



## Covid-19 deaths at work – where is the data?

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed the most significant risk to the lives of workers across the globe in a generation.

Despite this, a review of the annual reports of FTSE100 companies, covering their most recent reporting period, shows that the vast majority of these major employers have opted not to disclose data about how their workforce has been impacted by the virus.

Each reviewed company used their annual reports as an opportunity to describe the effects that Covid-19 had on the business and profitability. But there is a glaring omission of data on impacted workforces.

Key findings:

- Of the top 10 largest private sector employers listed on the UK stock exchange, only 10 Covid-19 workforce fatalities have been disclosed in their annual reports.
- These companies have a combined global workforce of over 2 million people, including those working in high-risk jobs during the pandemic such as in supermarkets, food factories, catering, transport, and logistics.
- 8 of the 10 largest employers did not disclose any Covid-19 related fatalities or cases among their workforce in their annual report: Tesco, HSBC, Royal Mail, Unilever, Sainsbury, WPP, BT Group, and GlaxoSmithKline.
- Across all FTSE100 companies, only 18 Covid-19 workforce fatalities were disclosed out of a total global workforce of 4.5 million people. The 18 fatalities were reported by 5 companies: Associated British Foods, BP, Compass, Polymetal International, and Shell.
- Only 4 companies disclosed the number of Covid-19 cases among their workforce, including 3 global mining companies: Antofagasta, BHP, and Polymetal International – with 1186, 486 and 1,451 workforce cases respectively.
- The fourth company, Spirax-Sarco Engineering, reported an employee case rate of approximately 3.7% in 2020, of which it says the majority occurred in Q4. The company also said it has established that over 85% were not workplace related. This suggests at least 250 potential workplace cases.
- Of the 92% of companies who disclosed no data, the vast majority provided no explanation for why this data was not provided.

## INTRODUCTION

Public health data tells us that Covid-19 has been transmitted in workplaces, with some sectors much more prone to outbreaks than others, and heightened rates of deaths occurring as a result.<sup>1</sup> For example, in the UK, workers in processing plants, service occupations, and transport roles have died at a greater rate than the general working population.<sup>2</sup> These risks have not been shared equally. Public Health England reported in June 2020 that individuals from black and other ethnic minority groups are “more likely to work in occupations with a higher risk of COVID-19 exposure”.<sup>3</sup>

And yet the annual reports of the FTSE100 companies, which have a global employee base of 4.5 million, present a very different picture. The top 10 largest employers among this group disclosed only 10 Covid-19 related workforce fatalities.

Across all FTSE100 companies, only 18 fatalities were disclosed. These include sectors where workers were on the frontline during the pandemic, such as in supermarkets, food factories, catering, construction, transport, and logistics.

The data provided in company annual reports does not present a credible picture of how the virus impacted workers. As a point of comparison, the Covid-19 mortality rate of working age people (aged 15-64) in England and Wales during 2020 is estimated to be 19.7 deaths per 100,000 people.<sup>4</sup> If this rate is applied to the combined global workforce of FTSE100 companies, it would amount to 863 deaths. The US working age death rate is higher, at 37.1 deaths per 100,000 people. This would amount to 1670 fatalities among the FTSE100 employee base.

Whilst these are crude comparisons given the variability of Covid-19 death rates internationally and amongst age ranges, they provide an indication of the levels of workforce fatalities that may have gone unmentioned in company reporting. Given that a company's whole workforce is often significantly larger than the subset of direct employees disclosed in reports, these estimations are likely to be conservative.

It is plausible that in companies which continued operations during the pandemic, a portion of undisclosed deaths could have been the result of occupational exposure to the virus. Without comparable data this cannot be determined and investors and other interested parties are unable to scrutinise the effectiveness of a company's health and safety protocols.

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<sup>1</sup> London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the Office for National Statistics, and University of Manchester. ‘Occupation and Coronavirus (COVID-19) mortality in England’

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/news/news/newresearchprovidesfurtherinsightintooccupationaldifferencesincovid19mortality>

<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics. ‘Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by occupation, England and Wales: deaths registered between 9 March and 28 December 2020’ Accessed May 25<sup>th</sup> 2021

[https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbyoccupationenglandandwales/deathsregisteredbetween9marchand28december2020#:~:text=chefs%20\(103.1%20deaths%20per%20100%2C000,per%20100%2C000%20males%3B%2070%20deaths\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbyoccupationenglandandwales/deathsregisteredbetween9marchand28december2020#:~:text=chefs%20(103.1%20deaths%20per%20100%2C000,per%20100%2C000%20males%3B%2070%20deaths))

<sup>3</sup> Public Health England, June 2020. ‘Beyond the data: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups’

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/892376/COVID\\_stakeholder\\_engagement\\_synthesis\\_beyond\\_the\\_data.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892376/COVID_stakeholder_engagement_synthesis_beyond_the_data.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Excess deaths associated with covid-19 pandemic in 2020: age and sex disaggregated time series analysis in 29 high income countries BMJ 2021; 373 doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n1137> (Published 19 May 2021). Working age people for the purposes of this paper refers to age band 15-64 years.

## FINDINGS

For this briefing PIRC analysed the annual reports of the 100 largest companies listed on the London Stock Exchange in terms of market capitalisation. The analysis looked for disclosures of workforce Covid-19 cases and fatalities within the most recent reporting period, which in all cases covered the events of 2020. A subsection of the top ten largest employers have been highlighted, alongside case studies of companies which have made partial disclosures.

The research represents PIRC's best efforts to locate and record Covid-related disclosures in annual reports. In the eventuality that data has been missed, it is likely that other interested parties will have found it similarly difficult to locate. Disclosures, where they do exist in reports, have not been presented consistently.

### ONLY 10 COVID-19 FATALITIES DISCLOSED AMONG TOP TEN LARGEST EMPLOYERS LISTED IN UK

Only 10 Covid-19 workforce fatalities have been disclosed in the annual reporting of the top 10 largest private sector employers listed on the UK stock exchange. These companies have a combined global workforce of over 2 million people, including those working in high-risk jobs during the pandemic such as in supermarkets, food factories, catering, transport, and logistics.

8 of the 10 largest employers did not disclose any Covid-19 related fatalities or cases among their workforce in their annual report: Tesco, HSBC, Royal Mail, Unilever, Sainsbury, WPP, BT Group, GlaxoSmithKline.

<i>Company</i>	<i>Sector</i>	<i>Global employment</i>	<i>Covid-19 workforce fatalities disclosed in annual report</i>	<i>Covid-19 workforce cases disclosed in annual report</i>
COMPASS GROUP PLC	Travel & Leisure	548,143	1	0
TESCO PLC	Food & Drug Retailers	367,321	0	0
HSBC HOLDINGS PLC	Banks	239,712	0	0
ROYAL MAIL PLC	Industrial Transportation	159,194	0	0
UNILEVER PLC	Food Producers	150,000	0	0
ASSOCIATED BRITISH FOODS PLC	Food Producers	133,425	9	0
SAINSBURY (J) PLC	Food & Drug Retailers	117,000	0	0
WPP PLC	Media	104,163	0	0
BT GROUP PLC	Fixed Line Telecommunications	102,200	0	0
GLAXOSMITHKLINE PLC	Pharmaceuticals & Biotechnology	94,066	0	0
	<b>Total</b>	<b>2,015,224</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>0</b>

With no requirement for UK listed companies to disclose Covid-19 cases in their public reporting, the lack of data may not come as a surprise. However, given the penchant for corporate statements to promote workforce safety as a priority during the pandemic, the lack of data to back this up is regrettable.



Investors will know from engaging with companies and regulatory bodies that this data does exist. Companies have been reporting these figures to their Boards and relevant public health authorities throughout the pandemic. In many cases this involves making assessments about the likelihood that Covid-19 cases were transmitted within workplaces.

What's more, as a handful of companies have demonstrated, it is possible to provide data on Covid-19 related cases and fatalities among workforces without taking a position on whether the cases resulted from occupational exposure to the virus. This demonstrates a will to be transparent.

Mining and extraction company Polymetal International disclosed 5 Covid-19 employee deaths but did not record these as being the result of a particular workplace incident or outbreak. Manufacturer Spirax-Sarco Engineering reports an employee case rate of approximately 3.7% in 2020, of which it says the majority occurred in Q4. The company also said it has established that over 85% were not workplace related.<sup>5</sup> This suggests at least 250 were the potential result of occupational exposure to the virus.

In a similar vein, Anglo-Australian mining company BHP reported that 486 Covid-19 cases emerged in their operations. Most of these were among their Latin American workforces, with 135 cases that were believed to be potentially infectious whilst at work.

Any outbreak at work is of concern, but simply by disclosing this data, BHP is ahead of most other FTSE100 companies in demonstrating that it takes its responsibility towards the safety of its workforce seriously. That is a striking indictment on corporate transparency regarding Covid.

#### COVID-19 key statistics and initiatives to 30 June 2020

Total number of confirmed <sup>(1)</sup> cases in the BHP workforce <sup>(2)</sup> (potentially infectious while at work) <sup>(3)</sup>  Figures for persons potentially infectious while at work are included irrespective of where infection may have occurred	Minerals Australia <sup>(4)</sup>	4 (0)
	Minerals Americas <sup>(5)</sup>	455 (135)
	Petroleum <sup>(6)</sup>	27 (0)
	Asia/Europe	0 (0)
	<b>Global total</b>	<b>486 (135)</b>

i BHP 2020 Annual report p15

The company acknowledged the increased safety risks posed to their workforces and nearby communities during the Covid-19 pandemic and offered the following explanation as to why, despite evident workplace outbreaks, no fatalities were recorded:

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.spiraxsarcoengineering.com/sites/spirax-sarco-corp/files/annual\\_reports/annual2020/index.html](https://www.spiraxsarcoengineering.com/sites/spirax-sarco-corp/files/annual_reports/annual2020/index.html)

### Occupational illness

In FY2020, the reported incidence of occupational illness<sup>(ii)</sup> for employees was 4.3 per million hours worked, a decrease of 1.6 per cent compared with FY2019. The hours worked increased by 9 per cent reducing the overall occupational illness rate.

Excluded from this reporting are cases of COVID-19 among our employees that may have arisen from workplace transmission. This is due to the inherent difficulty in concluding, with reasonable certainty, that a person was infected as a consequence of work-related activities or exposure in a setting of high levels of community transmission and evolving understanding of the epidemiological criteria for infection. For internal risk management purposes, we have sought to identify where risks of workplace transmission may have been a factor. Review of this information, along with a suite of leading indicators, has supported the continual evaluation of the effectiveness of our COVID-19 controls and informed improvement opportunities. We are progressing work on classification and verification of potential work-relatedness for COVID-19 cases in further support of enhancing our risk management processes and enabling external reporting. For key statistics and more information on our COVID-19 response, refer to section 1.4.6.

*ii BHP 2020 annual report p56*

### REASONS PROVIDED FOR LACK OF DISCLOURE

Most companies provided no explanation as to why they have not included employee Covid-19 cases and fatalities in their annual reporting. Among those who did provide an explanation, the most common reason was that it is too hard to make an assessment about which deaths resulted from occupational exposure and which were contracted outside of work as a result of community transmission.

A lack of regulatory requirements was also implied as a factor. Notably, varying local regulations resulted in one partial disclosures from a company: outsourcing giant Compass Group was required to report just one of its Covid-19 workforce fatalities in accordance with local state-level regulations in the US. The company is one of the largest private sector employers in the world, with a global workforce of half a million people including in frontline roles such as catering facilities in hospitals. It is fair therefore to assume that this one death was not the only to have occurred, but that it was the only one which the company had a legal requirement disclose.

Compass offered the following explanation for its partial disclosure:

The dynamic nature of the COVID-19 virus means that when contracted, it is very difficult to identify the source of the infection. While some of our colleagues have been affected by the virus, our investigations have found no conclusive evidence that the sources of contraction originated within our work environments. We have, however, reported one workplace related COVID-19 fatality of a colleague who was a front line worker in a hospital in our North American business. Although there is no conclusive evidence that our colleague contracted the virus while at work, local law makes the presumption that for front line workers, the virus was contracted in the workplace.

*iii Compass 2020 annual report, p107*

The voice of responsible shareowners

Other companies have opted for obituary tributes to members of the workforce lost, such as the statements below from owner of Premier Inn hotel chain, Whitbread Plc, and industrial company CRH Plc. Such narrative passages provide opportunities for companies to express their sorrow under the circumstances but lack the supporting data required to understand what role occupational exposure to the virus may have played.

As I said, the year has been challenging for everyone and our team members up and down the country have not been immune to that. Sadly, we have lost some Whitbread colleagues to the virus and many of our team members will have lost loved ones. I am sure that many of our shareholders will also have suffered losses, and I would like to offer our condolences to the families and friends of those that are sadly no longer with us.

*iv Whitbread 2020 annual report p68*

Regrettably CRH employees and their families are being impacted by COVID-19, with a number suffering adverse health outcomes including, tragically, bereavement. The Board offers its deepest sympathy to employees and the families of CRH employees who have lost loved ones.

*v CRH 2020 annual report p4.*



## CONCLUSION

Covid-19 is the biggest occupational health issue in a generation. Yet the overwhelming majority of companies have chosen not to disclose data publicly that would help shine light on the role that business decisions and working practices may have played in the spread of the virus.

There has been significant scope afforded to companies to self-manage the narrative and disclosure about how the pandemic affected their operations. When companies are left to their own devices to determine what data should be in the public realm, as has been the case in relation to Covid-19, the resultant dataset is unreliable.

Employers cannot be blamed for the lack of regulation and guidance in this area. Confounding this lack of regulation, executives have incentives to downplay any harmful activities resulting from their handling of the pandemic. Litigation risk is a factor. Meeting KPIs and health and safety targets is another. Earlier this year, PIRC published research on the widespread corporate practice of taking worker fatalities into account when determining the size of an executive bonus package.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, at a time when the “S” of ESG (environmental, social and governance) performance of companies is increasingly being prioritised by investors, the lack of Covid-19 disclosure is regrettable. It suggests an unwillingness to face scrutiny and to share responsibility, where it is due, for any avoidable harm and loss of life suffered by workers. It also raises questions about the effectiveness of investor engagement over worker safety, and potential ‘social washing’. If company shareholders do not have access to data relating to Covid-19 cases and fatalities among the workforce, it is difficult to see how they are assessing company effectiveness in responding to the pandemic.

Stronger expectations and requirements should be put on companies to be accountable for any occupational risks that have occurred. This starts with transparency about how the virus has impacted workforces, including both direct employees and contracted workers, with disclosure of comparable data on cases and fatalities among these groups.

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<sup>6</sup> *How Much is a Worker's Life Worth?*, PIRC, April 2021