal wave of infections in Autumn/Winter with comparable size and realised severity to the current Omicron wave” in the next 12-18 months.

All scenarios modelled by SAGE “assume that SARS-CoV-2 will continue to circulate for the foreseeable future and that variants will emerge.” This week Dr Susan Hopkins, Chief Medical Advisor for the UK Health and Security Agency (UKHSA), said in relation to one of the Omicron variants, “We now know that BA.2 has an increased growth rate which can be seen in all regions in England. We have also learnt that BA.2 has a slightly higher secondary attack rate than BA.1 in households.”



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