

Pandemic deaths in China hit 700,000 since end of Zero-COVID policy, according to modeling estimates

Benjamin Mateus
22 January 2023

New modeling estimates of COVID deaths in China since December 1, 2022, by Airfinity place the figure at over 700,000 fatalities since the Stalinist regime ended its Zero-COVID policy on December 1 in response to pressure from giant corporations and imperialist governments, particularly the United States.

Although the real scale of death and misery may never truly be known, this analysis nonetheless provides a horrific glimpse into the crisis befalling the Chinese working class.

The figures on infections, deaths and the course of the outbreak by the British-based analytics firm Airfinity were recently revised and updated to take account of epidemiologic data from the more remote inland provinces. Airfinity is now forecasting one longer, more severe COVID wave as Chinese New Year travel will continue to fuel the outbreak that has spread across the country at unimaginable rates.

The group wrote on January 16, “Today’s new forecast considers reports that some provinces including Henan, Gansu, Qinghai, and Yunnan have already seen infections peak. Our analytics indicators suggest that the virus has spread more quickly to rural areas, partly driven by people traveling for the Chinese New Year celebrations. This increased growth rate has changed our forecast from predicting two successive waves to one larger and more severe wave.”

As China’s ministry of transport has noted, more than two billion passenger trips are likely to take place during the 40-day holiday season. Already on Saturday, the eve of the Chinese New Year, the Chinese media reported that more than 26 million passenger trips took place.

A majority of the travelers are thought to be migrant workers on their way home to visit families, many for the first time in the three years since the Wuhan lockdowns took effect and Zero COVID was implemented as the country’s official response to the coronavirus. There are real and justified fears that such travel will only entrench the virus

deeper into Chinese society.

According to Airfinity’s calculations, COVID-19 infections could peak at 4.8 million per day, with more than 62 million infections estimated to occur in the latter half of January. Assuming a fatality rate similar to other countries, deaths would peak at 36,000 per day on January 26, with the New Year festivities well underway. The firm estimates that cumulative COVID-19 deaths as of January 20 stand at 708,000.

These figures imply that the health systems across China over the next several weeks can expect to face a more protracted and horrific wave. Dr. Matt Linley, Airfinity’s Analytics Director, said, “Our forecast estimates a significant burden on China’s healthcare system for the next fortnight and it is likely that many treatable patients could die due to overcrowded hospitals and lack of care.”

These estimates were corroborated by China’s chief epidemiologist at their Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Dr. Wu Zunyou, who said over the weekend that the current wave of infections “has already infected about 80 percent of the people,” or around 1.1 billion people.

However, these numbers haven’t fazed Chinese health authorities and their Stalinist bosses, who continue to downplay the current crisis that has swept across the country with unprecedented speed. Vice Premier Sun Chunlan said late last week, before the start of festivities, that the virus was at a “relatively low” level and that the number of critical patients in hospitals were in decline.

Major urban centers like Shanghai and Beijing continue to see patients being piled into crowded hospital rooms, hallways and lobbies waiting for treatment, while more people are pouring through the doors who had waited to see how their illness would proceed.

Circumstantial evidence of the ongoing catastrophe is palpable in the comments offered to the media. One woman speaking with an NBC News correspondent said, “Thirty-

five people passed away the day before yesterday, right here. Since my mom was here, I've come here to see her every day. On the day my father moved into the hospital, almost all patients in the emergency department died."

Many family members of the deceased have also been critical of the local governments and health systems for failing to acknowledge that the virus caused their deaths. The *Financial Times* noted that the "lower-than-expected figures" are due to "keeping COVID-19 off the death certificates." Instead, the deaths are being attributed to pneumonia or heart disease or as unknown, if the deceased were brought in after having succumbed at home.

The clinical director at Raffles, a premier private hospital that caters to the wealthiest Chinese and high-ranking officials and whose pharmacies are stocked with Paxlovid, told the *Economist* that "local hospitals, especially ICUs, are full and we still seeing patients arriving with complications making it difficult to find ICU beds currently in Beijing. There are less patients but still a lot of serious cases and patients with complications are still arriving to the hospitals."

The continuing crisis in Beijing, which has by far the most advanced health care resources available to it when compared to other regions of the country, means the consequences for rural and smaller metropolitan areas are nothing short of dire. For instance, Paxlovid, the anti-viral medication manufactured by Pfizer for prevention of severe disease, is known to be selling on the black market. It would cost an average Chinese worker two months of salary to procure these lifesaving treatments.

Many in rural China have access only to rudimentary health care and, if required, the severely afflicted require transport to townships where more up-to-date health systems are available. In other words, anyone infected is essentially left on their own to see if the course of their illness will take a fatal turn. People have to cope with their symptoms and hope for the best.

As the *Economist* noted, even in these rural areas, where symptomatic cases remain high and health systems are under strain, local residents have said that many have experienced COVID-19 recently from the massive surge in cases in December that washed across the country after the lifting of all mitigation measures.

David Rennie, the *Economist's* bureau chief in Beijing, who recently visited a remote village in the central rural region of China in Henan province, wrote, "They talked about how everyone basically got sick in late December. The sheer speed of that wave, which I think was much faster than maybe we were expecting has clearly had a really brutal impact, although, we may never know exactly how many deaths ... I spoke to a funeral worker who said he was three

times busier than usual and at the crematorium ... is handling 100 cremations a day and went up to 150 to 160 at the peak of the sicknesses. Before the pandemic, they were doing 30 or 40 cremations a day."

He then added that doing the math means seeing hundreds or thousands of excess deaths for just the one county and then multiplying it by 66 times to account for the entire Henan Province. "You get some very big numbers very soon," he observed.

Ben Cowling, chair professor of epidemiology in the School of Public Health in Hong Kong, said, "For the next two or three weeks, we know the virus is going to find its way to every last corner of the country. That means in rural areas they're going to have lots of infections, most likely within a short space of time, and the impact may be greater because of that lack of resources."

The rapidity with which the Chinese Communist Party has embraced the "herd immunity" policy and essentially forced the population to accept mass infection has been nothing short of a criminal policy of social murder. It is as though the Stalinist regime is seeking to catch up with the Western powers in infections and deaths, after having kept the virus out for the last three years and protected the lives of millions of people.

The demands placed by finance capital on China's leadership were bound to supersede any nationally based public health policy aimed at maintaining Zero COVID.

In that regard, China's Vice Premier Liu He's appearance before the world's billionaires at Davos to tell the world that China was open for business was a revealing indictment of the bureaucracy's orientation. Without flinching, he told the elite audience, "Life has been restored to normal in China."



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact