

New Zealand wages high-stakes effort to halt virus outbreak

August 27 2021, by Nick Perry



People walk along a beach in Auckland, New Zealand, Wednesday Aug. 25, 2021. By early next week, New Zealanders should know if their government's strict new lockdown is working to stamp out its first coronavirus outbreak in six months. A successful effort could again make the nation's virus response the envy of the world. Credit: Michael Craig/NZ Herald via AP

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A successful effort could again make the nation's virus response the envy of the world. A failure could expose flaws in its health system, including a shortage of hospital beds and a slow vaccine rollout.

The high-stakes campaign hinges on whether new infections, which have risen for the past 10 days, begin to drop.

Last week, the government put the nation into the full lockdown after only a single community case was detected in the city of Auckland..

"It's counterintuitive," said epidemiologist Michael Baker. "When there's a threat, you usually increase the response as it gets more dangerous. Here, we're doing the opposite, with the maximum response when the threat is tiny."

It's a strategy that has worked incredibly well for New Zealand but faces its biggest test against a tougher enemy: the highly contagious delta variant of the virus. Baker, a professor at the University of Otago, said the strategy was the best approach and he was optimistic it would succeed again.

Since the pandemic began, New Zealand has reported only 26 deaths from the virus in a population of 5 million. The death rate per capita in Britain and the U.S. is about 400 times higher. Remarkably, life expectancy for New Zealanders actually rose in 2020 as virus measures helped reduce other seasonal ailments like the flu.



People cross nearly empty streets in the central business district of Auckland, New Zealand, Friday Aug. 27, 2021. By early next week, New Zealanders should know if their government's strict new lockdown is working to stamp out its first coronavirus outbreak in six months. A successful effort could again make the nation's virus response the envy of the world. Credit: Michael Craig/NZ Herald via AP

The U.S. is in the grip of a wave of infection powered by the delta variant, which has sent cases, deaths and hospitalizations soaring again, wiping out months of progress.

New Zealanders lived virus-free in the six months leading up to the [latest outbreak](#), going to workplaces, stores and sports stadiums without needing to wear masks, while children attended school.

Then a traveler returning from Sydney brought the delta variant and it somehow escaped from a quarantine hotel. The outbreak has grown to about 350 known cases and is straining New Zealand's contact-tracing system as workers try to track down 30,000 other people who might have been exposed.

New Zealand has a large diaspora of Pacific Island people. The outbreak has hit this community particularly hard after spreading at a Samoan church event that drew hundreds. That led to some racist attacks on [social media](#).



The Parliament buildings stand in the central business district of Wellington, New Zealand, Friday, Aug. 27, 2021. By early next week, New Zealanders should know if their government's strict new lockdown is working to stamp out its first coronavirus outbreak in six months. A successful effort could again

make the nation's virus response the envy of the world. Credit: AP Photo /Nick Perry

"This is disappointing and, frankly, gutless," said Ashley Bloomfield, the director-general of public health. "I'm asking everyone in the country to be kind."

The lockdown prevents most people from leaving home other than to exercise, or to buy groceries or medicine. Retail stores are closed, as are restaurants—including takeout—schools and most businesses.

While much of the world is learning to live with the virus and has moved away from hard lockdowns, most New Zealanders still embrace them.

"Fortunately, there's a great team spirit," said Lesley Gray, a public health specialist at the University of Otago. "It's quite obvious to me that the country would rather keep this out. We want to stamp it out, keep it out."

Among the handful of other places that have successfully pursued virus elimination strategies are China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.



The streets are nearly empty in the central business district of Wellington, New Zealand, Friday, Aug. 27, 2021. By early next week, New Zealanders should know if their government's strict new lockdown is working to stamp out its first coronavirus outbreak in six months. A successful effort could again make the nation's virus response the envy of the world. Credit: AP Photo /Nick Perry

Nearby Australia stamped out previous outbreaks but leaders say they can't get rid of the delta variant, which has continued to spread in Sydney despite a two-month lockdown. New South Wales state Premier Gladys Berejiklian says she'll ease restrictions for vaccinated adults next month, despite record infection numbers reaching more than 1,000 a day.

George Williams, a constitutional law expert at the University of New

South Wales, said that while he supports the Sydney lockdown, he also sees risks in the government getting too comfortable in using its extraordinary powers.

"They're pretty draconian, quite authoritarian measures, which would be unthinkable outside a pandemic," he said, noting that unlike in many democracies, Australians aren't protected by a Bill of Rights.

Some Australians also are tiring of lockdowns. Hundreds have been arrested and given heavy fines this month for defying health orders at protests.



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In New Zealand, where the lockdown is even stricter, Police Commissioner Andrew Coster said about 70 protesters and other rule-breakers have been arrested since it began, but he's happy with the overall level of compliance.

With little else to do, many New Zealanders watch daily news conferences held by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and others. Like a slow-moving forensic drama, the briefings outline the latest infections, places those people visited and genome-sequencing results.

There have been moments of levity, such as when COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins misspoke about exercising outdoors, saying people could go "spread their legs"—a comment quickly mocked on social media.

But there will be serious consequences if the lockdown fails.

New Zealand's vaccine rollout has been the slowest of any developed nation, with only 39% of people having gotten at least one shot and 22% fully vaccinated. The country chose to use only the Pfizer vaccine and didn't approve its use until two months after U.S. regulators first approved it for emergency use.



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern gestures during her COVID-19 response and vaccine update in Wellington, New Zealand, Thursday, Aug. 26, 2021. By early next week, New Zealanders should know if their government's strict new lockdown is working to stamp out its first coronavirus outbreak in six months. A successful effort could again make the nation's virus response the envy of the world. Credit: Mark Mitchell/Pool Photo via AP



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern walks to her COVID-19 response and vaccine update in Wellington, New Zealand, Thursday, Aug. 26, 2021. By early next week, New Zealanders should know if their government's strict new lockdown is working to stamp out its first coronavirus outbreak in six months. A successful effort could again make the nation's virus response the envy of the world. Credit: Mark Mitchell/Pool Photo via AP



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The government blames the initial slowness of the rollout on Pfizer's delivery schedule.

But opposition lawmaker Chris Bishop said the government's "negligent execution of the rollout has left New Zealand a sitting duck for the delta variant."

Vaccinations have sped up rapidly since the outbreak began, with health workers now giving doses to nearly 2% of the population every day.

Another challenge is a lack of intensive-care hospital beds. A recent report by a group of experts noted that at the pandemic's start, New Zealand had fewer than one-third the number than the average in developed nations, and little had changed since then.

"The New Zealand [health system](#) is still poorly resourced to deal with any large outbreak of a disease such as COVID-19," the report found.

Many New Zealanders are desperate to visit relatives abroad and want to know when the lockdowns will end and the borders will reopen. Ardern, the prime minister, has promised a cautious reopening early next year but has given few specifics.

"For now, while we vaccinate, elimination is the goal," she said. "And we can do it."

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