

# COVID-19 cases detected in Christchurch as New Zealand outbreak grows

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28 October 2021

Yesterday, New Zealand's Labour Party-led government announced it had identified two COVID-19 infections in Christchurch; a further two people, close contacts of the pair, were announced as positive cases today. These cases and another infection in the town of Blenheim over the weekend were the first detected in the South Island in nearly a year.

The country is in the midst of a rapidly growing outbreak, which began in mid-August in the biggest city, Auckland. Infections have also been found in the Northland and Waikato regions.

There are 1,484 active cases of the highly infectious Delta variant in the community. The size of the outbreak has increased more than sixfold in the past month, after the government decided on September 22 to ease the lockdown in Auckland from "alert level 4," the strictest level, to "level 3." This allowed approximately 300,000 people to return to work.

The government has dismissed scientists' calls for a return to "level 4" in Auckland, and is removing more public health restrictions, creating the conditions for the virus to spread even further. This week, Auckland high schools reopened for students in the top three year levels, allowing thousands to return.

On October 4, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that the government would "transition" away from its previous elimination strategy for COVID-19, which has limited the country's death toll from the pandemic to just 28 so far. In response to pressure from big business to "reopen" the economy—and allow the extraction of profits from the working class to fully resume—the government insists that people must accept the spread of the coronavirus throughout the country.

Outside of Auckland and Waikato, the country remains on "alert level 2," with minimal restrictions

including masks and social distancing requirements. COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins told the media that the government would not impose a lockdown in Christchurch, even though other people may have been exposed to the positive cases.

Of the Christchurch residents who tested positive, one had returned from Auckland on October 15. The first two cases, who live in the same household, became symptomatic last week and tested positive on October 26. The Ministry of Health has announced 13 possible exposure locations in Christchurch, including a supermarket and various shops.

Only 69 percent of people aged over 12 in the Canterbury region, which includes Christchurch, are fully vaccinated. Nationwide, 70 percent of the eligible population, i.e., just 59 percent of the total population, is fully vaccinated.

Speaking to Newstalk ZB, epidemiologist professor Michael Baker said steps should have been taken to keep the South Island free from the virus. He called for stricter rules for people travelling to the island, including "a vaccination requirement." The positive case who had returned from Auckland was unvaccinated.

Last week, Ardern announced that when 90 percent of the eligible population is fully vaccinated, the government will no longer use lockdowns to deal with the pandemic. Alert levels will be replaced with a new "traffic light" system, in which the circulation of COVID-19 is accepted as something the population must "live with."

Even when the warning level in the new system is "Red," indicating a high risk to vulnerable groups and an "unsustainable number of hospitalisations," businesses and schools can still remain open. Public health measures will include the use of masks,

distancing, crowd size management and vaccine certificates.

The new approach presents significant dangers. Epidemiologist Dr Amanda Kvalsvig, from the University of Otago, told the Science Media Centre (SMC) there would be “very little protection in public spaces for those who aren’t vaccinated, particularly children.” COVID-19 modeller professor Michael Plank, while approving of some aspects of the new system including vaccine certificates, said “stricter measures like business closures or localised lockdowns” should be retained.

Public health lecturer Dr Rhys Jones and immunologist Dr Dianne Sika-Paotonu both criticised the lack of a specific target for high rates of vaccination for Maori and Pacific island communities, which have been disproportionately affected by the current outbreak. As well as lower vaccination rates, these populations suffer from poor health, often linked with poverty, placing them at greater risk of hospitalisation if they contract COVID-19.

Dr Lesley Gray, a senior lecturer in Otago’s primary health care department, told the SMC that vaccinations, while important, would not stop widespread transmission. She noted that “other countries who have highly vaccinated populations... are still experiencing high case numbers, hospitalisations and deaths [e.g., UK].”

In Ireland, which has a similar population to New Zealand, 93 percent of adults are vaccinated. Yet on Tuesday the *Irish Examiner* reported there were 513 COVID-19 patients in hospital, 97 of them in intensive care; in seven days, the country recorded 67 deaths from the virus.

The New Zealand government is charging ahead with lifting restrictions. On Wednesday, Minister Hipkins announced a tentative date of November 15 for reopening Auckland and Waikato primary schools. This would inevitably accelerate the spread of cases, as has happened in country after country.

The teacher unions, NZEI Te Riu Roa and the Post-Primary Teachers’ Association, are assisting the government in overcoming opposition to school reopenings. They have taken no action to stop teachers and students being placed in unsafe environments.

A concerned parent of high school-aged children in Auckland, who asked not to be named, told the *World*

*Socialist Web Site* that Hipkins, who is also minister of education, was not listening to the concerns of many schools. “You can’t force parents or teachers or students to go to school, when school is not safe, under the Health and Safety Act,” she said.

She criticised the government for using exams and school credits as a pretext to reopen schools, asking: “When did we shift our priority from health and safety in the community to extra NCEA credits [qualifications]?” She praised Takapuna Grammar School’s principal, who announced that the school would not reopen, despite Hipkins’ instructions.

The parent opposed the decision to abandon an elimination policy. “We have to put life before profits. Without life, a school will become a ghost school, a city will become a ghost city,” she said. She pointed out that China had shown that outbreaks could be stamped out, but it required clear public health procedures and strict enforcement.



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