

# Rising hospitalisations in New Zealand's Delta outbreak

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Today the New Zealand government reported another 75 cases of the Delta variant of COVID-19, bringing the total infections from the current outbreak to 687. Almost all are in the biggest city, Auckland, with 16 in Wellington.

The numbers have increased dramatically since a nationwide lockdown began on August 18. The first case was an infected person who returned from Australia on August 7, but the outbreak was only detected 10 days later when a different person tested positive. Before today, new cases appeared to be falling. Tuesday's result was 49 cases, down from 83 on Sunday and 53 on Monday.

The government's director-general of health Dr. Ashley Bloomfield told the media the lockdown had reduced the effective transmission rate (the *R* value) of the virus to less than 1, meaning the average infected person is not passing it on to someone else, and cases should decline.

Thirty-two people are currently in hospital, eight in intensive care. The hospitalisation rate for Delta is about 6 percent, twice that of previous versions of the coronavirus. Young people are more prone to infection and severe symptoms. The youngest hospitalised case is 18 years old. Ministry of Health data yesterday showed that 62.7 percent of those infected are under the age of 30, and 12.3 percent under 10 years of age. Six infant children have the virus.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern confirmed on Monday that Auckland will remain in a "level 4" lockdown, the strictest level, until September 14. The rest of the country moved to a less stringent "level 3" lockdown today, except for the Northland region which will move down tomorrow.

The lowering of alert levels south of Auckland increases the risk of the virus spreading. Under "level 3," all businesses except those that require close physical contact are allowed to reopen provided they adhere to physical distancing, masking and hygiene requirements. Schools

and early childhood centres can partially reopen, with teachers and children not required to wear masks. Internationally, schools are a major source of infections.

Although only a handful of cases have been found so far in Wellington, and these people are currently isolated, the government has listed more than 12 "locations of interest" in the capital, where people may have been exposed to positive cases. More than 3,300 companies with 33,500 employees are authorised to travel between Auckland and the rest of the country.

New Zealand is one of a handful of countries officially pursuing an elimination strategy, using lockdowns to reduce cases to zero when outbreaks occur. As a result, New Zealand has recorded just 26 deaths from COVID-19 since the pandemic began.

Ardern noted that in the United States "the daily average hospitalisations for COVID-19 are more than 100,000 people, similar to where they were in their last winter peak."

This reflects the criminal policies of the Democratic and Republican administrations, which have allowed the coronavirus to spread out of control and forced the reopening of schools and workplaces. The policy of "living with the virus," which is determined by the profit interests of big business, has been embraced by governments around the world and enforced by the trade unions, resulting in soaring deaths. The UK government recently decided 50,000 deaths per year is acceptable.

New Zealand's population remains highly vulnerable. Only about 27 percent of the eligible population (over 12-years of age) are fully vaccinated. Ardern said on Monday, "we are not running out of vaccine." At present, however, just over 300,000 doses of Pfizer are being delivered to NZ each week, and a major delivery of 4 million is only expected to arrive in October.

About 70 percent of cases are among Auckland's Pacific Island community, which is predominantly

working class, and disproportionately affected by poor health and bad housing, exacerbating the dangers posed by the virus.

Dr. Bloomfield said on Monday that 101 of the total active cases were “essential workers,” those still working under level 4, but that most had contracted the virus before the lockdown. They include healthcare workers, supermarket workers and food processing workers. A prison guard has also tested positive.

Some experts have called for tougher restrictions to protect frontline workers, many of whom are unvaccinated. Auckland University microbiologist Dr Siouxsie Wiles told the *Herald on Sunday* that physical distancing, perspex barriers and low-grade face masks were not enough to stop the spread in enclosed workplaces. COVID-19 modeller professor Shaun Hendy has suggested reducing the number of supermarkets that can open under level 4.

Over the weekend the Sistema plastics factory in South Auckland was forced to close after a worker tested positive. The factory was operating with about 10 percent of its 600 workers. During last year’s lockdown, Sistema workers walked out to protest the lack of PPE and inadequate social distancing.

In a statement, the E t? union, which has some members at the site, said Sistema was refusing to pay workers who are not working during the lockdown. Instead they are being forced to take leave. No industrial action has been called, however, and the union did not object to the factory being allowed to operate during the lockdown.

New Zealand’s under-staffed and rundown public hospitals are under tremendous strain. Radio NZ (RNZ) reported yesterday that Middlemore Hospital in South Auckland sent home 24 emergency department workers due to possible exposure to COVID-19. More than 90 St John ambulance workers have also gone into self-isolation. RNZ reported today that Auckland City and Middlemore hospitals are approaching or at capacity for negative pressure rooms, which help prevent the spread of the virus.

Scientists continue to urge the government to stick to the elimination strategy. Epidemiologist Rod Jackson told RNZ on Monday: “It’s a complete no-brainer the best situation is eliminating COVID from the community... No society can cope with an outbreak of Delta, particularly one that’s unvaccinated.” He called for all essential workers to be vaccinated and wear N95 masks if community transmission continued.

Epidemiologist Michael Baker and doctor Ian Powell,

former head of the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists, wrote in *Stuff* that “through its elimination strategy, New Zealand has one of the lowest Covid-19 mortality rates in the world—5 deaths per million,” compared with 1,961 per million in the UK.

The corporate media, however, is increasingly frustrated with the strategy. The *Sunday Star Times* complained that “New Zealand has never appeared to have a back-up plan in case elimination doesn’t work out,” and suggested that if the outbreak is not suppressed the country could follow Australia’s example. The Australian government’s policies of “living with” the virus have produced a disastrous outbreak in New South Wales.

*Stuff* columnist Andrea Vance recently wrote that it was “unhealthy” to only hear from scientists about how to combat the pandemic. “No political decisions are based solely on pure science,” she said. “Political decisions always involve trade-offs, moral values and priorities.” Vance said Australian PM Scott Morrison, who has called elimination “absurd,” was “more than qualified to comment.”

*Stuff*’s Luke Malpass wrote on August 28: “Elimination via lockdowns was arguably the best strategy. But in a world of Delta, the economic juice won’t be worth the squeeze.” Chillingly, he urged the government to “remind Kiwis that it can’t save every life, and also realign its messaging around the fact that health outcomes are never the only consideration in policy-making.”

The working class must oppose these demands to place “the economy”—in reality, profits—ahead of science-based policies to eliminate COVID-19 and save lives. As the explosion of deaths internationally demonstrates, the population cannot “live with” the coronavirus, any more than polio, smallpox and measles. Those advocating such a policy are serving as the mouthpieces for big business, which views lockdowns as an intolerable hindrance to the extraction of profits from the working class.



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