

Protective ‘herd immunity’ may come a lot sooner than predicted

To achieve so-called herd immunity — the point at which the virus can no longer spread widely because there are not enough vulnerable humans — scientists have suggested that perhaps 70 percent of a given population must be immune, through vaccination or because they survived the infection.

Now some researchers are wrestling with a hopeful possibility. In interviews with The New York Times, more than a dozen scientists said that the threshold is likely to be much lower: just 50 percent, perhaps even less. If that’s true, then it may be possible to turn back the coronavirus more quickly than once thought.

The new estimates result from complicated statistical modeling of the pandemic, and the models have all taken divergent approaches, yielding inconsistent estimates. It is not certain that any community in the world has enough residents now immune to the virus to resist a second wave.

But in parts of New York, London and Mumbai, for example, it is not inconceivable that there is already substantial immunity to the coronavirus, scientists said.

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“I’m quite prepared to believe that there are pockets in New York City and London which have substantial immunity,” said Bill Hanage, an epidemiologist at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. “What happens this winter will reflect that.”

“The question of what it means for the population as a whole, however, is much more fraught,” he added.

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