

As mask mandates end, Canada's Atlantic provinces see a virus resurgence.

By Vjosa Isai

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In Canada's Atlantic provinces, once a refuge of sorts from the pandemic, there has been a resurgence of known coronavirus infections at a time when most provinces have ended mask mandates and scaled back data surveillance on virus transmission.

The four eastern provinces — Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island — were relatively shielded, in part by their location, from the rampant virus transmission that gripped the rest of Canada during previous waves. Part of the strategy was to limit out-of-province travelers in what came to be known as the Atlantic “bubble.”

The “bubble” has burst, but inter-province travel is less of a concern for public health experts than the effects of recently ended mandates.

“We’ve started removing masks, which for Canada is a big deal,” said Tara Moriarty, an infectious disease researcher and professor at the University of Toronto.

But measuring the effect of changes in public health restrictions is hampered by a lack of public data, as most

provinces have reduced the frequency of their reporting.

“The consequences are really serious in terms of the number of infections because people think that things are not too bad and they’re behaving accordingly,” Dr. Moriarty said.

In Nova Scotia, a province of about one million people, positive coronavirus test results have been rising since March, though the numbers may be “stabilizing,” according to a report issued by its public health authority. In Canada as a whole, the daily average of new cases is 10,073, according to the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.

Some infectious disease experts, including Dr. Lisa Barrett, a professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, have been recommending to the province that indoor mask mandates stay in place, and it’s unclear what the threshold would be to revive some public health measures.

“It’s really hard for people, without data being reported more frequently, to remember that we’re in a pandemic,” said Dr. Barrett, adding that the mask provided a useful visual cue.

Newfoundland and Labrador has also reduced its daily data reporting; the province recorded its highest number of Covid deaths in April.

Amy Hurford, an expert in infectious disease modeling at Memorial University in St. John’s, Newfoundland, has created her own dashboard.

“I think it fills a need, where people can get a better sense of situational awareness, by synthesizing the information that’s available from a number of different sources,” Dr. Hurford said.

Canada’s overall test positivity rate is 18 percent, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Despite a rise in hospitalization rates across some jurisdictions, critical care occupancy remains low, said Dr.

Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, in a news conference on Friday.

Booster shots also appear to have plateaued, months after the winter holiday frenzy to book limited appointments. About 81 percent of Canadians are fully vaccinated, and just over 47 percent have also received a booster, according to government data.

"We probably haven't done enough good communication from all angles, public health and otherwise. And so we're trying to do that once again, and give it another shot," Dr. Tam said.