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Over 100 children died from COVID-19 in Indonesia each week in July



A worker in protective suits takes a break amid graves at a newly opened cemetery for the victims of COVID-19 in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia, Monday, Nov. 16, 2020. (AP Photo/Binsar Bakkara)

Indonesia is now experiencing more than 1,500 deaths from COVID-19 each day on a seven-day average and has become the epicenter of the pandemic in Asia and globally. With the Delta variant now dominant in the country and only 7 percent of the population fully vaccinated, confirmed daily cases have reached a peak of 50,000. However, because of a lack of sufficient testing, the positivity rate is hovering around 30 percent, implying a gross underestimation of the true extent of the community spread.

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Coinciding with this catastrophic surge of cases and deaths has been a disturbing rise in hospitalizations and deaths among children, upending previous data that found that children infected with the virus face lower rates of mortality.

According to the Indonesian Pediatric Society, there have been more than 360,000 confirmed cases among children, accounting for one in eight infections. Additionally, over 700 children have died from COVID-19 in the last few weeks, at a rate of over 100 per week. Shockingly, over 150 children died during the week of July 12 alone, with half of these under the age of five.

Dr. Aman Bhakti Pulungan, head of the Indonesian Pediatric Society, told the *New York Times*, “Our [child death rate] numbers are the highest in the world. Why are we not giving the best for our children?”

Health authorities have noted that the rise in childhood deaths in Indonesia has coincided with the surge in the Delta variant of the coronavirus, underscoring the immense dangers facing children worldwide, the vast majority of whom remain unvaccinated in every country.

In Brazil, COVID-19 has become the leading cause of death among children ages 10-19, cutting down at least 1,581 youth in just the first six months of 2021. Another 1,187 children under 10 years old have succumbed to the virus since the start of the pandemic.

Even in more developed countries, where the Delta variant is surging, there is an attendant growth in child hospitalizations and deaths. In the UK, over 40 children are now being hospitalized with COVID-19 each day, alongside a general surge in the number of children becoming infected. Roughly 33,000 children ages 2-16 and 71,000 young people ages 17–24 have gone on to develop Long COVID, with symptoms lasting beyond 12 weeks.

In the US, child hospitalizations are also surging. On Tuesday, Arkansas Children’s Hospital reported their highest number of COVID-19 hospitalizations at any point in the pandemic, with 24 admitted with the virus that day alone. Officials noted that of the 24 children admitted, seven are in intensive care and four are on ventilators. None of the hospitalized children are fully vaccinated, despite more than half of them being eligible.

Similar surges of child infections and hospitalizations are taking place wherever the Delta variant is surging in the US, including in Florida, Alabama and throughout the South, as well as Missouri and a growing number of states.

Recent data from the UK indicates that the Delta variant has potentially more than doubled the risk of hospitalization within two weeks of contracting the virus over the same rates seen with the Alpha variant, which itself produced higher rates of hospitalization than the wild type of the virus.

In Indonesia, health experts have blamed the most recent wave of child infections on the gatherings and domestic travels surrounding Eid al-Fitr, a religious holiday celebrated by Muslims worldwide marking the end of Ramadan, which took place from May 12–13. Many abandoned all precautions during these festivities with children in hand everywhere. The rise in deaths among children in Indonesia has largely been attributed to the fact that the health care systems are inundated with patients, which means limited access for pediatric cases.

Dr. Yasir Arafat, a medical physician and public health professional who offers technical advice to Save the Children's COVID-19 response in Asia, stated in a press statement, "Until now, children have been the hidden victims of this pandemic. *Not anymore*. Not only are countries like Indonesia seeing record numbers of children dying from the virus, but we're also seeing an alarming rise in children missing out on routine vaccinations and nutrition services that are critical for their survival, which should ring major alarm bells. It is clear that, for children, the devastation of the past year will be felt long after the pandemic."

It has not yet been scientifically proven that the Delta variant's virulence contributes to the relative rise in severity of disease and mortality among children, or whether it is primarily a byproduct of the circumstances around the near-collapse of the health care system, which is leading to delays in obtaining medical treatment. In either case, the capitalist politicians in every country are fully to blame, as they knowingly implement policies that will deepen the spread of the pandemic and lead to further suffering and death among children, adults and the elderly.

Adding to the mounting tragedy confronting the international working class, a recent study published in *The Lancet* reported that 1.5 million children worldwide have lost a parent, grandparent or caregiver due to COVID-19.

Project HOPE's Executive Director for Indonesia, Edhie Rahmat, based in Jakarta, issued a statement Sunday on the impact COVID-19 has had on maternal and neonatal mortality. He wrote, "In Grobogan and Banyumas alone, there have been 85 maternal deaths already this year. That's more than double the rate for 2020. Most of these deaths happened within a two-month time period, directly coinciding with the second COVID-19 wave. Nearly 70 percent of maternal deaths this year have been the direct result of COVID-19 infection."

The statement added, "The same areas have also reported 184 neonatal deaths and 231 infant deaths. I am struck by the images and stories I'm receiving of dying newborn babies in some of the districts we support. These newborns are being released from hospitals with negative COVID-19 status, but later contracting COVID-19 and dying after being visited by neighbors and extended family members. It is heartbreaking."

Seizing on a slight decline in official infection figures in Jakarta, President Joko Widodo has announced that he will be easing restrictions this weekend, allowing small businesses and some shopping malls to reopen. These include traditional markets, vendors, and small local restaurants, even in the worst-hit regions of the country, despite warnings by health authorities that this will only lead to a resurgence of infections.

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