

Risk of COVID-19 outbreak in New Zealand after government ends three-day Auckland lockdown

Tom Peters
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On Thursday, the New Zealand government lifted a partial lockdown in Auckland, just three days after it was imposed following the discovery of three cases of the more infectious UK variant of COVID-19 in the community.

The “level 3” lockdown in New Zealand’s largest city, while not as strict as the “level 4” nationwide lockdown imposed in March–April 2020, required schools and most businesses to shut. There are still “level 2” restrictions in force in Auckland, which require some social distancing and use of facemasks. The rest of the country is at “level 1,” with few restrictions other than a requirement to wear facemasks on public transport.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told the media there did not appear to be “widespread” community transmission. This was despite three more people testing positive for the virus on Wednesday, the same day she announced the lockdown would be lifted.

The source of the cases is still unknown. One of the women who tested positive works at the laundry of LSG Sky Chefs, which supplies food for airlines. Her partner and daughter caught the virus, it then spread to two students at Papatoetoe High School and a household contact. The school remains closed until the end of the week.

New Zealand has 40 active cases of coronavirus in hotels that have been repurposed as managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facilities overseen by the military. Under pressure from healthcare workers, teachers and other workers, the government imposed a strict lockdown in March last year and the country has so far avoided the horrific level of deaths seen internationally. However, there have been repeated

community outbreaks and individual cases that “leaked” from MIQ facilities.

The pandemic continues to rage throughout the world and more infectious and potentially vaccine-resistant strains have emerged. There is no internationally coordinated effort to vaccinate the world’s population as quickly as possible and take other measures needed to save lives. Governments in the UK, US, Brazil and elsewhere have kept businesses and schools open, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives.

Under these conditions, New Zealand and other countries that have been lauded in the media for defeating the virus, in fact remain vulnerable.

By ending the latest lockdown after just three days, the government is again gambling with people’s health and lives. Last year, in April and August, restrictions were similarly eased earlier than many scientists recommended, and Ardern sought to appease businesses by promising that she would seek to avoid another nationwide lockdown.

Brett O’Reilly, chief executive of the Employers and Manufacturers’ Association, told Radio NZ (RNZ) on Wednesday after Ardern announced that the lockdown would be lifted: “We’re very pleased and so is the rest of the business community.”

Epidemiologist Rod Jackson told RNZ yesterday he was “surprised” at the decision given three new cases were found on Wednesday. He said the government was balancing “between the cost to business and the threat to our health.”

Auckland University Professor Des Gorman pointed out to RNZ that the Ministry of Health found out about the first cases on Saturday night but the Prime Minister was apparently not told for 12 hours, and weekend

events “that should have been cancelled” went ahead, including the Prada Cup yacht race and the annual Big Gay Out.

“We actually don’t know where this outbreak came from,” Gorman said on Wednesday. “If you’re operating at the lowest possible level of risk acceptance, you’d extend level 3 for a couple of weeks.” He observed that lifting the lockdown would maintain “economic activity” at the price of a “higher level of risk.”

Microbiologist Dr Siouxsie Wiles told Newshub her advice would be to extend the lockdown by two days while more people were tested. She noted the incubation period for the virus can be up to 14 days for some people, meaning contacts could test negative, only to test positive a few days later.

Epidemiologist Nick Wilson also criticised the government’s decision, telling the *New Zealand Herald*: “We still don’t have any clear idea how the pandemic virus got through the border and many test results are outstanding.” He added that “much more needs to be done including getting MIQ facilities out of Auckland [and] tightening processes in MIQ facilities.” Without improvements, “there will continue to be border failures every few weeks.”

The MIQ hotels, which are housing about 4,000 people throughout the country, present a clear risk of new outbreaks. In January, three returned travellers in Auckland tested positive for the South African variant of COVID-19, several days after being released from two weeks’ mandatory isolation in the Pullman Hotel MIQ facility.

Nurses working at the facilities have expressed concern about low staffing and high turnover, because health workers feared catching the virus and were poorly-paid. On February 9, a nurse working at an MIQ facility in Auckland told RNZ, “The big concern is always that it’s going to get out into the community, and that standards of infection control practices are going to slip, because everyone is exhausted... I’ve done two 24-hour shifts, where you work a day and there was nobody to cover the night, so I stayed on and worked through until the next morning.”

Auckland Airport is being considered as a possible source for the recent cases. There are reports that staff who deal with airlines and passengers are not properly segregated from other staff. The *Herald* reported on

Wednesday that an anonymous airport staff member feared that the LSG Sky Chefs employee could have contracted the virus at the company’s cafeteria, where she could have been “sitting with other workers that deal with aircrew... I’m sure, within the premises, that not everybody’s going to wear a mask.”

On February 15, Ardern announced that New Zealand had received its first batch of coronavirus vaccines from Pfizer. There are only 60,000 doses, enough for 30,000 people. These will be given to border workers and those at the MIQ facilities. The government has not said when it expects to receive more vaccines, but Ardern said most of the population would be vaccinated in the second half of the year.



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