

New Zealand's COVID wave continues over holiday season

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New Zealand is now into its third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and, as is the case internationally, the holiday season is posing the danger of an even greater surge. A majority of cases are in the urban centres of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch.

On December 30 there were 3,812 COVID cases announced, 767 down on the day before. The seven-day running average was at 3,471, but the week before Christmas it had risen to 5,157. With people away on holiday, reporting is likely to have dropped away.

About 30 percent of all cases are reinfections, which increases the risks of a person developing debilitating Long Covid. The young are being primarily hit by reinfections/ In the 10–19 years age group, 41 percent of cases are reinfections and 46 percent hitting the 20–29 group.

Active COVID cases are running highest among the 20–29 and 30–39 age groups. While 84 percent of the eligible population has received a first vaccine dose, just 54 percent has had one booster. With second boosters rationed and unavailable to those deemed younger or healthy, just 14 percent of the population has had one.

According to one modelling expert, the official infection figures are likely to be lower than the actual number of cases circulating in the community. Dion O'Neale told Radio New Zealand that about two-thirds of cases would go unreported, because people who were asymptomatic would not be testing. "Around 30 to 40 percent of infections are asymptomatic," he said.

Admissions to hospitals, including ICU, have been increasing since early October, peaking in the week prior to Christmas. There were 732 people in hospital last week with 16 in ICU, and thousands more at home in isolation. Because hospital admissions usually lag by a couple of weeks, doctors are warning the early new year threatens to be another "crunch time" for the overburdened health system.

The escalating COVID-19 death rate, which began rising in late October after 7 fatalities during the first week of that month, has been consistently high throughout December. It rose to 78 in the week to December 28, up from 64 the week before, including a child aged under 10.

According to data to the end of November, measured by mortality and age-standardised, COVID-19 in New Zealand has cost five to six years of public health improvements during 2022.

Despite the surge in cases and the mounting death toll, the Labour-led government and corporate media continue to insist that the pandemic is over. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern scrapped New Zealand's zero-COVID policy in October 2021, at a time when the country had experienced just 32 deaths. The government imposed the program of mass infection that had already killed millions of people worldwide.

Virtually all public health measures have since been overturned, with the death toll soaring to nearly 2,500 people in the past year. The figure will soon reach 2,779, equalling the number of New Zealand soldiers killed at the battle of Gallipoli in World War I. While this event is commemorated as a national tragedy at annual Anzac Day ceremonies, deaths from COVID are now totally ignored by the political establishment.

Underscoring the government's reckless adoption of the "living with COVID" policy, Ardern told the *Woman's Weekly* in early December this would be the first Christmas in three years "where we haven't had COVID hanging over us." After criticism from several experts, Ardern claimed she had been "misinterpreted," declaring: "This is the first summer where there hasn't been the risk of border closures, gathering limits, cancellations of large-scale events. We do, however, continue to have COVID amongst us."

Ministry of Health data released before Christmas showed school teachers and child carers had the highest

COVID-19 rates among all occupational groups. The data, produced by the ministry as part of its Public Health Risk Assessment of COVID report, was only released after a request under the Official Information Act.

According to the report, teachers had the highest rates of infection at 41 percent, followed by 38 percent of child carers, while hospitality workers were third at 36 percent. Occupations in the health sector ran between 30 and 33 percent, mainly because masks and other personal protective equipment were widely used within the sector.

Epidemiologist Professor Michael Baker said the data showed the education sector was highly exposed to COVID-19 with lower protection than others. Teachers were exposed to groups with a slower vaccine roll-out, for example five to 11-year-olds, who became eligible last January, and were not consistently mandated to wear masks, increasing the risk for COVID to spread, Baker said.

Culpability for the dire situation in the schools rests with the teacher unions, the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI) and Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA). Both organisations initially opposed demands to close the schools then later shepherded teachers back into them when big business and the government decreed shut-downs should end.

Neither union has mounted any campaign, or called strike action, to protect the health and safety of teachers and students. Following the initial outbreak in March 2020, the PPTA opposed calls from teachers and health workers for schools to be shut, with the union's president Melanie Webber absurdly declaring that they were "safe places."

Schools fully reopened for most of 2022. Over the winter, teachers expressed anger and said they felt unsafe in their classrooms as case numbers soared. Schools stated that they were at "breaking point" with many staff off sick. Records show that on one day in March 2022 over 250,000 children were absent. Schools were left to decide individually how they would deal with the spread of the virus.

Internationally, reopening schools was a key demand of the financial and business elite, forcing parents to return to work so that the extraction of profits from the working class could fully resume. However, during the deepening crisis mid-year, in an interview with *NewstalkZB*, on July 25 Webber repeated the false propaganda that schools were "safe," preposterously claiming that "a lot of transmission is actually happening outside of schools rather than within schools."

Health experts are already expressing concern over the situation that is likely to develop when schools return after the holiday break. Epidemiologist Amanda Kvalsvig and a team at the University of Otago last week repeated a call they had made, unsuccessfully, at the beginning of 2022 for an urgent "COVID Action Plan for Schools."

The existing policy, the group declared, "isn't following #Covid science, exposing students, staff, and their families to an array of preventable risks." Amid the recent surge, children were not required to isolate if a close contact at school was a confirmed case, and schools were not required to inform parents when there had been a positive case in their child's class.

Kvalsvig tweeted on December 28; "How will NZ children fare in winter 2023? The answer is not in viruses and bacteria, but in policy. We hope to hear an announcement that 'protecting children's right to life, health, and education is paramount,' backed up with guidance and resources for schools and families."

She warned; "If, however, we hear that 'The most important outcome is face-to-face learning and closing schools is a last resort,' the decision is business as usual and children are going to be collateral damage. We know already from NZ 2022 and N hemisphere winter what that looks like."

Appeals to the government and ruling elite are, however, futile. The policy of "herd immunity," which prioritises profits over public health, is backed by the entire political establishment. Heading into the fourth year of the pandemic, schools and other worksites will become super-spreaders of COVID and an influx of other severe illnesses, all hitting the working class hardest.



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