

## **COVID-19 Vulnerability Alert – Children – 17 May 2020**

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The Australian Risk Policy Institute (ARPI) as Convenor of the Global Risk Policy Network (GRPN) which includes the European Risk Policy Institute (ERPI), today issues a further Vulnerability Alert focusing on school-aged children. Caution is urged with continual monitoring of information coming in from networks.

COVID-19 can, and does, spread rapidly through schools. Recent studies show that infected children can and do pass the virus onto other children at school, on public transport and then to parents and other children at home. Unchecked, school-based infection can be a significant cause of community transfer of the virus.

It is hoped that children do not pass the COVID-19 virus to one another or schoolteachers. With schools re-opening, and one school in Sydney closing again already due to the virus, this is a Vulnerability which must be fully protected against.

### **1. COVID-19 can, and does, spread rapidly through schools**

In New Zealand, an outbreak of COVID-19 at the Marist College, Auckland became one of the most significant outbreaks in that country. The Marist College is a Catholic high school for girls at Mount Albert. There were 95 cases associated with the college as of 6 May 2020, prompting the Director-General of Health, Dr. Ashley Bloomfield to encourage the entire community of the college to be tested for the virus. Dr. Bloomfield described the most recent case as a weak positive and noted that the child was not unwell in early April when health authorities first contacted them, so they did not proceed to test. However, as the college heads back to school, 250 contacts had been tested, resulting in the identification of the most recent case.

During most of the course of the infection, children and adults in the Marist cluster have been under Alert Level Four and, most recently, Alert Level Three. New Zealand authorities seem hopeful that further spread under those constraints will be minimal.

### **2. International studies of patterns of transfer indicate that school child transfers can and are a significant source of rapid community spread.**

The role of schools in spreading infectious disease is well known in the scientific literature and the closure of schools to contain infection is an accepted public health response to epidemics.

Where there is little or no community spread, the closure of schools can have a significant impact on significantly reducing community infection (by up to half) and may delay the epidemic.

### **Today's Vulnerability or Exposure to COVID-19**

Where there is a possibility of community spread of the virus, there is no scientific or evidenced-based basis for reopening schools. Where there remains such a possibility, reopened schools may act as a significant vector for the rapid spread of the virus into the broader population.

The need for immediate improved economic outcomes is totally understandable and essential but must be continually balanced against evolving information on Vulnerabilities and Exposures.

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