

Virus spikes in UK, new restrictions in Birmingham, England

September 11 2020, by Pan Pylas



Cleaners arrive in Birmingham Crown Court, which has been closed this afternoon and given a deep clean after a staff member reported COVID-19 symptoms overnight, in Birmingham, England, Friday, Sept. 11, 2020. Households in England's second-largest city, Birmingham, are being urged to stop socializing with others from Friday as part of a dramatic tightening of coronavirus restrictions in the wake of a sharp spike in new confirmed cases. (Jacob King/PA via AP)

Households in England's second city, Birmingham, are being urged to stop socializing with others from Friday as part of a dramatic tightening of coronavirus restrictions in the wake of a sharp spike in new confirmed cases.

Amid mounting evidence of a pick-up in transmission rates across the U.K., the mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, said tougher restrictions on household mixing in Birmingham, and the nearby boroughs of Solihull and Sandwell, were necessary in light of a big local increase in virus cases.

Though the ban formally comes into effect on Tuesday, Street advised affected residents "to avoid household mixing before then as it has been identified as one of the drivers of transmission."

Street said younger people have "to take responsibility" since the biggest growth in cases is among those below the age of 40. He also said that the restrictions don't apply to schools, workplaces or transportation.

"It is about household mixing," he said.

The city's director of public health, Dr. Justin Varney, said the uptick in cases is "linked primarily to private household gatherings" at the end of August.

According to NHS Digital data, the latest seven-day rate for the city to Sept. 8 showed 78.2 cases per 100,000, with 892 infections over the period—among the highest in Birmingham since April's peak. For the previous seven-day period, the rate was just over 30.



People sit on the grass at Victoria Gardens, in London, Thursday, Sept. 10, 2020. From Monday, social gatherings of more than six people will be banned in England—both indoors and outdoors—and Boris Johnson hinted that such restrictions will potentially remain in place until or through Christmas. (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)

The move, which affects more than 1 million people, is the latest hardening of restrictions following a recent spike in cases across the U.K, particularly among young adults.

Earlier this week, the British government, which has sole responsibility for public health matters in England, said social gatherings will be limited to six people from Monday both indoors and outdoors and that the new rules will be policed more stringently, including via the

imposition of fines. The other nations of the U.K.—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—have also announced similar restrictions on gatherings.

Over the past week, the number of confirmed cases in the U.K. has spiked dramatically. The daily increase has been running at near 3,000 for much of this week, around double the number the previous week.

Though much of the increase is due to more testing taking place in the community, it's clear that the epidemic has been spreading, though not at the speed it did in the weeks before the lockdown was announced on March 23.

The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which advises the government on virus-related matters, said the virus' transmission rate was likely increasing across the whole of the U.K. It said the reproduction rate is now between 1.0 and 1.2, meaning anyone with the virus is infecting, on average, a little more than one other. At the height of the pandemic earlier this year, the R number was thought to be around 3. It was largely flat or below 1 over the summer, meaning the epidemic getting smaller.



People sit on the grass at Victoria Gardens, in London, Thursday, Sept. 10, 2020. From Monday, social gatherings of more than six people will be banned in England—both indoors and outdoors—and Boris Johnson hinted that such restrictions will potentially remain in place until or through Christmas. (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)

Separately, a survey of over 150,000 volunteers, who were tested between Aug. 22 and Sept. 7, by Imperial College London and polling firm Ipsos MORI, found that the epidemic was doubling every seven to eight days.

"We've seen all across the world how a rise in cases, initially among younger people, leads to hospitalizations and fatalities," said Health Secretary Matt Hancock. "The pandemic is not over, and everyone has a

role to play to keep the virus at bay and avoid another further restrictions."

The Conservative government has faced strong criticism for its mixed messages since it started easing the coronavirus lockdown in late spring. It spent much of the summer, for example, encouraging people to eat out to help the hard-pressed hospitality sector and is now urging workers to return to their offices to help hard-hit businesses in city centers.

The U.K. has Europe's worst death toll from the virus, with just over 41,600 deaths within 28 days of testing positive. The actual toll is believed to be far higher as the government tally doesn't include those who died without having been tested.

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