

# Global life expectancy drops two years since the start of the pandemic

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A major study published in March in the journal *Population and Development Review* estimates that global life expectancy declined by roughly 0.92 years in 2020 and another 0.72 years in 2021. These are the first declines in global life expectancy since the United Nations began tracking this figure in 1950 and the worst since World War II killed an estimated more than 70 million people.

The study, written by sociologist Dr. Patrick Heuveline of the University of California, Los Angeles, is highly significant in that it is the first to estimate global life expectancy declines from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report notes, “Annual declines in life expectancy ... appear to have exceeded two years at some point before the end of 2021 in at least 50 countries. Since 1950, annual declines of that magnitude had only been observed on rare occasions, such as Cambodia in the 1970s, Rwanda in the 1990s, and possibly some sub-Saharan African nations at the peak of the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) pandemic.”

Prior to 2020, there had been an uninterrupted 69-year rise in life expectancy since the United Nations began calculating this figure, from 1950 when life expectancy was 45.7 years until 2019 when it had reached 72.6 years, with an average of 0.39 years of life added annually.

The report notes, “The largest annual gains, more than 0.7 year from 1964 to 1968, reflect the success of global public health campaigns, in particular childhood vaccination programs.” Additional public health initiatives adopted in many countries at the time included the filtering and chlorinating of water supplies, the development of sanitation infrastructure, swamp drainage, milk pasteurization and mass vaccination campaigns, among many other scientific achievements.

Over the last two decades, this progressive expansion of life expectancy came under increasing attack, as the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the eruption of American imperialism initiated three decades of unrelenting social counterrevolution on a world scale. The report notes that in the years preceding the pandemic, “annual gains in

global life expectancy ... declined below their 1950–2019 average of 0.39 years, dipping below 0.3 years from 2015 to 2018 and below 0.2 years in 2019.”

The pandemic has rapidly accelerated this retrogression and SARS-CoV2 has proven to be one of the deadliest pathogens to have ever ravaged human civilization. The comparison of the pandemic to world wars is no hyperbole. According to a study published in *The Lancet*, global excess deaths in the last two years stood at 18.2 million by the end of 2021, nearly equivalent to all the deaths during World War I.

Unlike previous pandemics, every aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic was both foreseeable and preventable, as documented by dozens of scholarly papers, books and even films released just since the start of the 21st century. At every step of the way, the financial oligarchy and its political representatives ensured that profits were prioritized over human lives and well-being.

To put it succinctly, the decline in life expectancy is a concrete health measurement of the policies of social murder, whose monetary values can be appraised by the coinciding rise in stock market indices.

In the United States and many other countries, sections of the ruling elites have long advocated lowering life expectancy. They welcomed the pandemic as a positive good to cull the elderly and infirm, reduce pension obligations and cut social services.

At a national level, eight countries experienced substantial declines in life expectancy of more than four years over the last two years. These include five countries in Latin America—Peru (5.6 years), Guatemala (4.8), Paraguay (4.7), Bolivia (4.1) and Mexico (4.0)—and three in Europe, including Russia (4.3), Bulgaria (4.1) and North Macedonia (4.1).

The study estimates that in 53 countries, including the United States, life expectancy declined by over two years during the worst 12-month period of the pandemic. Numerous other countries experienced even worse 12-month periods of declining life expectancy, including Tunisia (3.4

years), South Africa (3.1), Egypt (2.3), Bosnia and Herzegovina (4.0), North Macedonia (4.0), the Philippines (3.0), India (2.6), Kazakhstan (3.2), Lebanon (3.4) and more. However, multiple countries in the Asia-Pacific region where elimination strategies were employed, including China with a population of 1.4 billion people, saw life expectancy climb.

To appreciate the full impact of the study's findings, it is worth noting that in 2019 the United Nations anticipated that global life expectancy would rise by 0.18 years in 2020. The implication is that had the ruling elites taken the necessary measures to eliminate COVID-19 in January-March 2020, the world's population would have expected a life span two years higher than now exists. Instead, global life expectancy has dropped to below 2013 levels, with one decade of gains in life expectancy vanishing for all of mankind.

Alongside the massive loss of life, there has also been a tremendous loss of livelihood. A recent study conducted by researchers from the University of Michigan estimated that roughly 43 percent of reported infections worldwide have led to Long COVID, with more than 100 million people likely experiencing various symptoms which can impact nearly every organ in the body.

In a significant subset of Long COVID patients, the condition can be quite debilitating and lead to the inability to work or care for themselves. Recent studies have associated even mild COVID-19 infections with an increase in all-cause mortality.

The report by Dr. Heuveline serves as a devastating indictment of the response of world capitalism to this global catastrophe. Expressing the silent brutality of the bourgeoisie, not a single corporate media outlet has reported on the groundbreaking study. The silence of the media and all world governments on the report underscores their culpability in the greatest social crime since World War II.

Outside of China and a handful of countries in the Asia-Pacific region which eliminated COVID-19 in early 2020, world capitalist governments refused to implement the measures necessary to stop the transmission of the virus. Instead, they pursued either the most brutal "herd immunity" strategy of mass infection or maintained a pretense of implementing limited mitigation measures, all of which were scrapped during the surge of the Omicron BA.1 subvariant.

These policies caused the evolution of ever more infectious and vaccine-resistant variants, with the Omicron BA.2 subvariant the most dangerous so far. China is now the only major country still fighting for a Zero-COVID strategy and is presently battling its worst outbreak since the start of the pandemic due to the BA.2 variant, with a record of over 20,000 infections reported on Tuesday.

The Western media now brays for China to abandon Zero-

COVID, knowing full well that this could cause millions of deaths throughout the densely populated country. At the same time, they are cheerleading the US-NATO escalation of the drive to war with Russia which threatens to unleash a nuclear World War III.

Both the response to the pandemic and the escalating drive to war express the criminality and bankruptcy of the capitalist system, which is hurtling mankind toward disaster. The same criminal financial oligarchy that has gorged itself and amassed trillions of dollars since the start of the pandemic now strives for an imperialist carve-up of Russia, China and the entire Eurasian landmass to directly exploit the region's vast resources and working class population.

Just before the start of the Omicron surge, the *World Socialist Web Site* initiated the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, which is gathering testimony from workers, scientists and anti-COVID activists throughout the world to uncover and document the disastrous response to the pandemic. These efforts must be expanded in every country and the findings popularized within the working class.

Above all, it is vitally necessary to build a mass movement rooted in the international working class, fighting intransigently against war and for a strategy to eliminate COVID-19 throughout the world.

Only the universal deployment of every public health measure on a world scale, including paid lockdowns, mass testing, contact tracing, the isolation of infected patients and quarantining of exposed people, the globally coordinated provision of vaccines and treatments, the provision and mandating of high quality N95 or better masks, and more, can stop the pandemic and renew the growth of global life expectancy.

The combined fight against war and the pandemic is inherently a global struggle with revolutionary implications. Only the socialist overturn of the decrepit and outmoded capitalist nation-state system can stop the further descent into war, plagues and barbarism. On May 1, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) will host this year's International May Day Online Rally to rally the working class to stop the war and the pandemic and rebuild society on socialist foundations.



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