Australian COVID-19 cases increase as governments ease restrictions

By Martin Scott
20 June 2020

As Australian state and federal governments continue to push for a return to work and the further relaxation of social distancing restrictions, new confirmed cases in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria provide a stark reminder that the coronavirus threat is far from over.

The country recorded 119 positive tests between June 13 and June 19, more than three times the previous week, and the most in a seven-day period since May 11.

The majority were in Victoria, where 89 new cases of COVID-19 were reported in the week to Friday. On Wednesday alone, 21 new cases were found in the state, more than on any day since May 4, during an outbreak at the Cedar Meats abattoir.

Fifteen of the week's cases appear to be the result of community transmission (i.e., not linked to other known cases), suggesting that the rate of infection throughout the state may be significantly higher than authorities acknowledge.

This would align with research published earlier this month by Macquarie University Professor Alvin Ing into the coronavirus-stricken Greg Mortimer cruise ship. The report revealed that 81 percent of the 128 passengers and crew who tested positive for COVID-19 were asymptomatic—that is, were infected by showed no symptoms.

"The findings may partially apply to the general population in that the number of asymptomatic positive cases are likely to be underestimated, the reason being that we don't test asymptomatic patients," Ing said.

"If you look at the current testing advice, it's if you have even the slightest symptoms, go get tested… but that doesn't include people who don't have symptoms, so we don't know."

Many of the newly-discovered cases were returned travellers in quarantine hotels, including 15 on Thursday. Workers at two of these hotels—Rydges on Swanston, and Stamford Plaza—have recently tested positive, suggesting that the containment practices in place are not sufficient to prevent a major outbreak stemming from returned travellers.

At Stamford Plaza, six security contractors have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and contact tracers are now investigating the possibility that the hotel is the source of at least seven other cases in southeast Melbourne.

While federal Tourism Minister Simon Birmingham has indicated that Australia's national borders are likely to remain closed until next year, the government has flagged likely exemptions for business travellers. In addition, moves are underway to create a "travel bubble" with New Zealand, which could be expanded to include other countries.

With Prime Minister Scott Morrison adamant that the JobKeeper wage subsidy will not be extended beyond September, lobbyists for the ailing tourism industry are placing increased pressure on state and federal governments to allow expanded travel.

Fourteen of the week's cases were linked to medical and aged care facilities, including a doctor who worked at three Melbourne clinics before developing symptoms and testing positive.

The previous week, the BUPA Aged Care Clayton went into lockdown and Scope Disability Services in Chelsea was closed after workers tested positive. Both facilities are in Melbourne's east.

Twenty-five residents at the Hawthorn Village aged care facility in north-eastern Victoria remain in isolation after one tested positive while in hospital undergoing treatment for an unrelated condition.

Contrary to the continued insistence by governments and health authorities that children are not susceptible to the coronavirus, seven tested positive this week.

Two Melbourne childcare centres were closed on Thursday after a one-year-old child and a worker were diagnosed with COVID-19. This follows the positive test

of a toddler at an early learning centre in Parkville the previous week.

Three Melbourne primary schools were forced to close in just two days this week after five students tested positive. The three schools, Strathmore, Pakenham Springs and St Dominic's, are all in working-class suburbs, as was the case with a previous outbreak in Keilor Downs, which caused the closure of four schools.

In NSW, four Sydney schools have also been closed over the past three weeks, after students and staff were diagnosed with COVID-19. As a result, hundreds of students, teachers, and family members remain in self-isolation.

Despite the closures, authorities have continued to insist that the return to face-to-face teaching is safe. Victorian Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton told 3AW Radio: "When we look at the classroom context of those kids, they don't pick up illness."

By contrast, the positive tests of those who recently demonstrated against police violence and Aboriginal deaths in custody have been prominently featured by health authorities and the corporate media.

Only three of the more than 100,000 protesters at the June 6 rallies around Australia have been diagnosed with COVID-19, and none appear to have contracted it at the demonstrations.

The positive tests have dominated media headlines and official health reports because they lend credence to moves by the ruling class to suppress mounting social unrest among Australian workers and young people.

The stern government warnings about the health risks posed by the protests, as well as the handful of tenuously-linked cases, also provide a convenient excuse if a sudden increase in the number of new cases results from the continued drive to ease social-distancing restrictions and force people back to work.

In NSW, 27 new cases were recorded between June 13 and June 19, more than three times the previous week, and the highest number for a seven-day period since May 7.

Most of the new cases are returned travellers in quarantine, but one is a man in his early twenties in the Illawarra region, south of Sydney. The source of his infection is unknown.

Despite the resurgence in cases in NSW and Victoria, both states are proceeding with the relaxation of restrictions on public gatherings and business operations.

Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews stated on Thursday that, while the uptick in cases this week was "a timely reminder… that this is far from over," the government believed it could "continue to slowly, cautiously, safely, reopen."

In Victoria, restaurants, bars, and licensed clubs will be allowed to seat up to 50 patrons per space from midnight Sunday, up from the current limit of 20. Indoor cinemas and concert venues will also be allowed to open for up to 50 people.

Indoor sports centres will also be allowed to reopen to 20 people per space, and pools will no longer be limited to three swimmers per lane.

In NSW, restrictions will be eased on July 1, allowing cinemas, theatres, music venues, strip clubs and brothels to reopen with capacity determined by floor space. While patrons will be obliged to drink only while seated and refrain from dancing, such restrictions will likely prove impossible to enforce.

Crowds of up to 10,000 will be allowed to attend National Rugby League games from July 1.

NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced on Tuesday that public transport capacity would be nearly doubled from July 1, supposedly to avoid overcrowding as the return to work is accelerated.

However, this will not be achieved through the provision of extra bus, train, and light rail services, but by the application of additional stickers to indicate that passengers can sit more closely than allowed under current social-distancing rules.

The easing of restrictions around the country is not based on an objective scientific analysis. No state has introduced the widespread random testing necessary to determine the true prevalence of the coronavirus and allow authorities to honestly assert the safety of reduced social distancing.

Instead, the changes are driven by the economic demands of industry and fuelled by the desperation of workers confronted with the choice of returning to work under possibly unsafe conditions or continuing to struggle with poverty-level government assistance or none at all.