

Australia: Coronavirus infections spike in Melbourne's working class suburbs

Patrick O'Connor**24 June 2020**

Several Melbourne working class suburbs have been hit with a sharp increase in coronavirus infections over the last week. The reproduction number (R0), which estimates how many people someone with COVID-19 is infecting, has escalated in just seven days from just below 1 to 2.5.

Health authorities today reported 20 new infections, bringing the total number of new cases in the state of Victoria since June 17 to 149. The state also today reported a new confirmed coronavirus death, a man in his 80s.

A large majority of the new infections are not from quarantined travellers returning from overseas, but are community transmissions. Many are from unknown sources, indicating that the virus is again spreading in an unchecked manner. Victoria's Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton declared that the state was at a "tipping point."

Six local government areas are the worst affected—Brimbank, Hume, Darebin, and Moreland, in Melbourne's north and west, and Cardinia and Casey, in the city's outer south-east. All are working class areas, with a total population of more than 1 million. Many feature large immigrant communities. In Brimbank, for example, (which includes the suburbs of Sunshine and St Albans), of the nearly 200,000 residents, 93,000 people were born overseas and 113,000 people speak a language other than English.

The situation contrasts with the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, when the first wave of infections in Australia disproportionately affected upper-middle class areas, due to people returning with the virus from their holidays from Europe.

There are multiple clusters. Two retail workers at Northland shopping centre are among the infected. A warehouse worker at the Coles distribution centre in

Laverton is also a confirmed case. Several security guards and hotel workers caught the virus while working around quarantined people who have recently returned from overseas. Some of the affected workers told the *Age* yesterday about inadequate safety protections, understaffing, and lack of training in the hotels.

Teachers and school workers have also been seriously affected, with 19 schools and kindergartens shut down in the last fortnight due to confirmed cases of either staff or students. The outbreaks underscore how the premature reopening of schools last month increased the risk of mass contagion.

The situation in Victoria stands as an indictment of both the federal Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews.

Like their counterparts around the world, Australia's leaders have prioritised the needs of business over the health and safety of ordinary people. Despite the amply documented dangers posed by the pandemic, state and federal governments have failed to take the most basic of measures, above all with regard to testing.

In the early stages of the pandemic, World Health Organisation officials declared that one of the necessary responses was to "test, test, test." China has demonstrated the possibility of rapidly testing millions of people, yet across Australia, testing infrastructure remains underfunded and inadequate.

In Melbourne yesterday, testing centres were overwhelmed with demand. In several drive-through centres located in the most affected areas, cars were banked up in line for several kilometres. People had to wait 3-4 hours before being tested, and before the end of the day the test centres were shut down.

There is a reported maximum capacity of just 20,000

tests a day in Victoria, a state with a population of 6.3 million. As that capacity was reached yesterday, authorities admitted that there will be delays in the communication of test results, with people having to wait several days.

Tests continue to be rationed, with the official advice remaining that only people with cold or flu symptoms need to be tested, together with those who have been in contact with a confirmed case. This is despite scientific evidence that coronavirus is contagious, possibly most contagious, when an infected person is pre-symptomatic.

There is no plan to carry out large-scale testing of the population, regardless of symptoms, meaning that the real number of active COVID-19 cases will remain unknown.

The *Age* on Monday reported that in April, 100 medical experts and scientists, at the request of the federal government, outlined alternative strategies in response to the coronavirus crisis. One was suppression of the virus, with rapid easing of restriction measures, and another eradication, which would have involved maintaining lockdown measures until late June. The national cabinet, comprising Labor and Liberal federal, state and territory governments, opted for suppression over eradication.

This was a conscious, bipartisan decision to prioritise the needs of big business and finance capital ahead of the health of the population. Morrison bluntly declared on April 16 that “the eradication pathway involves an approach which would see even more economic restrictions,” adding that there was a “trade off” in dealing with the health and economic crises.

The latest upsurge in coronavirus infections is a direct result of this government strategy. What has become clear as the pandemic has unfolded internationally is that there is no “safe” rate of infection. Any degree of infection carries with it the threat of rapid onset mass infection.

Professor Tony Blakely, an epidemiologist with Melbourne University who was one of the 100 experts that advised the government in April, told the *Age* that he estimated that there was only a 10 percent chance that coronavirus would be eliminated in Victoria given the current infection rate. “The discussion that should be happening behind closed doors—and it’s a really unpleasant one—is whether there is a strong case for

Victoria to go back into lockdown,” he said.

In fact, what is being discussed within ruling circles behind closed doors is that lockdown measures affecting corporate Australia are *never* going to be reimposed, regardless of the infection rate.

This perspective was articulated in multiple editorials published in the financial and Murdoch press in recent days. The *Australian*, for example, on Monday issued an editorial, “Victorian outbreaks must not risk nation’s recovery,” which denounced “head-in-the-sand isolationism” and praised Scott Morrison’s contemptuous declaration last month that “we can’t keep Australia under the doona.”

Responding to the infection surge, the Victorian government has made only minimal changes to the reopening schedule. Gyms and cinemas were allowed to reopen this week, as planned, while an increase in the capacity of restaurants and bars from 20 to 50 was only postponed to July 12.

The central restriction announced last weekend was a restriction on household gatherings, with no more than five guests permitted. This is part of the state Labor government’s attempt to attribute the new wave of coronavirus cases to individual decision making rather than government policy.



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