

Study suggests more than half of all Australians may have caught COVID-19 in 2022

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A recent study by the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance (NCIRS) and the Kirby Institute at University of New South Wales has found that twice as many Australians as previously reported may have been infected with COVID-19 during the country's first Omicron wave.

The researchers tested 5,185 samples taken from blood donors for antibodies produced by infection, but not by vaccination. Based on the results, the scientists concluded that around 3.4 million adults (17 percent of the population) had been infected by the end of February. According to the survey, this was "at least twice as high as indicated by cases reported to authorities by the end of February."

A comparison of the infection rates in different states illustrates the disastrous impact of the "let it rip" policies now adopted by all governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike, across the country.

The samples, collected just before Western Australia's Labor government dropped its "hard border," indicated that just 0.5 percent of blood donors in that state had contracted the virus. In Queensland, where the state Labor government threw open the border on December 23, despite surging cases in neighbouring New South Wales (NSW), 26 percent of the samples tested contained COVID-19 antibodies.

Since the period in which these samples were collected, regular surveillance testing in schools and workplaces has been almost entirely eliminated, asymptomatic close contacts are no longer required to test or isolate in most states, and free polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing programs have been slashed, forcing people to rely on less accurate, self-reported rapid antigen tests.

This means the drastic under reporting of infections revealed by the study is only likely to have worsened. The clear implication is that at least 14 million Australians, or well over half the population, may have contracted the virus since the beginning of the year, based on a doubling of the official figure of more than 7 million.

Further indicating that the impact of COVID-19 has been far worse than the official statistics show, the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Provisional Mortality Statistics for January and February 2022 reveal 5,052 excess deaths, compared to the historical average, almost 3,000 more than have been reported as directly caused by the virus.

The doubled infection rate calculated in the NCIRS study also raises the spectre of mass Long COVID. Estimates of the incidence of Long COVID vary, but even using conservative figures of 5 to 10 percent of all infections, 700,000 to 1.4 million Australians could already be facing ongoing debilitating illness.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported yesterday that demand for neuropsychological treatment is reaching record levels and people seeking treatment for Long COVID are waiting between six and twelve months for an appointment.

While governments have been virtually silent on the issue, federal Health Minister Mark Butler admitted this morning that Long COVID was proving to be a "major health challenge" as a result of "millions and millions of Australians" contracting the virus this year.

Labor, no less than the Liberal-National Coalition, is directly responsible for those "millions and millions" of infections. In line with the demands of big business, all Australian governments have reopened workplaces and schools and abandoned virtually all public health measures.

The newly-elected federal Labor government has made clear that these homicidal policies will continue. Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese admitted last week that the pandemic "clearly isn't over yet," but only extended the federal government's pandemic health funding by three months, to the end of December.

The \$760 million pledged over this period will do nothing to address the crisis in the health system, which is being pushed to breaking point with a combination of surging COVID-19, widespread influenza, understaffing and decades of cuts under Labor and Liberal-National governments alike.

Emergency department wait times are at record highs and ambulances in every state and territory are routinely ramped outside hospitals for hours, waiting to offload patients.

At the same time, even the most basic and limited public health measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 infections continue to be removed, at the behest of the corporate and financial elite.

Last Tuesday, the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), the body that supplies official health advice for government leaders to justify their edicts, released a statement calling on state and territory governments to end mask mandates for airport terminals from as early as June 17.

This has nothing to do with the protection of public health, but was because “all states and territories have relaxed mask mandates in most settings within the community.” What follows from this is the pretext for the removal of masks in every other setting where there are still mandates in place, in particular on public transport.

After the statement, Queensland, New South Wales, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory scrapped mask mandates in airports. From next week, mandatory mask wearing in Victorian airport terminals will no longer be required. Qantas CEO Alan Joyce used the announcement to demand the new Labor government scrap mask mandates for passengers on planes.

In Victoria, further public health measures are being wound back, with three-dose vaccine mandates to be scrapped in education, food distribution, meat and seafood processing and quarantine accommodation sectors. Changes are also being made to isolation requirements for positive cases, with Victorians who test positive for COVID-19 being able to leave home to drive a household member to or from education or work.

All of this takes place as the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Australia approaches 8 million and the official death toll surpasses 9,300.

Tens of thousands of new infections are being recorded every day across the country, with 3,000 people now hospitalised and 113 in ICU. At the current rate, basic arithmetic indicates that some 15,000 Australians could die from the virus by the end of the year.

In fact, all of the conditions have been created by the ruling class for forthcoming waves of COVID-19 to cause even greater amounts of infection, illness and death.

While only a tiny fraction of COVID-19 samples detected in Australia—mostly those found in incoming international travellers—are subjected to genomic sequencing, there are signs that Omicron BA.5 is set to become the dominant strain. A recent Japanese study has shown that the sub-variant is more contagious than earlier forms, and more

resistant to immunity from vaccination or previous infection.

Vaccine immunity, already limited against Omicron, is waning. Just 67 percent of adults aged over 16 have received a third dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, because of the relentless campaign by governments and the corporate media to downplay the severity of the pandemic. A fourth booster shot is currently limited to those over 65 years of age and those with underlying health conditions.

COVID-19 continues to spread throughout aged care facilities, with over 600 active outbreaks, including 3,316 cases among residents and 1,689 among staff. Only 50 percent of aged care residents have received a fourth vaccine dose. Almost a third of the total recorded COVID-19 deaths have been in residential aged care.

The ongoing wave of mass infections and deaths was not and is not inevitable. It is the result of a deliberate policy, embraced by state and federal, Labor and Liberal-National governments, to sacrifice the health and lives of the population for corporate profits.

The mounting deaths and infections demonstrate that, contrary to the claims of the ruling class, the population cannot “live with the virus.” COVID-19 can and must be eliminated. The recent experience of China, where a two-month lockdown in Shanghai and other public health measures, including widespread contact testing and tracing, successfully suppressed the most infectious variant of COVID so far, demonstrates that the virus can be stopped.

A strategy to end the pandemic requires that the international working class take matters into its own hands. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every workplace and community to implement the measures necessary to halt the transmission of the virus.

Through a global network of these committees, workers can take up a fight against the “let it rip” agenda of the ruling elite and for the adoption of public health measures based on the best available science.



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