

Australian data journalist: “Growth of COVID-19 outbreak will continue”

Our reporters
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Juliette O’Brien, a data journalist, is the founder and editor of covid19data.com.au. It is one of several web sites in Australia which have, since the early days of the pandemic, compiled and presented up-to-date information from official sources on COVID-19 cases, tests, deaths, vaccinations and other related parameters.

In addition to making this critical data available to the public in a more accessible and meaningful format than the perfunctory offerings served up by the state and federal health departments, independent sites such as O’Brien’s have pushed for greater data transparency from governments, especially regarding the country’s shambolic vaccine rollout.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke to O’Brien about the escalating pandemic in New South Wales (NSW). This discussion took place on August 17, when the state recorded 438 locally-acquired COVID-19 cases, bringing the total for the current outbreak to 8,653. Now, just four days later, the total has increased to 11,409, with 825 new cases reported today.

WSWS: [NSW Premier] Gladys Berejiklian said in the press conference this morning that the worst is yet to come (in September and October). What is your assessment of the situation in NSW?

Juliette O’Brien: You’d struggle to find an epidemiologist or infectious diseases expert who is particularly surprised at what is happening in NSW right now.

That is because, over the last seven weeks, we’ve been slowly moving in the wrong direction, essentially the entire time. We’ve had a low level of growth—slow exponential growth—and that means that new cases lead to more cases again in the next generation. And even though we’re not seeing doubling rates where we’re doubling every five or seven days, we’re seeing slower growth. So that means that, at this point seven or eight weeks in, the numbers grow more and more.

It’s not particularly surprising, and given the fact that we have many people out in the community while infectious

every day and we have thousands of cases that are unlinked, it’s clear that this growth will continue.

Having said that, with what we know about the transmissibility of the Delta variant, NSW Health must be in overdrive to keep these cases at this level. So to an extent, they are keeping a lid on the cases; our limited movement and our lockdowns are keeping a lid on all of the cases, but not to the point where they’re driving cases down.

WSWS: I heard your ABC interview with Norman Swan the other day and you were talking about cases rising to 500 per day by the end of August.

JO: I said next month, try next week!

The thing with that is, there are a couple of things to say. This is based on the reproduction rate, which has been bouncing around, around about 1.1, 1.2 to 1.3. When we get to these higher daily case numbers, the difference between 1.1 and 1.3 becomes pretty significant.

In the first place, my estimate was conservative. Within the realm of possibility, but conservative, based on the numbers.

Epidemiologists are saying it’s more likely to be 1,000 cases a day, and that’s in a matter of weeks. But I think, even in their estimates, at the moment NSW is at the worse end of the estimates, we’re on the wrong side of the margin there. The reproduction rate has ticked upwards in the last two days. Today we’re at 1.2, but yesterday we were really 1.3.

WSWS: Do you have any comment on the COVID-19 data made available publicly by Australian governments?

JO: In the NSW context, NSW has generally been a national leader in data transparency and how they publish the data. They were the first to publish data in machine-readable format, and they’ve always been very transparent. The surveillance reports have always had an excellent level of detail.

Something that has changed in this outbreak is the level of qualitative information that we’re given. We’re still given the quantitative information, but the qualitative information has deteriorated. That leaves us in the dark with regard to the

circumstances in which Delta is spreading. We're given these general themes of households and workplaces, and I have no doubt that's essentially the main problem, but we really have no understanding beyond that.

I am reading into the data at the moment that the reason for these numbers right now is that even though they've got it under control in Fairfield and Canterbury-Bankstown, it is the same patterns of spread in new communities. So it bursts into new households and new workplaces. We also have really worrying community spread in the southwest and the west.

With regard to data transparency and presentation more broadly, Ken Tsang [who runs covid19nearme.com.au] has been a saviour in terms of the federal data, because he has been scraping the federal website and the vaccination PDFs. Basically, everyone is reliant on Ken Tsang scraping those PDFs, because otherwise we would all be copying and pasting, or some other people like Migga [Anthony Macali, who publishes covidlive.com.au] would be doing their own PDF scrapers. So thank goodness for Ken Tsang.

I don't understand why they refuse, at a federal level, to publish the data in a format where we can actually use it. The situation at the moment is they are paying an agency, probably exorbitant costs, to take numbers from what is probably a spreadsheet, put them into a PDF and publish it, so that at the other end Ken has to spend countless hours scraping the PDF and putting it back in a spreadsheet. It's just ridiculous.

Some of the citizen-led data initiatives are excellent examples of why we should have data transparency in the first place, and here's an example. Ken Tsang, who has these incredible skills, has built these tools for exposure sites, and for finding a vaccination site that make it a lot easier than scrolling through a web page. So he is bringing his incredible skills from the commercial world to this public interest service and he's doing it for free and voluntarily, and all he's asking is for the data. So if they made this easier, then the community impact would be multiplied.

I do think with large organisations, I find that their priorities are often the issue. Even our commercial news and media, they were a little bit behind setting up data trackers partly because in the very beginning their key imperative wasn't a data dashboard. Commercial priorities are a big part of it and it's clearly not a priority for the government.

WSWS: This outbreak erupted during the school holidays—if it had not, the situation would likely be far worse than it is now. What do you think the impact would be if schools reopened for face-to-face learning?

JO: It is very hard for me to say what the impact would be because I do try hard to stay in my lane. I couldn't tell you that I have tracked data that indicates schools reopening

leads to a rise in cases, however we know that it creates many more people moving around the community. Mobility is what we are trying to limit.

Having said that, personally I believe—and I understand there are so many considerations for government in terms of what they permit and how we open up—but looking at the United States last year, where children did not go to school for the better part of the year and in some places the reopening of restaurants and bars seemed to be prioritised ahead of children going to school, it showed something about a society's priorities and I think our priorities should be children going to school and if we need to make sacrifices in other areas to make sure that happens, then I would personally support that.

WSWS: One of the bases for the drive to reopen the schools has always been the premise that children don't catch the virus, don't transmit it, or it is asymptomatic or mild. Now that has been refuted categorically. Just last Friday there were 44 children under 9 who tested positive.

JO: You are exactly right and that is the change with Delta, so it is definitely higher risk to reopen schools.

WSWS: Is it the case that you don't have the data on workplace infections? These are clearly a central driver of the outbreak under conditions where people have to go to work, especially in the western and southwestern suburbs. They then go home and infect their families. And the response has been to vilify those communities and deploy troops and police.

JO: No, we don't and that is what has changed in this outbreak, possibly because of sheer workload. The numbers in this outbreak are so much bigger than previous outbreaks. And maybe we will get retrospective data. I wouldn't put that past NSW Health to, when the dust settles, release a "bumper edition" epidemiology report that has lots of details for us, but in terms of what is happening right now we know very little beyond the broad themes of food processing, food distribution and freight.



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