

# Experts oppose “reckless” easing of COVID-19 restrictions in New Zealand

Tom Peters  
5 November 2021

On November 10, New Zealand’s Labour Party-led government will remove more lockdown restrictions in Auckland. Retail businesses, as well as libraries, museums and other public facilities will reopen, and people will be allowed to gather in groups of up to 25 outdoors. Then, on November 15, the government intends to fully reopen schools in the city, which have already partially reopened for senior students.

The government is removing restrictions even as the COVID-19 outbreak centred in Auckland continues to expand. On September 22, it lowered the Auckland lockdown from “level 4,” the strictest, to “level 3,” allowing hundreds of thousands of people to return to work. Once retail reopens, the new setting will be defined as “level 3, step 2.”

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced on October 4 that the government would “transition” away from its previous elimination strategy, indicating that the population must now tolerate the persistent presence of COVID-19 in the community, with an inevitable increase in deaths. Internationally, the decision to allow the virus to spread, driven by the demands of big business, has resulted in a death toll of more than 10.5 million, according to the *Economist’s* estimate.

Today there were a record 206 new infections announced, bringing the total active cases to 2,479. Of these, 73 people, three percent of the total, are in hospital.

A man in his 50s, who was self-isolating at home with the virus, was found dead yesterday, bringing the country’s total official number of fatalities from the pandemic to 29. A friend told *Stuff* that the man, who was sick from COVID-19 despite being fully vaccinated, should not have been allowed to discharge himself from hospital on November 3.

The outbreak is spreading well beyond Auckland.

Parts of Waikato and Northland are already in lockdown and cases have been identified in Christchurch. Wastewater sampling has recently detected COVID-19 in Napier, Gisborne and Stratford, indicating that there may be unidentified cases in these towns.

Public health expert Collin Tukuitonga, an associate professor at the University of Auckland, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the decision to move to “alert level 3, step 2,” while case numbers are rising, is “reckless.”

Tukuitonga is one of several experts, including epidemiologist Michael Baker, modeller Shaun Hendy, microbiologist Siouxsie Wiles, and doctor Rawiri Jansen, who have publicly expressed concerns about the reopening of retail. Wiles told *Stuff* earlier this week: “We are going to have many people, many young people, get COVID and get long COVID as a result.”

Tukuitonga said that early in the outbreak, the government had a “strong science-based response,” which “prioritised public health over business and other economic considerations.” The decision to drop from level 4 to level 3 in Auckland, however, was “premature” and “was not a public health based decision; that was [based on] business and politics.” Tukuitonga believed that “the government was concerned about the economic consequences, and Aucklanders... getting restless at having been locked down for so long.”

The COVID-19 Technical Advisory Group (TAG), which includes Tukuitonga and other leading health experts, has been sidelined. TVNZ reported on October 13 that the TAG had “helped inform just about every element of our pandemic response,” but was not consulted on the government’s recent decisions to

abandon an elimination strategy and ease restrictions in Auckland.

Staying in “level 4” a bit longer would likely have restricted the spread of infection, even if it did not completely eliminate the outbreak, Tukuitonga said. The outbreak shrank to just over 200 active cases in late September. Since then, the number has increased more than eleven-fold.

“For a time, myself and some colleagues continued to push for level 4,” he said, “but we were told that the majority of cases in Auckland were within households and that locking the city down, inconveniencing the majority, was not going to have an impact on the outbreak itself. Obviously, the continued increase in the number of cases tells me that [the virus is spreading] not just within households.”

Tukuitonga said “we should have maintained the elimination strategy, maintained our restrictions, until vaccination rates improved,” especially among Maori and Pacific Islanders. While rates for Maori are improving, “they’re still way behind the rest of the country in terms of uptake.” According to the Ministry of Health, 78 percent of the eligible population (those aged over 12) is fully vaccinated. For Maori, the figure is 56 percent, and for Pacific peoples 71 percent.

Maori account for nearly half the active cases in the current outbreak. This reflects the fact that Maori and Pacific people are among the most impoverished sections of the working class, with a greater prevalence of poverty-related illnesses, often linked to poor housing, and less access to healthcare services.

The government has decided that once 90 percent of over-12-year-olds are vaccinated, it will cease to rely on lockdowns to combat the virus. The country will move to a “traffic light” warning system, under which businesses and schools will remain open with COVID-19 circulating in the community.

Tukuitonga and other experts are concerned that even if a District Health Board reports an overall vaccination rate of 90 percent, Maori could be significantly behind, leaving them more vulnerable to the virus. He called for the target to be met for every group in society before moving to the “traffic light” system.

He also believed it was “irresponsible to say we’re never going to go into lockdowns,” even when there is high vaccine coverage. If there was a new mutation of Delta, things could get “really out of hand” and a

lockdown would be needed. “Viruses are spread by people,” he said. “One of the most effective public health measures that we can adopt is to restrict movement.”

The concerns of public health experts are shared by healthcare workers, teachers and the working class more broadly. Surveys in August and September showed broad support for the elimination approach and the level 4 lockdown. A recent poll of 10,000 people by *Stuff* found that 43 percent “believed authorities had done a terrible or bad job at managing the outbreak.”

A retail worker at Sylvia Park shopping centre told Newshub yesterday that she was scared of spreading COVID-19 to vulnerable members of her family. “I just don’t understand fully why high volume places are opening while Auckland’s in this state,” she said.

Despite the widespread anxiety among workers, the trade union bureaucracy is enforcing the reopening. As in other countries, these organisations are working hand-in-hand with the Labour government and businesses to impose policies which will inevitably lead to many more infections and deaths.



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