

UK government blames young people as COVID-19 surges

By Thomas Scripps
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Late Tuesday night, as has become standard for coronavirus statements, the UK government announced that social gatherings, indoors or outdoors, would be limited to six people from next Monday, September 14.

Down from 30 previously, the measure is designed to disguise the fact that the government's reopening policy proceeds unchanged even as infections rise exponentially, and to provide it with an opportunity to shift responsibility for its crimes onto young people.

The six-person rule does not apply to workplaces or schools, and groups of six can continue to visit pubs, bars, and restaurants. As if to underscore the tokenistic character of the measure, organised sporting fixtures, including with spectators, are also exempt. Wherever there are profits to be made, or children who need minding so their parents can return to work, public health concerns disappear.

The six-person limit will be accompanied by a new asinine government health slogan, "Hands-Face-Space," supposedly encouraging hand-washing, the wearing of face masks and social distancing. This comes on the heels of the infamous "Stay Alert-Control the Virus-Save Lives" message.

The real political intentions behind these new interventions were summed up by Conservative government Health Secretary Matt Hancock, who noted in an interview on Monday that cases were rising fastest among young people, before saying, "The question is, how much are you willing to risk the lives of yourself and others by breaking the social distancing rules?" and, "Don't kill your gran by catching coronavirus and then passing it on."

The outrageous misrepresentation perpetrated by this callous statement is that the renewed spread of the virus is down to failings of individual responsibility. Limiting gatherings to six has been justified with reference to incidents of illegal raves and house parties—given pages

and pages of coverage in the press.

At best, it is only mentioned in passing that although the highest levels of infection are in people in their 20s, the rise in cases is spread across the working-age population. Or that young people are more likely to work in public-facing roles like hospitality—the front lines of the government's own "Eat Out to Help Out" scheme—more likely to work in insecure employment, where taking precautions against the virus is frequently impossible, and more likely to be forced to live in shared accommodation.

In a circle that cannot be squared, the government simultaneously expresses "concern" over the "sharp rise" in cases amongst young people, while pushing forward its drive to reopen schools that have already become a breeding ground for the virus. Just one week after the reopening of schools, England has seen 223 COVID-19 infections, with 28 in Wales, 64 in Northern Ireland and 103 in Scotland (with a much smaller population than England, which opened schools earlier), taking the UK total to over 400.

The exponential spread of the virus will escalate dramatically this month, with the return of students and staff to universities—the very demographic now being demonised for its supposed poor behaviour.

All of which is to say nothing of the fact that by far the worst killers of grandparents in the UK are Matt Hancock and his boss, Boris Johnson! They not only presided over the transformation of care homes into killing fields this spring, as hospitals were emptied into unprepared facilities and the resulting infections claimed tens of thousands of lives but have now turned back to the "herd immunity" strategy they were forced to reluctantly and temporarily abandon in March.

The government's public health announcements are made to distract from these crimes and from the fact that it is their reopening of the economy which is producing the conditions for a second surge in infections. Official

figures are already beginning to reflect the consequences. In the past three days, the UK has recorded daily new infection totals of 2,988, 2,958 and 2,460. The seven-day average now stands at 2,198, up from around 500 in late June. This spread also underscores the fraud of “local lockdowns,” now covering millions, but which do little or nothing to contain the virus.

The duplicitous character of media commentary is underscored by their downplaying of this very real threat, even as they castigate young people. The BBC, in what reads like a government press statement, published Wednesday morning, “Five reasons why rise in cases is not all it seems.” These reasons are: “1. The ‘peak’ [in recorded daily infections] was a massive underestimate, 2. Extra testing is a factor, 3. Testing is targeted at hotspots, 4. Hospital admissions aren’t rising with cases,” and “5. Young people are testing positive at higher rates.”

Indeed, a direct comparison with the figures recorded during the first peak is distorted by the fact that the government’s woeful testing capacity at the time means those figures are likely underestimates of the real number of infections per day. But this is hardly a cause for comfort. Virus cases are rapidly increasing and are not confined to the young. They will reach the catastrophic levels seen earlier this year. At which point, hospital admission *will* rise rapidly as winter approaches, with a hundred National Health Service trusts at or above capacity and six overwhelmed completely, according to the *Guardian*, “even if COVID pressures are closer to May’s lower levels.”

Moreover, this increase takes place under conditions where the test-and-trace system is failing, with people unable to access the test-booking website and being sent to testing centres hundreds of miles from their home to receive one. In the seven days ending August 26, just 69.4 percent of close contacts of infected people were reached by contact tracers—the lowest weekly percentage since test-and-trace began.

As for testing being targeted at “hotspots,” these are now appearing all over the country. Seventy-nine local authorities have rates of infection higher than 20 per 100,000, the level at which an official “concern” is registered. The idea that extra testing is wholly responsible for the present increase, or that it is nothing to worry about because it is concentrated among young people, is a lie. The team behind the Covid Symptom Study App, with over a million participants, issued a report this week saying, “We are now confident that this rise is statistically significant and that we are definitely

seeing a rise in COVID cases in the UK. This is backed up by our R [Reproduction] value, which is currently 1.2 for England, Scotland and Wales and 1.3 for Northern Ireland.”

In an interview with ITV on Monday, Professor John Edmunds—a member of the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)—said that the reproduction rate (R rate) for the country was “already above 1 and we’ve opened schools. So this is a risky period.”

He added that he was “quite worried that schools have just returned, cases are increasing now exponentially. They are increasing exponentially now, from a relatively low level. But they are increasing.”

“The epidemic continues to increase and then we have Christmas. And that is very difficult. What is Christmas? Well, it’s meeting with your family very close. Restaurants and pubs and stuff like that. And it’s all high risk. And it’s all indoors. Indoors makes a difference.”

“Schools have gone back. Universities are high risk. They are going back in the next couple of weeks. And the government is trying to get us back into work and back on the tube and buying our sandwich from Pret-a-Manger, and things like that. That will have an epidemiological effect.”

BBC coverage could have been authored by the government’s press spokesperson. Health correspondent Nick Triggle wrote on Monday, “New figures show the UK faces an ‘impossible balancing act’.” Echoing Boris Johnson’s statement in March that “families are going to lose loved ones,” the BBC journalist wrote, “Keeping the death toll anywhere near zero is, sadly, going to be impossible.” Success, in his view, meant keeping the death toll below the appalling 41,500 fatalities officially recorded this spring. In fact, the government’s own “reasonable worst-case scenario” predicts 85,000 additional deaths.

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