Reactions and Attitudes Towards the August 2021 ‘Snap Lockdown’ in Aotearoa New Zealand

A CARUL Collective Research Report

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Introduction

The CARUL Collective is an interdisciplinary team of academics whose research explores the impacts of pandemic control measures on social life in Aotearoa New Zealand and the UK. Our work is based on a mixture of quantitative and qualitative survey research and semi-structured interviews. Having conducted four surveys during 2020, we distributed a follow-up survey in August 2021, just as a new lockdown occasioned by the detection of the Delta variant was being introduced.

This report summarises some of the main points that emerged from that survey that have not yet been reported in any published CARUL work. It has been prepared in the hope that an empirical overview of how people living in Aotearoa New Zealand reacted to the lockdown implemented at 23:59 on 17 August 2021 will be of value to Phase 2 of the NZ Royal Commission COVID-19 Lessons Learned and to the wider research community.

Our survey contained a mixture of quantitative questions and qualitative questions that invited 'free-text' responses of unlimited length. It was distributed to people who had taken part in previous phases of our research via email, and to the general public via a paid Facebook Ads campaign which ran from 18 to 25 August 2021. We received 1040 responses in total. The respondent pool contained a wide breadth of ages and regions of residence but, despite attempts to maximize variation, contained disproportionate numbers of women, New Zealand European/Pākehā people and university graduates—as is often the case with survey research in Aotearoa New Zealand.[1] However, our goal with the survey was not to attempt to study a representative sample of the population but rather to identify the range of experiences that people were having, and to thereby identify factors that might support or impede a positive experience of life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finding 1: The 2021 lockdown had widespread public support

1.1 Overall rates of support were high. 90.8% of our survey respondents said that they either 'strongly supported' (81.5%) or 'somewhat supported' (9.3%) the reintroduction of the Level 4 lockdown, while only 2.5% 'somewhat opposed' it and only 4.5% 'strongly opposed' it. The remainder either professed themselves neutral or preferred not to respond. Even given

[1] Houkamau, Carla A, and Chris G Sibley. 2019. "The role of culture and identity for economic values: a quantitative study of Māori attitudes." *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand* 49 (S1):119-36.

that our survey was not based on a representative sample, this is indicative of widespread public support.

1.2 As in the surveys we conducted in 2020, the vast majority of respondents explained that they considered lockdown necessary for protecting public health. They expressed strong support and gratitude for the approach being taken by the New Zealand government, pride in the level of 'community spirit' shown across the country, and relief that Aotearoa New Zealand had seen so few cases of COVID-19 vis-à-vis international comparators. The main difference we observed was that while in 2020, respondents had seen participating in the lockdown as a way of protecting Aotearoa New Zealand's 'most vulnerable' populations (sometimes specified as the elderly, Māori and Pacific people, or people with medical vulnerabilities), respondents in the 2021 survey often saw their participation as protecting the 'unvaccinated and not-yet-fully vaccinated' (referring here to people who had not yet received two doses of vaccine, rather than those who had declined vaccination).

1.3 The minority who opposed the lockdown typically did so on civil liberties grounds, or because they felt the threat COVID-19 presented to community health was low. These reasons were similar to those proffered by people who had been opposed to lockdowns in our 2020 research.

Finding 2: Attitudes towards the 2021 lockdown were often more complex than in 2020

2.1 The most common attitude towards the 2021 lockdown in our survey was one of unwavering support. However, the survey responses also included several lines of commentary on the 2021 lockdown that we had not witnessed in the 2020 surveys, and which suggest that support was sometimes more qualified or ambivalent than in 2020.

2.2 A significant number of respondents who were supportive of the lockdown nevertheless expressed considerable frustration that this lockdown was happening. Many suggested that the lockdown could have been avoided had there been faster vaccination rollout in Aotearoa New Zealand, and had more resources been given to improving the capacities of hospitals to cope with COVID patients. Others argued that the lockdown was the fault of international governments that had adopted suppression rather than elimination strategies, thereby allowing the more transmissible Delta variant to emerge.

2.3 While some respondents remained hopeful that Delta could be eliminated, many felt much more pessimistic about this possibility, based on their understanding of international experiences with the variant. Even respondents who felt that elimination was possible expressed concern that their futures would involve lockdown after lockdown, that international travel would never be possible again, and that there was no clear 'exit strategy' for living with the virus. There was a stronger sense of hopelessness and resignation in the survey responses compared to commentary on the 2020 lockdown.

2.4 In 2021, respondents were beginning to express concern that the lockdowns – as well as other aspects of the pandemic response strategy, such as vaccination policy – were becoming unduly politicised. Respondents criticised the media and opposition politicians for negative commentary on lockdowns in a way that we had not observed during our research during 2020.

2.5 Vaccination status emerged as a new mediator of how people related to lockdown policies. Respondents who had already received one or two doses of vaccine sometimes mentioned feeling more 'relaxed' about the lockdown, not needing to be so 'vigilant', and being willing to take 'risks' they would not have done in 2020. Sometimes these 'risks' involved actions that fell within the Level 4 rules (e.g. shopping in-person in the supermarket). Sometimes they involved bending or breaking the rules (e.g. merging bubbles with another household at Level 4).

Finding 3: The suddenness of the 2021 lockdown was a challenge, but many people were prepared

3.1 19.5% of respondents said they were 'extremely well-prepared' for the lockdown, and 43.9% said they were 'somewhat well-prepared'. By contrast, 12.2% considered themselves somewhat unprepared, and 5.2% considered themselves extremely unprepared. The remainder either professed themselves neutral or preferred not to respond. Since this was not a representative sample it is hard to be certain how these figures scale up to the population at large, but they are suggestive of a reasonable degree of preparedness across the nation.

3.2 Qualitative text responses revealed that many respondents had been anticipating another lockdown at some point in 2021, especially in the light of international news about the emergence of the more transmissible Delta

variant. Some described practices such as maintaining cupboards full of food and household supplies in case another lockdown was introduced.

3.3 The suddenness of the August 2021 lockdown nevertheless caught many by surprise. Some respondents felt they had not been given adequate time to prepare, stock up on supplies, or make arrangements for supporting vulnerable friends and relatives (who might have been brought into a bubble during the 2020 lockdown). Although the initial announcement indicated that the lockdown would be short, respondents often suspected the lockdown would last longer and found it stressful to be constantly waiting for updates on what would be happening.

3.4 Respondents often told us that having lived through lockdown in 2020, they 'knew what to do' this time around and that this was a source of reassurance. Anxiety about the lockdown was more keenly felt by those who had found locking down a struggle in 2020, or those whose living or work arrangements had changed since 2020.

Finding 4: Some people would have benefitted from extra financial support during the 2021 lockdown

4.1 Most respondents indicated that they were happy with the support available from the government, and that no further measures were necessary beyond a speedy vaccine rollout.

4.2 A significant minority reported financial pressures, and some expressed anxiety regarding the level of wage subsidy support that would be available. Concerns were repeatedly raised about costs of food, internet, rent, and other essential outgoings, and the possibilities that these could be capped or subsidised during lockdown.

4.3 There were also repeated calls for increased support for small businesses. Respondents suggested that more retail businesses be allowed to open on a delivery basis, or with COVID prevention measures in place. There was a particular appetite for being able to buy food from small businesses and market traders rather than supermarkets, not just to support these businesses but because their products were considered more affordable.

4.4 Some frontline workers asked for increased pay to recognise the risk of COVID exposure they faced at work. Others reported that they had already been vaccinated and so felt more relaxed about the risk of exposure.

Finding 5: There was widespread concern over the potential mental health impact of the 2021 lockdown

5.1 Many respondents were concerned about the effect that the lockdown would have on their own and others' mental health and suggested that better mental health support should be available.

5.2 Some respondents asked for free mental health support to be more easily accessible. Several described having to pay for mental health services to supplement what was available from their GP.

5.3 Some respondents suggested that mental health issues should be addressed more fully in government messaging – both by acknowledging and normalising the mental health challenges associated with lockdown, and giving fuller instructions on how support could be accessed.

5.4 Respondents in solo-parenting /co-parenting arrangements, who had experienced recent bereavements, or who had other pressing care needs expressed a desire for more capacity to connect with other households or access respite care when at Level 4. They explained that such arrangements could significantly help their mental health.

Closing Remarks

The August 2021 survey was the last survey we conducted for our study, and so we are unable to comment on how our research participants experienced subsequent phases of pandemic control measures. Survey participants overwhelmingly accepted the imperative to keep themselves and others safe by restricting their movement and social contacts. One survey respondent – a New Zealand European / Pākehā woman in her fifties from the South Island captured the prevailing sentiment very well: "I'm surprised how compliant people in Christchurch are about the lockdown. There has been no lockdown here since 2020 and there are no cases in Christchurch but everyone seems to have accepted the need for the lockdown. As always during lockdown it's kinda like a holiday, mums and dads and kids are out and about, people are exercising. Most people seem happy." It was nevertheless clear from our survey that the arrival of the Delta variant into Aotearoa New Zealand was – understandably – a source of frustration, despondency and anxiety for many. Small tweaks to ensure better mental health support, financial support, and, if possible, a longer 'notice period' in which to confirm caring and living arrangements could have alleviated some of the difficulties our research participants encountered.