

Weekly COVID Update:

**Cross-National Policy Comparisons and Canadian Trends in Social
Distancing, Social Media Activity, and Government Support**

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Foreword

Canada, like many countries around the world, is beginning to reopen its economy. At the same time, we are still confronting a serious public health threat in the SARS-CoV-2 virus and in COVID-19.

How are we reopening, compared to other countries? And how are we doing as a country at maintaining social distancing and the public support and attention necessary to sustain the fight against COVID-19?

On our Dashboard, we present unique quantitative data on:

- The openness of the economy on nine different dimensions in 52 different jurisdictions: 34 OECD countries, 5 US states, 10 Canadian provinces and 3 Canadian territories.
- Trends in social distancing in Canada.
- Trends in social media attention to COVID-19 and selected other topics.
- Trends in support for federal, provincial, and local government management of COVID-19.

We also provide a weekly qualitative summary of the actions governments are taking and considering taking to reopen their economies and manage the coronavirus.

Our data are updated weekly. You can subscribe to a weekly update by visiting our website: www.reopeningaftercovid.com.

Please direct any questions or comments to peter.loewen@utoronto.ca.

Data Visualizations from Dashboard

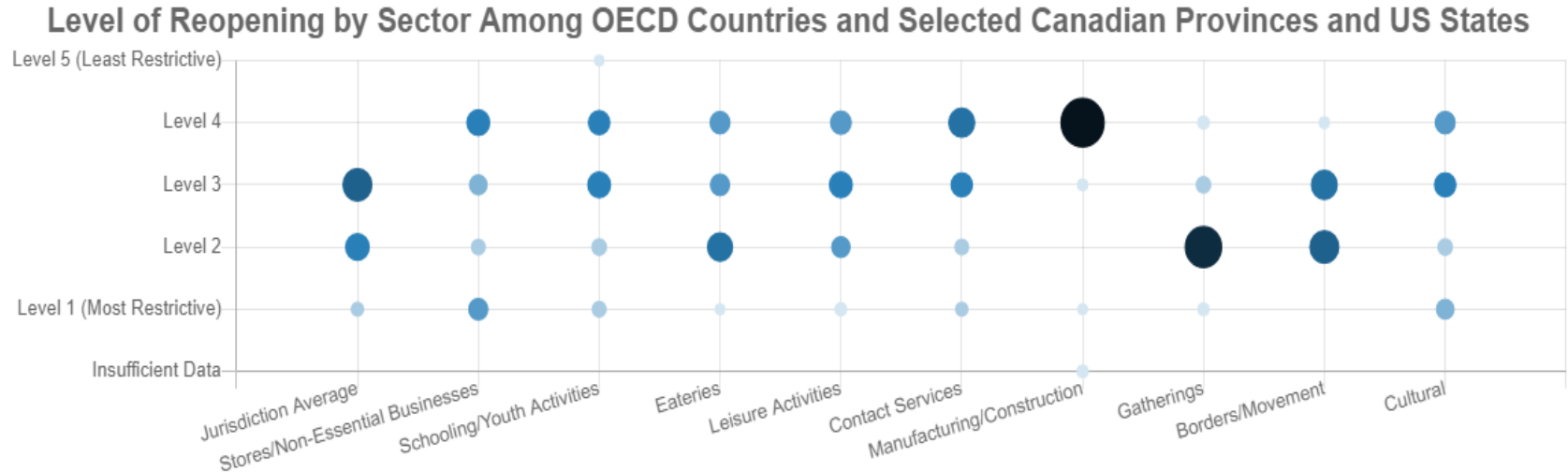


Figure 1 – Level of reopening among 52 different jurisdictions as of February 15. The reopening policies of 52 jurisdictions: 34 OECD countries, 5 US states, 10 Canadian provinces and 3 Canadian territories. For each jurisdiction, we classify a total of 9 different sectors: Stores/Non-Essential Businesses, Schooling/Youth Activities, Eateries, Leisure Activities, Contact Services, Manufacturing/Construction, Gatherings, Borders/Movement, and Cultural. Each sector is assigned a level of reopening from Level 1 (Complete Lockdown) to Level 5 (Unrestricted Access). The larger and darker a dot is, the more jurisdictions are at that level of reopening. For details, see www.reopeningaftercovid.com

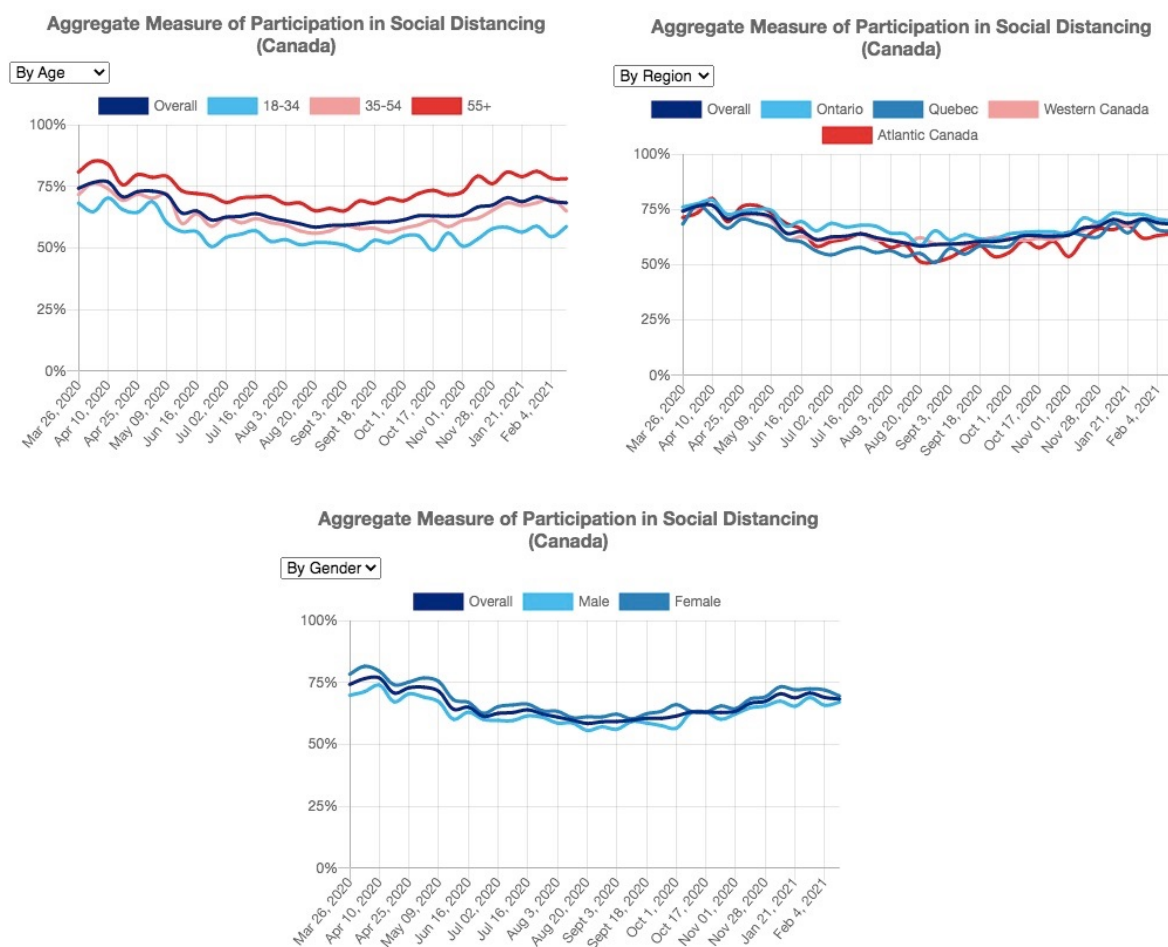


Figure 2 – Aggregate survey measure of participation in social distancing (Canada). We asked Canadians whether, as a result of the pandemic, they had taken any of the 6 following actions: avoided crowded places; avoided in-person contact with friends, family, and acquaintances; maintained 2 metre distance from others; avoided domestic travel; avoided public transit; and avoided the grocery store at peak times. The graph displays the percentage of these measures taken by the average survey participant. The surveys used to collect these data were run in partnership with the Media Ecosystem Observatory (MEO). Each survey has a sample size of approximately 2,500 people. For each survey, we worked with a leading sample provider to generate a nationally representative, online sample of Canadians. In addition, following data collection, we applied survey weights to each survey so that—within each province—the sample is representative of the population age and gender.

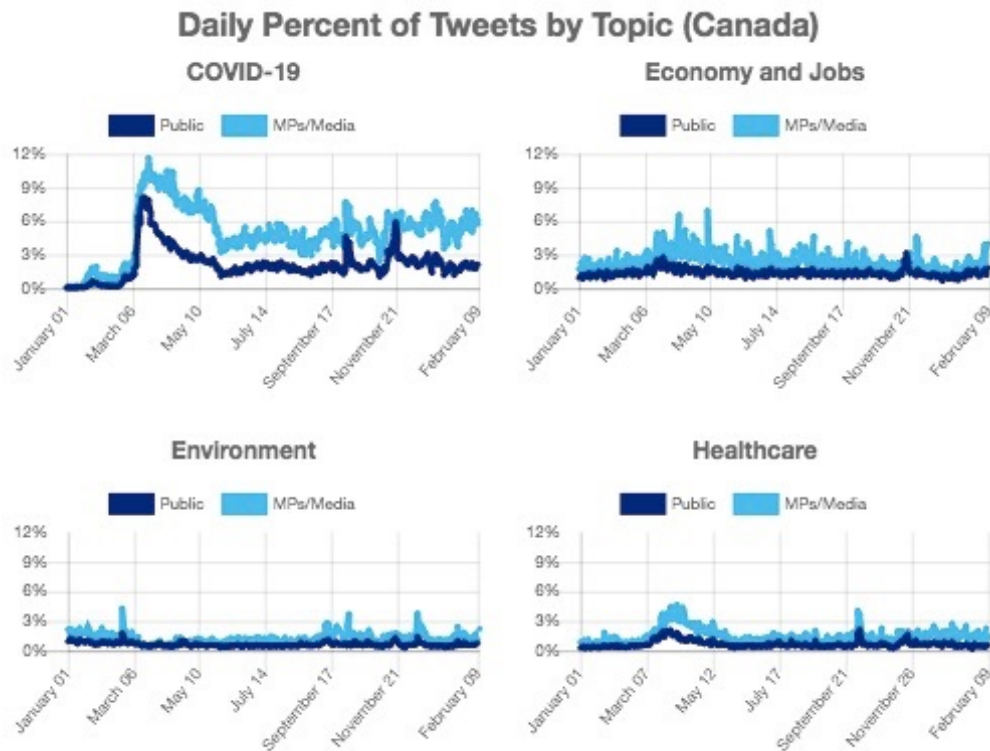


Figure 3 – Daily Percent of Tweets by Topic (Canada). The graphs report the percentage of daily tweets containing one or more keywords associated with the particular topic. The results are presented separately for MPs, senators, and journalists, on the one hand, and for the Canadian public, on the other. The Twitter data are provided by the Media Ecosystem Observatory (MEO). It aims to capture the entire Canadian Twitter conversation. To do so, MEO identified a set of politicians, political journalists, public intellectuals, and Canadian-specific hashtags and collected every Twitter user that touched one of these themes or individuals. MEO then evaluated each individual, looking at their follower or friending behaviour, biographies, self-identified location, and hashtag use and included them in the sample if they were determined to be algorithmically likely to be Canadian. The dataset contains approximately 200,000 tweets a day. The analysis uses a 10% sample of the public’s daily tweets and the full set of daily tweets from MPs, senators, and journalists.

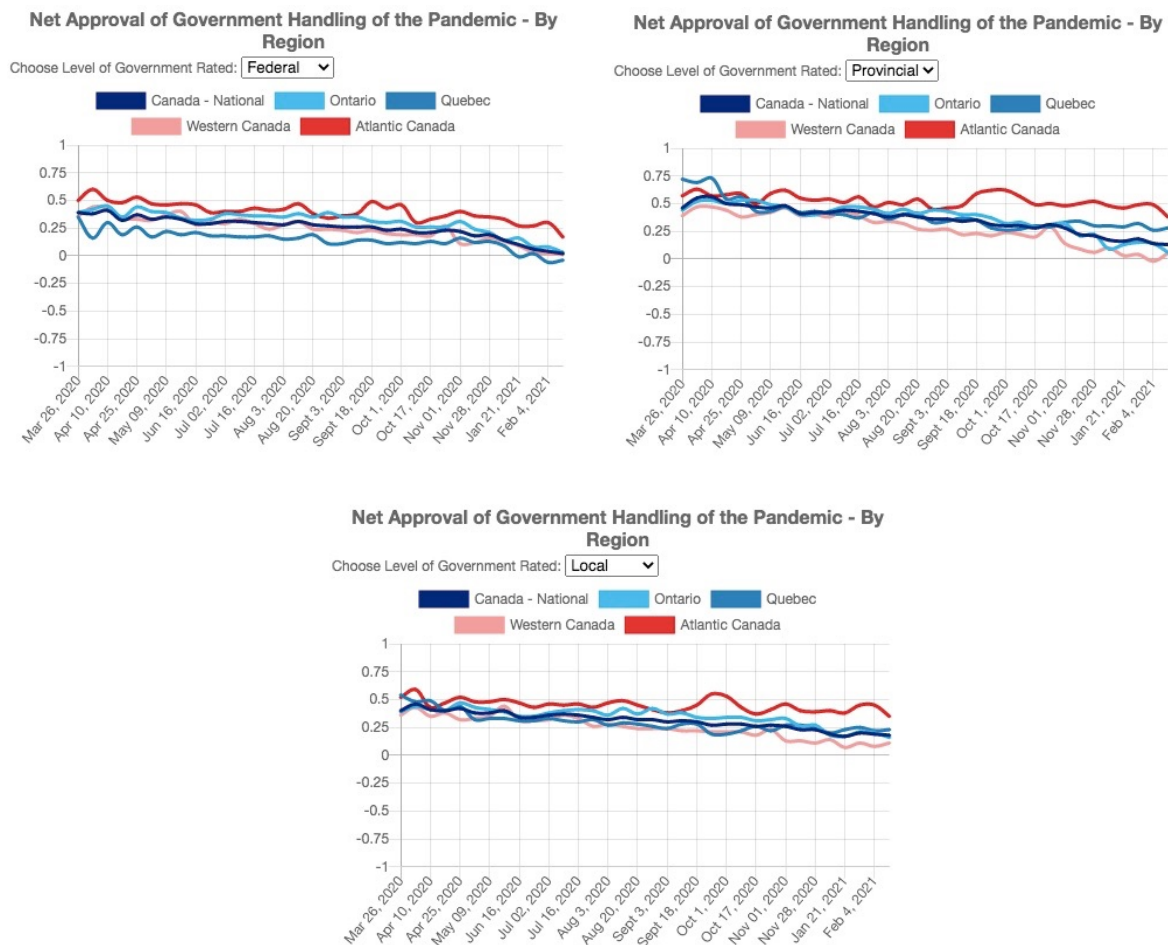


Figure 4 – Net approval of government handling of the pandemic by region. We asked Canadians whether they approved of how each level of government (the federal government, their provincial government, and their local government) was handling the coronavirus pandemic so far. To obtain a net approval score, participants’ answers were coded as follows: strongly approve (1); somewhat approve (0.5); neither approve, nor disapprove (0); somewhat disapprove (-0.5); and strongly disapprove (-1). The graph displays the average score. The surveys used to collect these data were run in partnership with the Media Ecosystem Observatory (MEO). Each survey has a sample size of approximately 2,500 people. For each survey, we worked with a leading sample provider to generate a nationally representative, online sample of Canadians. In addition, following data collection, we applied survey weights to each survey so that—within each province—the sample is representative of the population age and gender.

Individual OECD Country Profiles

THE AMERICAS

Canada

→ *Alberta*

On February 11, there were 351 daily new cases of COVID-19 in the province.¹ Some restrictions were eased on February 8 to allow eateries, youth activities, and individual indoor fitness to resume.² Alberta travellers arriving at land border crossings will now be required to provide proof of a negative test within the previous 72 hours. The Alberta border pilot at Calgary's airport has been suspended due to the new federal requirements and restrictions taking effect in the coming weeks.³ Two members of the premier's caucus are challenging the province's economic restrictions and have joined a coalition pushing back against Canada's public health restrictions.⁴

→ *British Columbia*

British Columbia reported just over 60 new cases of COVID-19 per 100,000 people last week.^{4a} The province-wide strict restrictions remain in place without a definite expiry date. No significant policy changes were observed.

→ *Manitoba*

On February 12, 81 new cases were reported in the province, 28 of which were in the southern health region.⁵ Manitoba eased its restrictions effective February 12; the new rules are set to remain in place for at least three weeks. No changes are set for social gatherings, whereas restaurant dining, museums, art galleries, and libraries are scheduled to reopen with restrictions in place. A maximum of five people are allowed at outdoor gatherings and ten at weddings, excluding household members. Restaurants are allowed to operate at 25% of their usual seating capacity and more than two metres distance between tables is required. Only those from the same household may be seated at one table. Indoor fitness facilities can provide one-on-one training and operate at 25% capacity. Museums, art galleries, libraries, tattoo parlors, and retail businesses can open at 25% capacity or up to 250 people, whichever is lower. Religious services can have up to 50% capacity.⁶

→ *New Brunswick*

New Brunswick reported one new case of COVID-19 on February 15. The province now has a total of 140 active cases, down from 203 one week ago.⁷ Zone 1 (Moncton) moved down to the province's less restrictive "orange" public health alert level, joining Zones 2 (Saint John), 3 (Fredericton), 5 (Campbellton), 6 (Bathurst), and 7 (Miramichi).⁸ Households in orange-level regions are permitted to have up to 10 "steady" contacts from outside the home, and formal outdoor gatherings of up to 50 people are permitted with hygienic and social distancing measures in place.⁹ Students from K-12 can return to in-person classes, post-secondary institutions can operate, and most non-essential business, cultural institutions, and entertainment venues are permitted to open under orange-level restrictions.¹⁰ Zone 4 (Edmunston) has moved down to the less restrictive "red" phase; it had 113 active cases as of February 15.¹¹ In red-level regions, contact must be limited to a single-household bubble, and outdoor gatherings are limited to 5 participants.¹² Many non-essential businesses and activities are restricted in red-level regions, including gyms and fitness facilities, barbers, spas, and in-person dining.¹³ Schools remain open, and post-secondary institutions are encouraged to teach virtually when possible.¹⁴

→ *Newfoundland and Labrador*

On February 11, Newfoundland and Labrador reported 100 new cases of COVID-19.¹⁵ The recent rise in cases has been linked to young people with mild symptoms gathering at parties and sporting events.¹⁶ The province is now at Alert Level 5, putting the province in lockdown. This includes closing all schools, gyms,

fitness facilities, non-essential retail stores, contact services, bars, and cinemas. Restaurants are closed for in-person dining but are able to offer takeout or delivery services. Organized gatherings in the area are limited to 5 people and informal gatherings are being limited to those within the household.¹⁷ The provincial election has been postponed following calls from the PC leader and chief election officer.¹⁸

→ *Northwest Territories*

Six new cases of COVID-19 were recorded in the Northwest Territories last week. The state of emergency in the city of Yellowknife has been extended through February 25. The territory is staying in Phase 2 of its reopening plan. As of last week, priority populations in all 33 communities have been offered first doses of the COVID-19 vaccine.¹⁹

→ *Nova Scotia*

Nova Scotia reported one new case of COVID-19 on February 15, leaving the province with a total of 10 active cases -- up from 8 one week ago.²⁰ As of February 10, travel between Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island is permitted without the requirement to self-isolate when entering or returning home from either province.²¹ Most non-essential businesses, such as fitness centres and retail stores, can remain open across the province at 75% capacity and with hygienic measures in place.²² Businesses and organizations can host in-person events and activities, including arts, cultural, and sporting events, festivals, weddings, funerals, and other social events, with up to 100 participants indoors and 150 participants outdoors.²³ The province will remain in a state of emergency until at least February 21.²⁴

→ *Nunavut*

There are 18 active cases in Nunavut as of February 15, all of which are in Arviat. The community remains in lockdown while its vaccine clinic continues to administer doses.²⁵ With three cases diagnosed on February 11, the territory has passed 300 cumulative cases since the beginning of the pandemic.²⁶ The territorial government announced that vaccination clinics would be set up in the communities of Kimmirut, Qikiqtarjuaq, Kugluktuk, Kinngait and Taloyoak within the first two weeks of March.²⁷

→ *Ontario*

Ontario reported 904 new cases of COVID-19 on February 16, below its 7-day moving average of 1,035 new cases per day.²⁸ There are currently 11,604 active cases in the province, down from 14,799 one week ago.²⁹ The province's state of emergency was allowed to expire as scheduled last week, but a stay-at-home order remains in place as individual regions transition back to the province's colour-coded public health framework.³⁰ Health units in Hastings Prince Edward, Kingston, Frontenac and Lennox and Addington, and Renfrew County, moved to the green zone on February 10, allowing restaurants, non-essential businesses, and schools to reopen.³¹ The Ontario government allowed another 27 regions to transition into its reopening framework on February 16, with 9 regions moving to the red zone, 10 orange, 3 yellow, and 4 green.³² Niagara will be the only region in the grey-lockdown zone.³³ The Toronto, Peel, York, and North Bay-Parry Sound Districts are not among the regions moving into the tiered system, and the stay-at-home order will remain effective in those regions until at least February 22.³⁴

→ *Prince Edward Island*

In Prince Edward Island, no new cases were reported on February 11.³⁵ Retail businesses, markets, gyms, fitness facilities, museums, and libraries can now operate at full capacity as long as physical distancing is maintained. Restaurants and bars are permitted to stay open for in-person dining.³⁶ International travellers will be required to quarantine for 14 days in the province, after completing the 3-day hotel quarantine mandated by the federal government.³⁷ The chief public health officer said that the COVID-19 vaccine supply is reserved for year-round residents only and that seasonal residents will need to receive their shots in their home province.³⁸

→ *Quebec*

Quebec reported 1,049 new cases and 33 additional deaths on February 13. The 7-day average was 986. The province has 10,533 active cases.³⁹ Officials recognize that hospitalizations have been declining for weeks, but say that new variants of COVID-19 could change this trend.⁴⁰ Residents of western Quebec have been asked to stay home with the exception of essential activities and to abstain from visiting people not in their household. Non-essential businesses, hair salons, and museums reopened in various parts of Quebec, but gyms and restaurants remain closed, the curfew continues, and intra-Quebec travel is discouraged.⁴¹ Cinemas and auditoriums are expected to open on February 26 in some regions with capacity limits and health and safety measures in place.⁴² Quebec wants more PCR screening. Approximately five labs in the province can test for the B117 and B1351 variant.⁴³

→ *Saskatchewan*

The seven-day average of daily new cases in Saskatchewan is 13.3 per 100,000 people as of February 14, a decline from the previous week.⁴⁴ However, the province had the highest per-capita rate of deaths and new cases in the country over the past two weeks. After facing calls to introduce new restrictions, the premier said those calling for a lockdown “are people who can work from home.” Opposition MPs strongly criticized the premier’s statement, saying it was insulting to those who have lost relatives to COVID-19.⁴⁵ The province’s age-based vaccine distribution plan is facing criticism from teachers,⁴⁶ doctors, and nurses unions after it was revealed that they would not be given priority access to doses.⁴⁷ The premier and public health officials have defended the plan, saying that age-based criteria for eligibility are the easiest to monitor.⁴⁸ The provincial government has not ruled out buying its own doses of a Canadian-made COVID-19 vaccine after Manitoba took the same step this week. The doses would be used for insurance purposes since the vaccines are not expected to be ready until the end of the year.⁴⁹

→ *Yukon*

One new case of COVID-19 was recorded in Yukon last week, breaking the almost month-long COVID-free period. The territory remains in Phase 3 of its reopening plan. The first round of mobile vaccination clinics is now complete and the second round will start on February 19. Bookings for the second dose will open soon online and by phone.⁵⁰

The United States

→ *California*

On February 12, California became the state with the most COVID-19 deaths.⁵¹ Since its winter peak, California’s average daily number of new cases has fallen approximately 75% and the average number of daily deaths has fallen 30%.⁵² California had 9,649 new cases and 444 new deaths on February 12; its seven-day average fell to approximately 10,000 daily new cases.⁵³ As of March 15, Californians aged 15 to 64 who are disabled or who have a high chance of morbidity from COVID-19 can be vaccinated alongside medical workers, first responders, teachers, essential workers and people older than 65.⁵⁴ Some vaccination sites had to close due to a supply shortage, while others are requiring that certain eligible groups to wait until there are enough vaccines.⁵⁵ Approximately 8.1 million vaccines have been delivered to the state⁵⁶ and approximately 5.3 million vaccines have been distributed.⁵⁷ A COVID-19 strain first detected in California has now been discovered in 19 other states and 6 other countries.⁵⁸ Some fitness trainers were able to be vaccinated because of a loophole in the eligibility criteria.⁵⁹

→ *Illinois*

Illinois reported about 125 new cases of COVID-19 per 100,000 people last week. On February 13, the state’s seven-day positivity rate of testing fell below 3%. Illinois reported its first case of the South African variant on February 11. All 11 regions of Illinois remain in Phase 4 of the state’s reopening plan. The state health departments will begin to receive a larger amount of COVID-19 vaccine second doses starting this

week. But there will be fewer first doses due to the limitation of federal shipments.⁶⁰ Beginning February 25, Illinois residents aged 16 or older with underlying health conditions or disabilities will be eligible to receive the vaccination, a change that nearly doubles the size of the eligible population.⁶¹

→ *Michigan*

Michigan has reported about 83 new cases of COVID-19 per 100 thousand people last week. Due to shortage in vaccine supplies, Michigan is taking some of its first-dose allocation and shifting it to the administration of second doses.⁶² In terms of its vaccine strategy, Michigan has now included mortuary service workers who routinely work with infectious materials and residents aged 60-64 in the prioritized list. Workers in food processing and agricultural settings will be able to get vaccinated as of March 1.⁶³ The statewide paid media campaign is being expanded to remind all Michiganders to continue wearing masks, even after receiving the vaccination.⁶⁴

→ *New York*

New York reported a statewide 7-day average positivity rate of 3.83% on February 14, the lowest it has been since November 29.⁶⁵ The governor announced that restaurants and bars statewide will be permitted to extend their closing time to 11 pm on February 14.⁶⁶ Venues with more than 10,000 seats will be permitted to have a limited number of spectators at sports and entertainment events effective February 23, provided that they have received approval from their local health department. Seating capacity will be limited to 10% and attendees will need to show that they have received a negative COVID-19 test in the previous 72 hours.⁶⁷ More mass vaccination sites in New York City and elsewhere in the state will be set up in the coming weeks, with sites chosen so as to increase equitable access to the vaccine.⁶⁸ The governor and his top aide are facing allegations of a cover-up of the state's nursing home death and hospitalization figures. In response, some lawmakers -- including Democrats -- have called for a formal investigation, for the resignation of numerous top officials, and for stripping the governor of his pandemic emergency powers.⁶⁹

→ *Texas*

Texas reported 8,933 hospitalizations on February 11, which is the first time the number has been under 9,000 since December. Texas also reported 2,232 potential new cases, but the average number of hospitalizations and cases is declining in the state.⁷⁰ On February 11, the governor announced that the state may ease restrictions as cases and hospitalizations decline.⁷¹ 3.5 million people in the state, or 3.1% of Texans, are fully vaccinated.⁷² A multi-million dollar video campaign is being used to combat vaccine hesitancy.⁷³

Mexico

Mexico reported 4,099 new cases and 436 new deaths on February 14.⁷⁴ After cases and hospitalizations decreased, Mexico City went from the red reopening indicator level to orange on February 12.⁷⁵ On February 9, shopping centres and department stores started opening in Mexico City with strict hygiene protocols, masks, and the requirement that customers and employees register using a QR system to enable officials to track infections. Outdoor fast food dining is also permitted.⁷⁶ Mexico City's gyms, indoor pools, churches, and restaurants also reopened and can stay open until 10 pm.⁷⁷ For the period of February 15 to 28, two regions are in red, 21 regions are in orange, eight regions are in yellow and one is in green on the federal government's reopening indicators. Eleven states transitioned from red to orange.⁷⁸ Mexico accepted a shipment of 870,000 AstraZeneca vaccines from India on February 14. It also received the ingredients needed to make two million CanSino vaccines on February 11.⁷⁹ Mexico has a contract for 7.4 million Sputnik vaccines.⁸⁰ Mexico's vaccination campaign was previously interrupted; approximately 0.56% of Mexicans have received at least one dose.⁸¹ Mexico's president continues to refuse to wear masks and has been accused of playing down the pandemic.⁸²

Chile

Chile reported 3,920 new cases and 98 deaths on February 13.⁸³ Chile has ordered approximately 90 million vaccinations, which is enough to fully vaccinate each of its 19.2 million citizens twice.⁸⁴ The orders include vaccinations from Pfizer, AstraZeneca, SinoVac, Johnson and Johnson, and COVAX, the global vaccine-supply program.⁸⁵ Vaccinations began across the country on February 3, with approximately 1.8 million people receiving a dose as of February 14.⁸⁶ On February 15, school and pre-school workers were added to the list of people eligible for vaccinations.⁸⁷ Chile's president, who is 71, received the first dose of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine.⁸⁸

WESTERN EUROPE

France

France reported 16,546 new cases on February 14, much fewer than the 20,000 cases reported the day before.⁸⁹ Over the past week there were 9,921 hospitalizations.⁹⁰ France now has the seventh most COVID-19 deaths globally and the sixth most cumulative COVID-19 cases.⁹¹ The health ministry requested that regional health agencies and hospitals enter crisis mode on February 18, enabling them to prepare for a surge in cases resulting from new COVID-19 variants.⁹² While this is similar to measures taken last year, this year they will increase available hospital beds, postpone non-urgent surgeries and mobilize medical staff.⁹³ Although the three approved vaccines in the European Union are two-dose inoculations, France is recommending that people who have had COVID-19 only get one dose of a vaccine between three and six months after infection. The government believes that this is likely sufficient in combination with the immunity from having recovered from COVID-19.⁹⁴ 2.1 million people in France have received at least one dose of a vaccine and 535,800 were fully vaccinated as of February 11.⁹⁵

Germany

On February 10, 8,072 cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in Germany.⁹⁶ On February 11, the government decided to temporarily reinstate border controls along its southeastern frontier after designating the Czech Republic and parts of Austria as mutation areas due to their high number of variant COVID-19 cases. The temporary border controls and entry restrictions will come into effect on February 14. Travellers coming from certain areas of Austria or the Czech Republic will have to provide proof of a negative test in order to enter Germany.⁹⁷ The federal government and state leaders also agreed to extend the nationwide shutdown until March 7, beyond the previous February 14 deadline. Though overall infection numbers in the country are declining, concern is rising about new variants. On March 1, hairdressers will be allowed to reopen under strict hygiene conditions and schools and daycare centres may gradually reopen depending on the decisions of individual states.⁹⁸

Belgium

In Belgium, 2,149 new daily cases of COVID-19 were reported on February 12.⁹⁹ The current measures have been extended until April 1 with some restrictions being eased this week. Effective February 13, hairdressers and zoos reopened.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, scarves, neck warmers, and bandanas are no longer allowed to be used as an alternative to face masks.¹⁰¹ Currently, non-essential stores, museums, and swimming pools are open, with safety measures in place. Non-medical contact services, such as beauticians and tattoo shops, have been permitted to reopen on March 1.¹⁰²

Netherlands

On February 9, the Netherlands registered 693 new cases of COVID-19.¹⁰³ On February 12, the AstraZeneca vaccine -- which was approved for use at the end of January -- became the third vaccine in the country's strategy. The two-dose AstraZeneca vaccination is being given to people aged 60 to 65 as well as younger adults with morbid obesity and those over 18 with Down's Syndrome, in addition to healthcare workers who have not yet been vaccinated. Effective February 15, family doctors in Zeeland will start vaccinating their patients, and the program will then be rolled out to Limburg, Brabant, and then the rest of the country.¹⁰⁴ The mayor of Amsterdam has led a call for urgent attention to the plight of young people in the Netherlands under the COVID-19 restrictions. Along with six prominent experts, she wants young people to have priority for fast COVID-19 tests so that restrictions on them can be somewhat relaxed to lessen the social blow of the pandemic.¹⁰⁵

Spain

Spain's 14-day infection rate has decreased to 540 new cases per 100,000 people. This is the lowest it has been since January 14.¹⁰⁶ However, the number of COVID-19 deaths in the country has been increasing.¹⁰⁷ For the week prior to February 10, there were 428 new cases per day per million people, more cases than Germany and the UK.¹⁰⁸ On February 11, there were 17,583 new cases.¹⁰⁹ Castilla la Mancha is easing restrictions, allowing bars and restaurants to reopen, but customers need to use a QR code to enable officials to track outbreaks.¹¹⁰ Madrid and Catalonia also eased restrictions last week.¹¹¹ On February 9, a regional court in Basque Country suspended the government's decision to shut down bars and restaurants in specific areas.¹¹² There have been approximately 2.3 million vaccinations distributed in Spain and 950,000 people have received both doses.¹¹³ Spain is now using the AstraZeneca vaccine for essential workers such as police, teachers and prison workers who are younger than 55 years old and who do not have serious medical conditions.¹¹⁴

The United Kingdom

On February 12, 15,144 new cases of COVID-19 were reported across the UK.¹¹⁵ The country has been in lockdown since January 5, with schools closed for most children. Government ministers have said that any easing of restrictions will depend on data over the coming weeks and an announcement is expected on February 22.¹¹⁶ Two new COVID-19 variants have been identified in the UK with some similarities to the South African and Brazilian variants, according to the government advisory scientific committee. One of the new variants, first identified in Bristol, has been designated a variant of concern by the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group. The other variant, first identified in Liverpool, has been designated as a variant under investigation.¹¹⁷

Ireland

On February 12, 407 new cases were recorded in Ireland.¹¹⁸ The prime minister announced a possible extension of Level 5 restrictions until the Easter period. Under Level 5 restrictions there is a ban on all household visits, non-essential retail is closed, and there is a 5 km limit on travel. Only six people can attend a wedding and 10 people are allowed at a funeral. However, a phased return of pupils to schools is set to begin on February 22. Students with special educational needs and those attending classes at post-primary schools returned for in-school teaching on February 11; special classes for children in primary schools are also due to reopen on February 22.¹¹⁹

Luxembourg

On February 12, 147 new cases of COVID-19 were confirmed by the ministry of health.¹²⁰ The government has opted to extend the current restrictions until March 14, taking preventative measures against the virus variants that are causing concern around the world. Bars and restaurants will remain closed and the curfew will stay in place.¹²¹ However, schools are set to reopen after the holidays on February 22, but with a stricter sanitary plan -- including mandatory masks for primary students. Staff and pupils will be invited more frequently to participate in the large-scale testing program. If infections were to flare up again in the kindergarten grades, they could be forced to close. Distance learning could return for all students after the Easter break, but this will depend on the situation. Ministries will focus on reducing the mixing of children in activities and wraparound care outside of school hours. Pupils in secondary school will return to alternate week schooling, with the exception of those in their first year of secondary.¹²²

Portugal

On February 12, Portugal registered 149 deaths related to COVID-19 and 2,854 cases of infection.¹²³ The prime minister announced that the current level of lockdown will have to be maintained during the month of March, with no possibility of starting to discuss total or partial opening up.¹²⁴ Movement between municipalities in mainland Portugal has been banned between 8 pm on February 12 and 5 am on February 15 as part of measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.¹²⁵ Effective February 11, supermarkets and hypermarkets will be allowed to sell books and school materials, but are prohibited from selling other non-essential goods.¹²⁶ The Directorate-General for Health has revised its recommendations for combating the COVID-19 pandemic. It updated its guidelines to include tests of all contacts (high and low risk) and the implementation of regular screenings with rapid antigen tests in schools or in sectors of activity with high social exposure.¹²⁷

CENTRAL EUROPE

Austria

On February 12, Austria reported 1,577 new cases of COVID-19.¹²⁸ “Non-essential shops, museums, libraries, and zoos are open with an FFP2 mask requirement for all customers and visitors.”¹²⁹ Contact services, such as hairdressers, have reopened, but proof of a negative test is required for all customers. A stay-at-home order continues to be in effect from 8 pm to 6 am.¹³⁰ Effective February 11, travel to Tirol has been limited to essential trips only, and a negative test no older than 48 hours is required when leaving the province.¹³¹ Exemptions are in place for children under 10 and for those on transit journeys.

Greece

On February 12, Greece reported 1,323 new cases of COVID-19.¹³² Effective February 11, the government implemented a full lockdown in Athens and two other regions due to rising cases. All non-essential shops, churches, and schools will be closed until February 28 in an effort to slow the surge.¹³³ Greece signed an agreement with Israel to allow tourists with vaccination certificates to travel between their two countries without any limitations or self-isolation requirements in an effort to boost their economies.¹³⁴

Italy

In Italy, 15,137 new cases of COVID-19 were reported on February 12.¹³⁵ A colour-coded system of restrictions remains in place, with the majority of the country in the yellow zone.¹³⁶ Across Italy, a nighttime curfew remains in effect from 10 pm to 5 am. Gyms, cinemas, theme parks, pools, and theatres remain

closed. The government extended the ban on travel between regions due to variant-related outbreaks. The scheduled reopening of ski slopes on February 15 has been postponed until at least March 5 due to concerns related to COVID-19 variants in Italy.¹³⁷ A new government was sworn in on February 13 under Prime minister Mario Draghi.¹³⁸

Slovenia

On February 12, 1,345 new cases of COVID-19 infection were reported in Slovenia.¹³⁹ The country has entered the orange tier of restrictions after meeting thresholds for hospitalizations and cases.¹⁴⁰ The easing measures are no longer linked to regions but apply to the country as a whole. As a result, all primary and secondary students are back in school for in-person learning. Effective February 15, the ban on movement between municipalities will be lifted and ski resorts will be open for people with proof of negative test results taken within the past week. As of February 13, people arriving from EU and Schengen Area member states “who have recovered from COVID-19 in the past 6 months and at least 14 days have passed since their second vaccine dose will not be subject to further requirements.”¹⁴¹ Another motion was submitted for a vote of no confidence in the Slovenia government by 5 left-leaning opposition parties.¹⁴²

Switzerland

On February 12, Switzerland reported 1,356 new cases of COVID-19.¹⁴³ The closure of non-essential stores, sports facilities, museums, libraries, and eateries has been extended until the end of February.¹⁴⁴ Effective February 8, depending on the type of travel, people without a Swiss passport or valid residence permit in Switzerland, may be subject to entry restrictions such as showing proof of a negative test or entering quarantine.¹⁴⁵ Cantonal ministers and business associations are calling on the Federal Council to ease pandemic restrictions on March 1.¹⁴⁶

EASTERN EUROPE

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic reported 2,851 new cases of COVID-19 on February 15, below its 7-day moving average of 7,636 cases per day.¹⁴⁷ Ongoing restrictions will continue for at least two more weeks after the government renewed its state of emergency on February 15, just hours before the previous one was set to expire.¹⁴⁸ This means that many non-essential businesses and activities will remain prohibited, the national curfew will remain in place, and schools will continue to operate at limited capacity.¹⁴⁹

Hungary

Hungary reported 1,337 new cases of COVID-19 on February 15, below the country’s 7-day moving average of 1,592 new cases per day.¹⁵⁰ Ongoing coronavirus-related restrictions will remain in place until the country’s state of emergency expires on March 1.¹⁵¹ 550,000 vaccine doses developed by the Chinese state-owned company Sinopharm arrived in Hungary on February 16, making it the first EU member state to procure a Chinese vaccine.¹⁵²

Latvia

Latvia reported 278 new cases of COVID-19 on February 15, below the country’s 7-day moving average of 699 new cases per day.¹⁵³ On February 3, the Latvian cabinet of ministers extended the country’s state of emergency and a number of ongoing safety measures until April 6.¹⁵⁴ This means that all public events, as well as the operation of entertainment venues, bars, skating rinks, cultural sites, museums, and food

service venues, remain prohibited.¹⁵⁵ In-person shopping remains limited to stores providing essential goods and services, and the national curfew remains in effect between the hours of 10 pm and 5 am on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.¹⁵⁶ From February 10 to 24, travellers from the European Union, the European Economic Area, Switzerland and the UK will be allowed to enter Latvia for essential purposes only.¹⁵⁷

Lithuania

Lithuania reported 213 new cases of COVID-19 and 10 deaths due to the virus on February 15.¹⁵⁸ A nationwide lockdown, which has been in effect since November 7, will remain in effect until at least February 28.¹⁵⁹ This means that a number of ongoing restrictions will remain in effect, and Lithuanians remain forbidden from leaving the boundaries of their home municipality unless they are attending a funeral, going to work, accessing healthcare services, or taking care of a family member.¹⁶⁰ Non-essential movement within municipalities is also forbidden, with the same exceptions.¹⁶¹

Poland

Poland reported 2,542 new cases of COVID-19 on February 15, below its 7-day moving average of 5,544 cases per day.¹⁶² Poland remains in the “red zone,” but economic restrictions have been gradually relaxed in recent weeks.¹⁶³ Cinemas, theaters, sporting venues, and ski resorts were allowed to reopen at 50% capacity on February 12.¹⁶⁴

Slovakia

Slovakia reported 572 cases of COVID-19 on February 15, below its 7-day moving average of 2,024 cases per day.¹⁶⁵ Forty-four of Slovakia’s 72 administrative regions are at level 3 out of 4 on the country’s regional alert scale, compared to forty-one last week. Level 3 permits the reopening of kindergartens and primary schools for in-person learning, as well as the resumption of many non-essential activities for residents who have had a negative COVID-19 test in the past 7 days.¹⁶⁶

NORTHERN EUROPE

Denmark

Denmark reported a positivity rate of just 0.33% on February 12, continuing the weeks-long trend of positivity rates below 1%. As of the same date, there were 337 hospitalizations in the country, the lowest figure in several weeks. The vaccination program continues: 2.73% of the population is now fully vaccinated. However, public health officials announced that the B117 variant now makes up nearly 30% of all positive COVID-19 cases nationwide, leading to concerns about the effectiveness of restrictions going forward.¹⁶⁷ Public health officials announced that they expect to complete their vaccination program by June 27.¹⁶⁸ Primary schools in the Copenhagen suburb of Ishøj will return to distance learning until at least February 28 due to a surge in infections in the city.¹⁶⁹ Residents of border regions in Sweden and Germany will no longer have an exemption to the ban on non-essential travel into Denmark.¹⁷⁰ Most Danish regions have switched their rapid test provider in the past few weeks due to operational issues with their previous supplier, leading the national public health agency to cancel the contract.¹⁷¹

Estonia

On February 15, Estonia reported a two-week average infection rate of 626.2 new cases per 100,000 people and a positivity rate of 13.8%.¹⁷² The prime minister acknowledged that the infection rate is rising and urged Estonians to follow the public health regulations, but said that the government would not yet implement

new restrictions.¹⁷³ The minister of education said that final exams will proceed as normal this summer, but marks will be calculated differently and graduation will not depend on the results.¹⁷⁴ Education workers became eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine on February 15.¹⁷⁵ The government will open dedicated vaccination centres due to the expanded eligibility.¹⁷⁶ Public health officials have classified team sports as a high-risk activity, putting more stringent health and safety protocols in place.¹⁷⁷ The prime minister said that there was no reason not to purchase doses of Russia's Sputnik vaccine if it was approved by the European Medicines Agency, despite some other EU countries expressly ruling it out.¹⁷⁸

Finland

Finland reported a two-week COVID-19 incidence rate of 90.5 per 100,000 people on February 15, an increase over the previous two weeks.¹⁷⁹ Despite the increase in the number of confirmed cases, the number of patients in intensive care continues to fall.¹⁸⁰ The prime minister said that a bill that would mandate COVID-19 testing at the border for all arrivals to Finland is progressing through parliament. The prime minister also said that the government would consider new restrictions if the infection rate continues to worsen.¹⁸¹ Municipal election officials will not be able to access the COVID-19 vaccine in advance of election day on April 18.¹⁸² Public health officials are facing calls to publicize information about the vaccine in multiple languages after there were reports of misinformation being spread in predominantly immigrant communities.¹⁸³

Iceland

The two-week incidence rate in Iceland is 7.7 new cases per 100,000 people as of February 15, which continues to be the lowest infection rate in Europe.¹⁸⁴ In over two weeks, no domestic cases have been found outside of those already in quarantine.¹⁸⁵ Icelandic officials have lowered their emergency situation from the 'distress' level to the 'alert' level for the first time since October.¹⁸⁶ Public health officials said that if the infection rate remains low, they will consider easing restrictions before the end of the month.¹⁸⁷ The government announced that a vaccine study by Pfizer will not go forward due to Iceland's low infection rate. The study would have seen the company provide Iceland with enough doses to vaccinate its entire adult population within the next few months in order to test its effect on developing herd immunity.¹⁸⁸

Norway

As of February 15, Norway reported 32 new cases per 100,000 people in the past seven days, continuing a month-long decline in its infection rate.¹⁸⁹ However, public health officials expressed concerns that the decline is due to low testing rather than a decrease in infections.¹⁹⁰ Outbreaks of the B117 variant across the country have caused authorities to institute a new system of local restrictions. If the government determines that there is a variant-based outbreak, restrictions will be put in place depending on the severity. Bergen, Kvam, and Ulvik have been placed under the most severe restrictions, amounting to a lockdown, though schools have been permitted to remain open. The new set of restrictions only apply to municipalities with a B117 variant outbreak.¹⁹¹ The foreign ministry has advised against all international travel until at least Easter, with only Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland exempt.¹⁹²

Sweden

The number of new confirmed cases in Sweden has remained relatively stable over the past week. However, public health officials said that the spread remains very high and that the number of variant cases has continued to increase.¹⁹³ The region of Västerbotten has introduced local recommendations to avoid non-essential travel, limit close contacts, and avoid high-traffic public places after a surge in cases over the past week.¹⁹⁴ The government announced that transit companies will not be permitted to fill more than half of

their seats on long-distance train travel until at least the end of May.¹⁹⁵ Swedish authorities said that there is unlikely to be any significant easing of restrictions before the summer.¹⁹⁶ The Swedish vaccination program is behind schedule; several regional healthcare administrators say that they have experienced delivery delays.¹⁹⁷ Two Swedish regions have stopped administering the AstraZeneca vaccine after an unusually high number of reported side effects.¹⁹⁸ Despite the delays, the health minister said that Sweden remains on track to hit its goal of vaccinating the entire adult population of the country by the end of June.¹⁹⁹

ASIA/PACIFIC

Japan

Japan reported just above 8 new cases of COVID-19 per 100 thousand people last week. Japan approved the Pfizer vaccine and will begin its vaccination campaign on February 17. Medical workers will be the first in line to receive the shots.²⁰⁰ The health ministry is opening a call center to provide consultations on vaccinations.²⁰¹

South Korea

South Korea continued to report about 5.2 new cases of COVID-19 per 100 thousand people last week. In response to growing outcry from small merchants, the government lowered the social distancing scheme to Level 2 for the Seoul Metropolitan Region and to Level 1.5 for the rest of the country over the period from February 15 to 28. The adjustment allows restaurants, cafes, gyms and other public facilities to remain open for an hour longer (until 10 pm); nightclubs, karaoke bars and other entertainment venues will reopen for the first time since last November until 10 pm; and many multi-use facilities including theaters, supermarkets, amusement parks and private institutions, can operate without curfews. However, the ban on gatherings of five or more people remains in place.²⁰² The special advisory against overseas travel has been extended until March 17. South Korea is expected to begin vaccinating its population on February 26, with medical workers and elderly people at nursing homes being the first to get the shots.²⁰³ According to the president, new social distancing rules will be introduced in March that focus on minimizing compulsory measures and encouraging voluntary ones.²⁰⁴ The Seoul metropolitan government has started testing pet cats and dogs for COVID-19.²⁰⁵

New Zealand

New Zealand continued to report about 0.33 new cases of COVID-19 per 100 thousand people last week. After the discovery of 3 new community cases in Auckland, the city has been moved to alert level 3 for 3 days starting February 15; the rest of New Zealand moved to level 2. In Alert Level 2, businesses and schools remain open, but people are asked to maintain a distance of 2 meters from others in retail stores and public spaces; in other places like workplaces, cafes, restaurants and gyms, people must stay one metre apart; social gatherings, including weddings and funerals, are limited to 100 people. In Level 3, Aucklanders must stay home if they can; gatherings outside people's bubbles are prohibited with exceptions for funerals and weddings (which are limited to 10 people); public venues such as libraries, museums, cinemas, food courts, gyms, pools, playgrounds, and markets are closed; schools and early childhood centres will only stay open for children of essential workers; and travel into, out of, or through the Auckland region is restricted.²⁰⁶ Australia has again suspended quarantine-free travel for New Zealanders.²⁰⁷ The first batch of the Pfizer vaccine is arriving in New Zealand this week, earlier than expected.²⁰⁸

Australia

Australia reported about 0.17 new cases of COVID-19 per 100 thousand people last week. After the detection of the UK strain, Victoria has re-entered a stage 4 lockdown. People must remain home and only leave for essential reasons; they must also remain within 5 kilometers of their homes and wear a mask everywhere outside the home; funerals will only be allowed to have 10 attendees and weddings will be banned except on compassionate grounds; food and hospitality venues will close except for takeaway service; non-essential retail stores, libraries, hairdressers and real estate inspections will close; schools will be closed except for those taking care of vulnerable children or those whose parents cannot work from home; indoor recreation and sports, outdoor physical recreation, and community sport facilities will all close; no visitors will be allowed into aged care centres or hospitals; and international flights will not be accepted into Victoria unless they are already en route.²⁰⁹ On February 14, Perth and Peel in Western Australia returned to pre-lockdown conditions, with the mask-wearing requirement and other restrictions lifted.²¹⁰

Turkey

On February 12, 7,590 cases of COVID-19 were confirmed across the country.²¹¹ The health ministry has started distributing mutation detection kits to hospitals across the country as infections from a mutated version of COVID-19 recently increased. The ministry instructed health care workers to run a second test for each person who tests positive for the virus to check whether they are infected with the new variants. In January, the health ministry announced that there were cases of the UK variant in 17 cities -- after which Turkey suspended flights to and from a number of countries because the infections were detected in people who had travelled abroad.²¹² By the end of March, the inoculation drive is expected to reach 13 million people. So far, Turkey has already delivered shots to more than 2.8 million people.²¹³

Israel

Israel reported about 357 new cases of COVID-19 per 100 thousand people last week. The coronavirus cabinet approved a plan to partially reopen the education system on February 11, allowing kindergartens and grades 1-4 and 11-12 to open in cities with low-to-medium infection rates. Meanwhile, those grades were also reopened in cities which recorded medium-to-high rates but had vaccinated at least 70% of its residents aged 50 and up.²¹⁴ The country's international airport will reopen partially starting February 20, allowing in 2,000 travellers per day. However, travellers will need to obtain a negative test both upon arrival and 72 hours before their return flight to avoid quarantine.²¹⁵ With the vaccination campaign leveling off, the health ministry and private firms are looking at different ways to incentivize Israelis to receive the vaccination.²¹⁶ The "green passport" is still being considered: officials were reportedly thinking of blocking those who refuse to be vaccinated from accessing gyms, hotels, restaurants and cultural and sports events.²¹⁷ The health ministry is now recommending vaccinating some teenagers aged 12-15 if they suffer from specific risk factors.²¹⁸ The ministry has also set up a team to monitor and remove viral fake news that could hinder the vaccination campaign.²¹⁹

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Partnerships and Contributors

The Media Ecosystem Observatory – a joint effort of Peter Loewen (Toronto), Taylor Owen (McGill), and Derek Ruths (McGill) – is responsible for the social media and behavioural data on our dashboard. The leads on these projects are Eric Merkley (Toronto) and Aengus Bridgman (McGill).

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Links

<https://munkschool.utoronto.ca/>

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