

Sydney's working-class suburbs hardest hit as pandemic spreads across Australia

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16 July 2021

In Sydney, Australia's most populous city, the Delta variant of COVID-19 continues to spread out of control. The working-class suburbs of south-western Sydney are now the epicentre of infections, with their residents bearing the brunt of the criminally-negligent policies of the New South Wales (NSW) state Liberal-National Coalition government.

On June 16, when the virus was first detected in Sydney, the Coalition government refused to implement any form of lockdown for ten days, allowing the Delta variant which is up to three times more contagious than the original version of the virus, to spread across the city.

Infections were initially contained to the affluent eastern suburbs. It was not until the virus had spread throughout Sydney that the government on June 26 issued "stay at home" orders. These do not include the closure of non-essential retail shops, while work from home "guidelines" only apply to those able to, ruling out the vast majority of the workforce.

After creating the conditions for the virus to spread, the Berejiklian government sought to blame the workers and the poor for the worsening outbreak. Without producing a shred of evidence, the premier and other senior ministers claimed that mounting infections were the result of family gatherings and parties, held in violation of lockdown orders in working-class areas such as Fairfield and Liverpool.

The government did next to nothing to make sure its health warnings and limited lockdown measures were translated and communicated in these areas, which include a substantial proportion of immigrant and non-English speaking households. Instead its immediate response was to send an additional 200 police officers, some on horseback, to these areas in a law-and-order "crackdown" on supposed breaches. Residents have

likened the response to a "military curfew."

NSW state Premier Gladys Berejiklian has refused to define which employees are considered "essential," effectively meaning those who cannot work from home must go to their places of employment. This is despite the government issuing orders for mandatory COVID-19 tests every three-days for residents in Fairfield who work outside of the suburb, and others who work there, in a clear acknowledgement that the virus is being spread in workplaces.

Characteristic of its punitive and intimidating response in these areas, NSW Health issued a statement saying, "Workers must provide evidence of the test upon request by their employer or a police officer."

Thousands of workers in Fairfield have turned out to be tested this week, queuing for up to seven hours into the night and again in the early hours of the morning, in response to the government directive.

Even as it continued to blame workers for spreading the virus, the government failed to provide adequate resources, creating chaos and producing huge kilometre-long lines of cars at testing centres.

The Fairfield Local Government Area (LGA) is being heavily impacted by the virus. Of the 952 cases of COVID-19 in NSW, the largest number are in the Fairfield LGA, which has reported 368 cases, nearly three times the next highest LGA of Canterbury-Bankstown, which has 115.

The outbreak includes the isolation of nearly 120 staff at Fairfield hospital, after a 24-year-old student tested positive to the virus on June 29. The impact on hospitals continues as medical staff at Liverpool hospital, just 10 kilometres from Fairfield hospital, have been forced into isolation after a pregnant female patient tested positive.

Fairfield, a multi-ethnic working-class area, is the

fourth largest LGA in NSW by population, with more than 210,000 residents. According to the most recent 2016 Census, 24 percent speak English at home with more than 75 percent speaking a language other than English. Nearly 60 percent of residents were born overseas, with the most common countries being Vietnam, Iraq and Cambodia.

The area has a high rate of unemployment, 11.5 percent in the December quarter of 2020, nearly double the national average. At the same time, the median weekly household income in 2016 was \$975, more than a third below the state and national averages.

According to figures published last week by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the majority of Fairfield residents cannot work from home.

In the nearby suburb of Liverpool about 11 percent of employees are managers and professionals, in Fairfield less than eight percent. This is compared with over 30 percent in Sydney's eastern suburbs where the initial outbreak was detected.

Fairfield and Liverpool also have large households. The ABC figures state that 20 percent of households in these areas are made up of five or more people, compared to 3.7 percent in Sydney's inner-city. A recent study by Public Health England reports that the Delta variant is 64 percent more likely to be transmitted in a home between family members than the previous wild variant of COVID-19.

Underscoring the danger facing workers in Fairfield, the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) issued a statement Tuesday recommending that adults under the age of 60, who cannot access the Pfizer vaccine in Delta variant outbreak zone, should receive the AstraZeneca jab.

This is a change to the previous recommendation by the Australian medical experts, who said that those under 60 should wait for Pfizer, because of rare risks of blood clotting associated with AstraZeneca. The advisory group also recommended reducing the interval between the first and second jab of AstraZeneca to between four to eight weeks in these zones, as opposed to the preferred interval of 12 weeks.

The ATAGI said that "in outbreak settings, such as that currently occurring in Sydney, the benefits of vaccination are greater" than the risks of early vaccination. It said that "the current cumulative risk of COVID-19 for residents of Sydney to 11 July 2021 is

approximately 10 per 100,000 and is increasing by 2 additional cases per 100,000 per day."

The advisory group stated this is "comparable to the Australian first wave (cumulative incidence 29 per 100,000)," but the risk in other parts of Sydney "and for specific populations" is considerably greater. "For example, in the Fairfield Local Government Area, the cumulative risk to date is [more than] 100 per 100,000 and has increased by [more than] 10 cases per 100,000 per day in the past week."

In other words, the likelihood of catching COVID-19 in Fairfield is nearly ten times as high as the average in Sydney, a figure that is rising every day.

One factor fueling the outbreak is the criminally low level of vaccinations in Australia. The federal Liberal-National Coalition government has overseen the slowest vaccine rollout of any of the 38 advanced OECD countries, with 10 percent of the population being fully vaccinated and less than one third having their first jab.

The result has been the continued spread of the Delta variant across Australia, with the Victorian state Labor government issuing a belated lockdown last night, after the virus was detected at two football games in Melbourne, each attended by tens of thousands of people. Australia's rate of hospitalisation remains at more than 10 percent of active cases with 131 currently admitted to hospital, 21 of which are in Intensive Care Units.

The responsibility for the outbreak of this virus rests squarely with the major political parties, including the Labor opposition, which in NSW has marched in lockstep with the Berejiklian government, issuing no criticism of the government response even as it has caused the virus to spread across the country.



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