

Study exposes COVID-19's dire social impact in Brazil

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A study released by Brazil's Health Ministry has exposed the dire social impact of the "COVID forever" policy initiated by the government of fascistic president Jair Bolsonaro (2019-2022) and continued under the current president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party - PT)

Entitled "Epicovid 2.0" the study is the result of the largest population-based study on COVID-19 in Brazil. Presented on December 18, the study's data was obtained through 33,000 interviews conducted through home visits in 133 cities in all 27 Brazilian states.

The study shows that the pandemic has exacerbated already extremely acute social inequality in Brazil, with the poorest population being the most severely impacted by COVID-19 and its multiple effects. Almost 15 percent of respondents reported the death of a family member due to COVID-19, and 21.5 percent of them reported that a child or teenager in the household had to interrupt their studies at some point during the pandemic.

Almost half of the respondents said they had suffered food insecurity at some point, reporting a lack of money and/or a reduction in their own food to feed the children in the household. In addition, almost 35 percent lost their jobs, and 48.6 percent experienced a reduction in their family income. All of these outcomes occurred more frequently among the poorest sections of the population and in households headed by women.

This situation caused informal work at the start of the pandemic to explode in Brazil and, even though it is decreasing today, it remains at high levels. Almost half of the workforce in Brazil was informal in mid-2021, shortly after the second deadly wave of the pandemic, a figure that has fallen to 40 percent today.

One of the study's significant findings is that 65.2 percent of those infected with the novel coronavirus have or have had Long COVID, that is, some 40 million people (18.9 percent of the Brazilian population). Of this total, almost 18 million people still have a series of persistent post-COVID-19 symptoms or complications. According to the study, the most prevalent symptoms among those with Long COVID are memory loss, difficulty concentrating, hair loss, joint pain, anxiety and tiredness.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) definition, Long COVID is the "continuation or development of new symptoms 3 months after the initial SARS-CoV-2 infection, with these symptoms lasting at least 2 months without further explanation." The condition can strike anyone, regardless of age or severity of illness, and affect different organs and systems of the

body, with more than 200 symptoms recorded to date.

Concluding the presentation of the study, researcher Pedro Hallal, Full Professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (USA), said that "the impacts of the pandemic on the Brazilian population are great and long-lasting," while at the same time "the pandemic has exacerbated historical health inequalities in Brazil."

Despite important findings about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil, the study presents the pandemic as a thing of the past. The virus, however, continues to circulate in Brazil and around the world, causing infections, deaths and a series of debilities associated with Long COVID – a situation totally ignored by the Lula government.

During the presentation of the study, the Health Minister of the PT government, Nísia Trindade, said that "Epicovid 2.0" is the continuation of "a broad, comprehensive study on COVID [that] was carried out during the pandemic," but was shut down by the "denialism" of the Bolsonaro government.

Hallal also explained that the first version of the study had the objective of "monitoring the spread of the virus" of COVID-19 in Brazil, while the second version, adapted to a "new moment in public health in Brazil", has the objective of "evaluating the impacts that the pandemic had".

Between May and July 2020, Hallal coordinated the largest epidemiological study on the pandemic in Brazil, funded by the Bolsonaro government's Health Ministry. Although discontinued by the Bolsonaro government, the study at the time showed a six-fold underreporting of cases in Brazil and that the risk of contamination among indigenous people is five times higher than the national average, and among the poor twice as high.

Hallal has become one of the targets of Bolsonaro and his political allies, who have attacked the monitoring of the pandemic as part of their "herd immunity" policy. After receiving a series of threats, particularly for his participation in the 2021 Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry convened by the Brazilian Senate that exposed the criminal policy of the Bolsonaro government, Hallal was forced to move forward a trip to the US at the end of 2021.

Despite denouncing the Bolsonaro government's "herd immunity" policy, Hallal and other researchers ended up adapting to strong class pressures as vaccines became widely available and capitalist governments around the world began to falsely pledge that they would contain the pandemic. The foremost representative of this policy was the US government headed by Joe Biden.

At the beginning of 2022, during the Omicron wave, Hallal used his scientific authority to fraudulently claim that this new variant “will infect a lot of people and very quickly, but it is less aggressive” and that “it can make this disease live among us, just as others do”. He also argued that “there is a positive side to Omicron. There is the possibility that the Omicron is the first step towards COVID-19 becoming an endemic disease and no longer an epidemic or pandemic.”

The Lula government’s boosting of Hallal’s scientific authority says a lot about its response to the pandemic. Since coming to power in early 2023, it has ended the daily reporting of cases, has failed to implement any educational campaigns about COVID-19 and has followed the policy of the world’s capitalist elite of restricting its response to vaccinating the population against COVID-19.

However, even this last measure has not been universal, has not used the most up-to-date versions of the vaccines and has suffered from numerous failures. Since the end of 2023, COVID-19 vaccines have only covered priority groups, leaving out the vast majority of the population between the ages of five and 60. The last time a person who is not part of these groups had a COVID-19 vaccine in Brazil was almost two years ago.

Reports of a shortage of vaccines against COVID-19 and other diseases have been frequent in the pages of the Brazilian corporate media since the middle of last year. In September, around 8 million doses expired, while municipalities reported a shortage of the vaccine. Between November and December, the National Confederation of Municipalities carried out a study and found that 65.8 percent of the 2,895 municipalities that took part in the survey are short of various vaccines, including those against COVID-19, chickenpox and whooping cough.

In addition, from 2023 to 2024, the health ministry incinerated almost R\$2 billion worth of medicines, vaccines and supplies from the Unified Health System (SUS), a waste three times greater than during the entire Bolsonaro government and a record for a 10-year period (2015-2024). Vaccines against COVID-19 account for the largest losses, totaling R\$1.8 billion.

As much as the Lula government tries to distance itself from the Bolsonaro “herd immunity” policy, in practice it has subjected the population to successive waves of infections, trapping the working class in a new normal of chronic diseases.

Although vaccines don’t prevent infection, they do reduce the risk of infection, hospitalization and of developing the numerous sequelae associated with Long COVID. Since the early years of the pandemic, it has been clear that the protection offered by the vaccine wanes after months, which is why booster doses and annual vaccinations were soon recommended to maintain immunity.

A significant study published in July 2024, led by Dr. Ziyad Al-Aly, one of the most prominent Long COVID researchers, showed that vaccination reduced the incidence of Long COVID by almost half. In the context of the free circulation of SARS-CoV-2, the authors note: “The large number of people infected during the Omicron era, the large number of new infections and ongoing reinfections, and low adherence to vaccination may translate into a large number of people with [post-acute sequelae of COVID-19].”

This and countless other studies expose the Lula government’s claim to “follow the science” against COVID-19 as part of a supposed “reconstruction of Brazil” after the Bolsonaro government’s years of destruction. Significantly, the publication of “Epicovid 2.0” marked the first time that officials from the Lula government spoke out about Long COVID. This was not accompanied, however, by any awareness campaigns to educate the broad Brazilian population about this chronic condition, let alone any explanation of the best way to avoid it: not getting infected with COVID-19.

In an interview recently published on the WWS, which had major repercussions on social media, Dr. Arijit Chakravarty, one of the main scientists warning about the risks of COVID-19 for public health, defended a “multifaceted strategy” over the “vaccine only strategy”. According to him, society “has a fighting chance” against a virus with an evolution like SARS-CoV-2 only with such a strategy that “limits the spread of long-term infections, develops combination therapies for long-term infections, uses the multifaceted approach to reduce viral load, including the deployment of items such as HEPA filters and distant UVC light and the monitoring of viral load in public spaces.”

The continued presence of SARS-CoV-2 and new outbreaks of diseases that had been controlled for decades is not an uncontrollable accident, but the consequence of an intentional policy against public health. Decades of accumulated public health knowledge provide the means to eliminate COVID-19 and countless other diseases.

However, all this has been ignored by the Lula government and other capitalist regimes around the world, which have subordinated human health and other social rights to profit interests. The struggle for fundamental social rights must develop in Brazil and around the world as part of an international and socialist movement to reorganize society on the basis of social and human needs.



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