

# **Overseas Kiwis and COVID-19**

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## **Introduction**

My project explored how the COVID-19 pandemic affected New Zealand's standing in the world, and the way kiwis abroad related to their home.

Looking back now, 'the COVID years' were very strange. In the months between the first lockdown and the end of 2022, time seemed to twist and blur with the rise and fall of alert levels. But one thing is certain - in those two years, COVID-19 changed New Zealand's standing in the world. For some, it became a progressive utopia where kindness and science reigned, and the sick and vulnerable were saved. For others, it was a 'hermit kingdom' that locked down its residents and kept citizens locked out. New Zealand's COVID response was state-led and collective-minded, and it resembled its Asian neighbours more than its siblings in the Anglosphere. But what did kiwis abroad think?

To answer this question, I interviewed Kiwis in Asia and Europe about their COVID experience. I did this to inform a novel about kiwi identity, national pride, mental health, and living abroad. I also spoke to three British doctors - a gerontologist (a doctor for the elderly), one who worked on a COVID ward, and one who left clinical work during the pandemic to work in infectious disease research.

## **Key Learnings**

I spend six weeks in southern England and six weeks in Thailand doing interviews and writing. My key learnings are below.

### *1. It was a Pandemic of Two Halves*

I am a kiwi so I think in rugby terms, whether I like it or not.

The opening whistle was 'go hard and go early', the elimination phase before the vaccines. In that first year, people in New Zealand lived normal lives in a giant COVID-free

bubble. We went to concerts and bars, and then came home to watch TV and saw the outside world dying on hospital floors. In this first half the folks in other countries were often jealous (UK doctors in particular were very jealous - their stories are harrowing), while the kiwis abroad were often proud. Often, but not always - and that changed quickly in 2021.

The second half started when the vaccines arrived in early 2021. Life outside New Zealand was returning to normal again thanks to vaccines, lockdown fatigue, and because many of the most vulnerable people were already dead. Folks overseas weren't as jealous of New Zealand, especially after hearing "Jacinda locked the country down after a single case". And as for kiwis overseas - the closed borders were taking their toll. The people I spoke with often felt abandoned and maligned for having the temerity to leave New Zealand. The traditional Tall Poppy Syndrome gained a moralistic and nationalistic streak, and the kiwis abroad were often pretty mad about it. Often, but not always. And that anger was strongest in those kiwis who had the least.

## *2. Floors and Ceilings*

I am a kiwi so I think in housing terms, whether I like it or not.

My fellowship reminded me that kiwis overseas are a diverse bunch. This seems obvious, but those differences were surprisingly strong and clear throughout the interviews. I saw two main groups of kiwis abroad - those who left because they'd hit the ceilings and wanted to go higher, and those who left because the floor was hitting them.

The first group were the kiwis I met in the UK. They were more likely to be young, urban, educated, and ambitious. They were largely middle class with good career prospects and liberal cosmopolitan politics. They were buoyed in the first half of the pandemic, and largely gritted their teeth through the second. They mostly had the money and support

networks at home to get through both halves. My interviewees included a manager at a Google AI project, a Cambridge PhD student, an employee at one of the 'Big Four' global consulting firms, and others.

The second group were the kiwis I met in Thailand. They were more likely to be older, provincial, less educated, and more financially precarious. They were largely working class men who were looking for a better life in a cheaper country, and their politics mostly ranged from conservative to contrarian to conspiratorial. They gritted their teeth through the first half of the pandemic, and shouted through the second. They often lacked money and support networks in both halves - and so did their families back home. Their stories were also horrific. But they found two helpful communities outside New Zealand. The first was other expats and the second was online. As time passed, the online community became much more paranoid, conspiratorial, and angry. Examples include permanently relocated semi-retirees, remote workers, agriculturalists, as well as some travellers and tourists. One of the men I interviewed even joined the parliament occupation when he finally got to visit home.

### *3. New Zealand - 'A Better Britain' or 'An Asian Country'?*

I am a kiwi so I think in international comparison terms, whether I like it or not.

In the beginning, New Zealand called itself a 'Better Britain'. But when Britain left us for Europe, we looked towards Asia. Former Prime Minister Jim Bolger even claimed "New Zealand is an Asian country." Our COVID-19 response arguably reflected this shift - instead of a limited state and individual responsibility, we saw a strong state and collective responsibility. In my research I found that the two groups mentioned above saw this, and applied their respective lenses to the two 'halves' of the pandemic.

New Zealand is a colonial nation, and our largest group of settlers came from England - specifically, southern England. Hence my UK research focused on this area. Many of the things I thought were kiwi were actually Southern English. Sally Lunns, pasties, street names, the entire city of Christchurch - it was all there. And it was all sitting in the pub with no mask on, cursing the government. That included the kiwis who lived there, who largely drifted towards the English approach over time.

In Thailand, it was different. Even at the end of 2022, Thai people were mostly wearing masks and checking temperatures in shops. Apart from the odd block of cheese and the shared cultural footprint of America, Thailand in 2022 was very different from both England and New Zealand. The kiwis who lived there rocketed from the Thai approach - especially as they started to radicalise via the internet.

### **Conclusion and Next Steps**

The fellowship was incredibly useful for my key task - which was to create detailed, accurate characters for a novel about kiwis abroad. I achieved this by interviewing people about their experiences in the COVID years. Since returning, I've written a draft and met with folks in the industry to talk through the details of publishing. My draft is over 100,000 words, and revising it is a huge task. My goal is that I will (eventually) publish a novel that addresses the core questions of the fellowship (or at least tries to). The Winston Churchill McNeish Writer's Fellowship has been utterly central to doing this. Previously, I've only succeeded in short stories because of the time. Novels take a huge amount of concentration and effort. The Fellowship gave me the resources to focus on writing, but more importantly - it gave me the time. So my next steps will be to revise this book, get feedback from other writers, and meet with contacts in the sector to work through publication.

## Appendix

### 1- Travel itinerary

Place	Arrive	Depart	Activity
Phuket	22 June 2022	23 June	Research
Koh Phangan	23 June	29 June	Research
Koh Samui	29 June	2 July	Research
Bangkok	2 July	3 July	Research
London	3 July	8 July	Research
Redhill	8 July	15 July	Writing
Canterbury	15 July	17 July	Research
London	17 July	20 July	Research
Bath	20 July	24 July	Research
Cambridge	24 July	27 July	Research
Rugby	27 July	31 July	Research
Redhill	31 July	12 August	Writing
Chiang Mai	21 November	19 December	Writing/Research
Langkawi, Malaysia	20 December	26 December	(Break)
Krabi	26 December	4 January 2023	Writing
Bangkok	4 January	6 January 2023	Writing/Research

### 2- Interviews

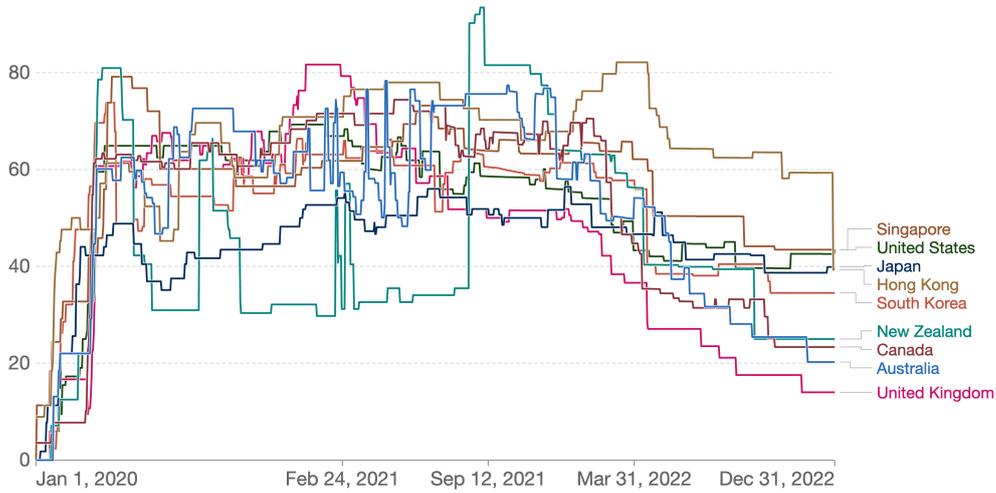
Given the angry and conspiratorial nature of some of the people I talked to (and some of the people who decided I was 'on the government payroll'), I will withhold the names of people I spoke to. I can provide some of these the Board privately if need be.

### 3- New Zealand's COVID-19 public health restrictions compared to other countries

#### COVID-19 Containment and Health Index



This is a composite measure based on thirteen policy response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, travel bans, testing policy, contact tracing, face coverings, and vaccine policy rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest). If policies vary at the subnational level, the index is shown as the response level of the strictest sub-region.



Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford - Last updated 24 July 2023  
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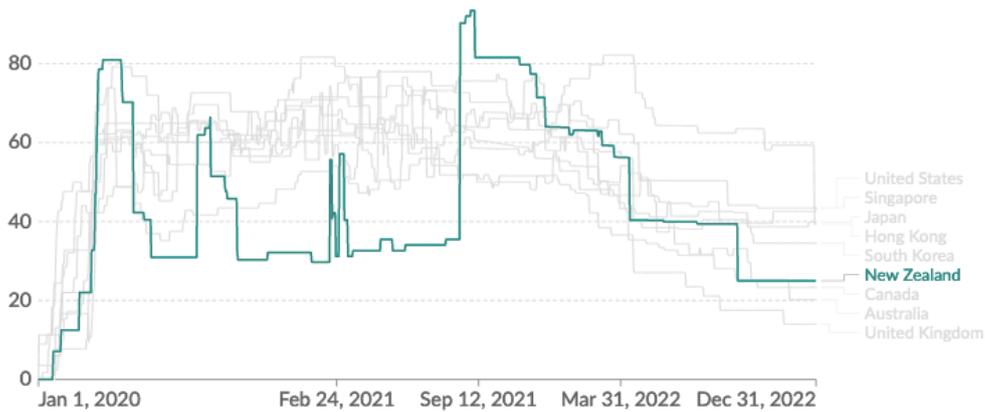
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+ Add country or region

All together ▾



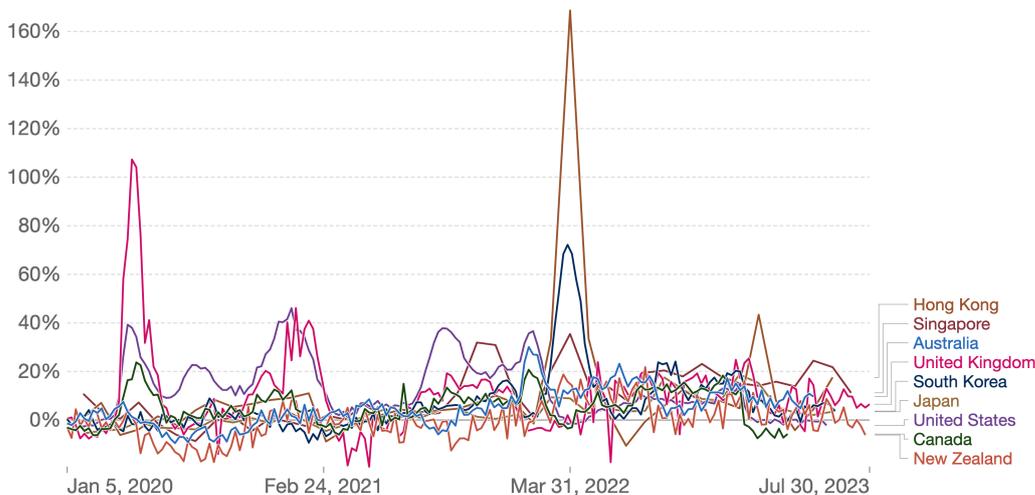
Source: Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford - Last updated 24 July 2023  
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▶ Jan 1, 2020 ○ Dec 31, 2022

## Excess mortality: Deaths from all causes compared to projection



The percentage difference between the reported number of weekly or monthly deaths in 2020–2023 and the projected number of deaths for the same period based on previous years. The reported number might not count all deaths that occurred due to incomplete coverage and delays in reporting.



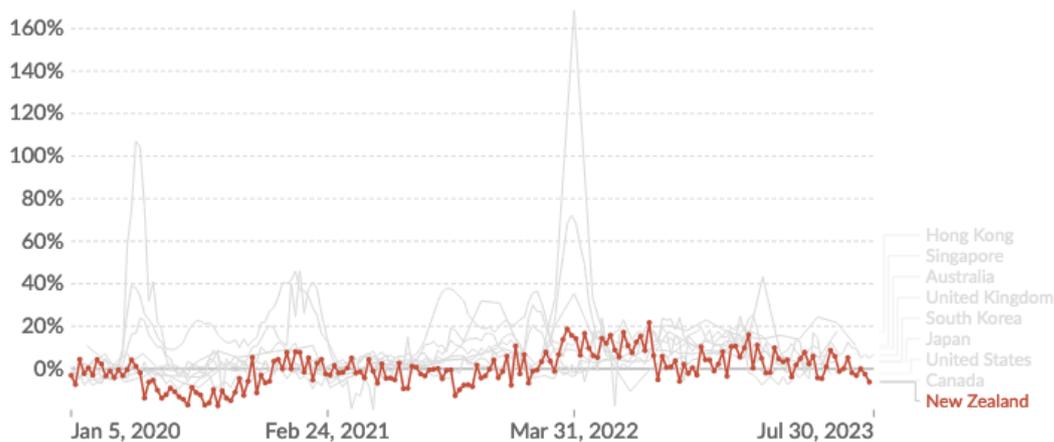
Source: Human Mortality Database (2023); World Mortality Dataset (2023); Karlinsky and Kobak (2021)  
 Note: Comparisons across countries are affected by differences in the completeness of death reporting. Details can be found at our Excess Mortality page.  
 OurWorldInData.org/coronavirus • CC BY

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▶ Jan 5, 2020  Jul 30, 2023