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What keeps an island community COVID-19 free in a global pandemic?

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Abstract

The COVID pandemic has offered opportunities for islands and other relatively isolated communities to establish pandemic-protection boundaries. A July 2020 survey of Waiheke Island residents sought views on how the island had remained COVID-19 free, despite proximity to a city of 1.6 million (Auckland, NZ). Many attributed that status to 'pure luck' or a 'moat' effect. However, many also attributed freedom from COVID-19 to reinforcing high-level community cohesiveness and shared values. The Waiheke community's response can be seen as a microcosm of New Zealand as an island nation and an exemplar of a response to pandemic threats uniquely possible for small islands.

KEYWORDS
community cohesion, COVID-19, islands, political subsidiarity

1 | LEARNING FROM AN ISLAND COMMUNITY'S COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE

Islands are known to have cohesive communities (Baldacchino, 2010), where boundedness, distance from metropolitan centres and/or socio-cultural homogeneity create strong community identity and self-reliance (Tennant, 2013). New Zealand's history has myriad examples of small communities resisting having their community culture, values, preferences and local needs subsumed by metropolitan or regional governance, seeking instead to maintain more relevant localised governance. Examples range from campaigns to retain local health care systems (Kearns, 1998) to the 2021 attempt by Wanaka to 'break free from domineering' Queenstown Lakes District Council to 'sort… out our own nest' (Jamieson, 2021, n.p).

Island experiences have provided useful lessons in localised infectious disease management (Cliff & Haggett, 2004), due to their isolation from mainland services and reliance on local resources. We explore the COVID-19 response on Waiheke Island as an exemplar of how small or relatively isolated communities have built community cohesiveness to create localised pandemic protection boundaries, with implications for political subsidiarity (Kull & Tatar, 2015).

Waiheke Island is located 21 km from downtown Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, and some 35 minutes by passenger ferry. The island has a permanent population of approximately 9500 resident 'Waihekeans' and is known within and beyond New Zealand as a hub for artists, environmentalists and people with 'alternative' views. Regular worker and other essential commuter access to downtown Auckland is largely by passenger and car ferries, with around 1400 people commuting daily (personal communication, Auckland Unlimited, 7 August 2021). Since local government reforms in 1989, Waiheke has been subject to Auckland's governance and increasing urbanising influence. Pervasive changes have included hugely increased tourism – estimated at around 1.3 million visitors annually in recent years – along with gentrification, as the island's beauty has attracted high-end residential development. These developments have resulted in an increase in the number of largely unoccupied holiday homes (around 35% of Waiheke's residences currently), a dramatic change in the population demographic, consequent erosion of the sense of community, and increasing

dissatisfaction with metropolitan governance (Project Forever Waiheke, 2018). Waiheke sought secession from Auckland in 2016, unsuccessfully, but achieved some increased local controls over planning decisions in a governance pilot (Allpress & Roberts, 2021).

2 | BUILDING PANDEMIC PROTECTION ON WAIHEKE

In April–May 2020, New Zealand experienced a series of highly restrictive pandemic lockdowns. On Waiheke, daily commuting to work in Auckland ceased, except for 'essential' workers, with local police monitoring arrivals and departures. In July 2020, *Project Forever Waiheke* distributed a short survey, via two Waiheke community Facebook pages, that explored the impacts of the pandemic on island residents, socially and economically. The question, "In your view, how has Waiheke Island maintained zero cases of COVID-19 compared to the outbreaks in mainland Auckland? *Please describe*." was answered by 180 of the 189 respondents. The responses were analysed thematically by two researchers with no Waiheke affiliations.

Five key attribution themes were identified, all related either explicitly or implicitly to Waiheke's island status – (i) 'luck'; (ii) a 'moat' effect, with geographic separation, an ability to control the island's 'borders', and minimising contact with the mainland; (iii) high-level infection prevention compliance; (iv) demographic factors; and (v) community cohesiveness.

TABLE 1 Waiheke residents' attributions for Waiheke COVID-freedom in 2020

Residents' attributions for Waiheke COVID-freedom	N	%
Luck	64	35
'Pure' luck	34	18
Luck as a feature of locality advantage	30	17
Prevention/lockdown compliance	42	23
Geographic separation from the mainland	42	23
Strong 'border' controls	27	15
Demographic factors	27	15
Sense of community cohesiveness	27	15
Minimised contact with the mainland	20	12
Annoyance with prevention/ lockdown non-compliance	10	6

Note: Open responding allowing multiple attributions means that aggregated percentages exceed 100%.

Community cohesion was a connecting theme across the other attribution types, reflecting island living and a strong community ethic. Table 1 describes the pattern of residents' attributions for Waiheke's 'escape' from COVID-19, with those data clarified in respondent quotes (with original syntax and spelling) in the following discussion.

2.1 | Luck

The largest response category, from one-third (35%) of residents, was 'luck'. Half of those deemed it 'pure', 'sheer' or 'only' luck. However, the other half (17%) explained 'luck' as deriving from one or more aspects of Waiheke's island or community context – lucky to live on an island, to have wide windy spaces for recreation, to be a community that protects one another, to live in a low-density environment – that is, luck due to demographics, geographic situation or community ethic, and commonly integrating those aspects.

> Honestly? 50% luck, 50% a large number of our commuters being healthcare/professional workers who are aware and cautious.
> Luck ... the ferry fares are so high that [others] can't afford to come here .... Ironic really.
> By being relatively isolated and having good luck! We were our own bubble.
> Discipline, and luck of geography.
> Limited access from the mainland ... but mostly luck and a less dense population.

2.2 | COVID compliance

Responses describing Waihekeans' adherence to the COVID prevention requirements (23% of respondents) typically highlighted commitment to the wellbeing of the community as a whole, using phrasing that reflected collective identity – 'locals', 'community', 'residents', 'we' and 'us'.

> ... the community is compliant with governmental directives. also being an Island.
> Taking care to follow the rules, responsible community.
> Residents are mostly respectful of the covid rules ...
> Small isolated community. Local compliance with lockdown requirements.
> We played it safe.

2.3 | Waiheke's 'moat'

Waiheke's separation by sea was identified by 23% of respondents as a major factor in preventing COVID-19 transmission from the mainland. However, 15% of residents also identified the ability to control traffic to and from the island, together with enforcement by the police and locals, as key to reducing the potential for transmission, and 12% noted that locals had made conscious efforts to limit traffic both to and from the mainland.

> By not having too many dicks going to anti-lockdown marches.
> We only go to city when we really need to. We are an isolated population.
> Most of us have stayed on the Island and followed safety requirements if leaving.
> Stronger community ethic; policing of ferry arrivals; sense that being on an island makes elimination more feasible.

2.4 | Waiheke's population demographics

Fifteen percent residents attributed the avoidance of COVID-19 infection to various aspects of the island's population features, in particular its older, more at-risk and therefore more cautious population, high average education resulting in high-level risk awareness, less crowding than in urban areas, and an outdoor lifestyle.

> A large number of retirees being extra cautious.
> ... enough space to maintain social distancing.
> Population is predominantly in a higher socio-economic group, not commonly crowded living conditions, etc.
> We enjoy our freedoms and outdoors here [and are] happy to not go to mainland Auckland.

2.5 | Cohesive community

Each of the factors described above were also linked by respondents to a strong community cohesiveness that resulted in residents working consciously to protect that community as a whole – a goal seen as achievable because of the island's 'moat' and the feasibility of minimising mainland contact. Twelve percent of residents explicitly identified Waiheke's community identity as a key factor in

remaining COVID-free. Respondents highlighted locals' sense of community responsibility, high levels of resident interconnectedness, trust and mutual support, and an emerging pride in remaining COVID-free as a whole-of-community achievement. The collective effort included locals monitoring ferry arrivals and reporting lockdown breaches to the Waiheke Police. Monitoring locals' compliance was possible because of high levels of community acquaintance, only one supermarket outlet and the high visibility of residents leaving their homes for recreation. Regular community bulletins from the Chair of the Waiheke Local Board were published via multiple Waiheke community Facebook pages, resulting in high-level Facebook traffic offering support to others.

The sense of cohesiveness was apparent in the language of responses, using phrases such as 'respect for others', 'working together as a community', 'strong island unity', and 'the Waiheke bubble'.

> Strong local, connected community ... less likely to flout rules.
> It's a responsible community. Everyone stuck to the guidelines.
> Respect for others ... has seen most of us caring about keeping to the rules and avoiding those who don't, a level of pride in supporting a virus free Waiheke.
> ... we also all use the same supermarket and we all know each other to a degree.
> Locals are happy to mask up on ferry trips, practice good social distancing and look after older residents.
> Island residents know what the impact of COVID-19 would be on our island so are extra vigilant and careful.
> We care for each other and ... so acted with respect and responded appropriately.

The sense of community respect and responsibility was also reflected in the 6% of respondents who voiced annoyance with people who were seen as having put at risk a community otherwise unified in 'keeping in the Waiheke bubble', so as to protect the whole island population.

> Luck mainly because, let's face it, we've got no end of idiots here who are seeking to make a name for themselves as pandemic deniers ... and put us all at risk.
> Mainly distance. We have no shortage of brainless fools here refusing to cooperate.
> Very noticeable the entitled few who felt they could come and go to town in the ferry because they had very 'important' business.

3 | BUILDING COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS AS SHARED IDENTITY FOR A LOCALISED PANDEMIC RESPONSE

The same survey found that Waiheke's already strong community connectedness was actively strengthened through its localised pandemic response. Residents reported a stronger sense of community caring, an increased connection with their neighbourhoods, and also reported an added sense of responsibility to protect the whole island. Respondent comments above illustrate Waihekeans not only *feeling* like a community in response to the pandemic threat, but actively '*performing*' community (Witten et al., 2020) in ways common to smaller communities at a distance from, and increasingly in distinction from, normative metropolitan governance. Other data from the same survey revealed that locals were not only connecting with their immediate neighbourhoods more, but also engaging with the broader community through converting the lockdown constraints into opportunities to connect with neighbours, the outdoors and broader community needs. New and revived activities such as marae accommodation for newly homeless during lockdowns, coordinated food shopping support for at-risk residents, generous food bank donations, a food rescue service distributing donated food, and a bespoke Waiheke lockdown Facebook page – 'The Waiheke Pandemic of Kindness' – with the specific goal of sharing ideas of helping others, all led to discovering or rediscovering quintessential island connectedness. New whole-of-community expectations were developed around 'eradication measures compliance', along with 'naming and shaming' rule-breakers. Those actions emerged from a strengthening community identity built around 'pride' in remaining COVID-free, and reinforcing a sense of shared vigilance around COVID prevention.

Progressively, protecting the island developed into campaigning actively against incursion from the mainland. As COVID-resistance actively strengthened the connections among community members, Waihekeans disconnected their island identity from the mainland Auckland pandemic experience, and 'othered' non-locals – along with the locals identified as 'idiots', 'entitled few' and 'brainless fools' – as health risks. Residents' comments above reflect a strong sense of responsibility to protect the island community against COVID threats. The Waiheke *Gulf News* editorial on 30 September 2021 commented that 'Not a week passes at Gulf News without readers contacting us to discuss mask compliance on ferries and the risk of Covid reaching Waiheke...', and a 2021 survey found 30% of residents feeling 'COVID-unsafe' due to non-compliance with masking by visitors on the ferries (Project Forever Waiheke, 2021). As a warning to potential day-trippers to the island in mid-2020, the Waiheke Local Board Chair called for a distinct regional border, telling media, not entirely facetiously, that she would 'be down at the wharf to meet them with my pitchfork – we don't want them here' (Ward, 2020, n.p).

Developing a Waihekean identity as proud to be COVID-free reinforced a pre-existing distinction of Waiheke as 'not Auckland', despite Waiheke being under Auckland governance for pandemic regulation purposes. Emergence of an 'us versus them' mentality has been evident in small island communities elsewhere that felt sufficiently empowered to 'close off' from the outsiders. Locals on Magnetic Island protested at their ferry terminal to prevent non-residents from landing during the Queensland 2020 lockdown (ABC News, 2021), as did Molokai Island residents at their airport (Hawaii News Network, 2020). On Aotea/ Great Barrier Island, the Local Board created and implemented localised health protocols, seen there as more effective than Council and national guidelines (personal communication, Great Barrier Island, 15 May 2021).

On Waiheke, 'mainlanders' – as identified vectors for transmission – became personified *as* the disease and classified as a threat by virtue of not being local. In October 2021, a COVID-19 border at the ferry entries to Waiheke was mandated by the NZ government, in direct response to the Waiheke Local Board supporting a 'bespoke' Waiheke COVID-19 border, to exclude access to all non-residents except essential workers (Franks, 2021).

The Waiheke community's wish for a localised response to the pandemic reflects the concept of political subsidiarity (Kull & Tatar, 2015), that a centralised authority should control only those tasks that cannot be performed more effectively through local governance. Despite the apparent success of the earlier 'team of 5 million' COVID-compliance campaign by the NZ government, recent examples of NZ communities undertaking their own COVID-19 vaccination programmes, in preference to central government implementation, demonstrate the desire for a localised response to needs better understood at the local level (Neilson, 2021). As Waiheke has demonstrated, cohesive communities with strong shared values are able to create their own highly effective community-based 'teams' for pandemic protection.

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