

Covid 19 Delta outbreak: Whangārei, Kaitaia protests erode Northland's fight against virus — Baker

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(de Graaf, 2021)

Robbie Johnson, Whangārei director of Destiny Church's Man Up movement, addresses a Freedom NZ protest at Kensington Park in Whangārei. Photo / Michael Cunningham

By **Peter de Graaf**
Reporter

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Large protests in Whangārei and Kaitaia on Saturday will erode Northland's effort to keep the virus out even if they didn't spread Covid-19, a leading epidemiologist says.

More than 1000 people gathered at Whangārei's Kensington Park in a protest led by Destiny's Man Up movement, while the district health board and Māori health providers were urging Northlanders to get jabbed as part of a nationwide Super Saturday initiative.

It was the biggest protest in the country after Auckland where an estimated 2000 people gathered at the Domain.

Another Freedom NZ protest took place in Kaitaia where hundreds of people gathered at Te Ahu before marching and driving up Commerce St. The crowd was big enough to delay traffic for almost two hours.

University of Otago epidemiologist Michael Baker said the protests were "obviously risky".

It wasn't so much the gathering itself but things people did before and afterwards such as sharing transport or socialising indoors.

Singing and shouting in a crowd also increased the risk of spreading the virus.

"It's clearly breaking down people's bubbles. It's the sort of situation where you expect transmission to occur if the virus is circulating."

Factors in Northland's favour were that the events were outdoors — "super-spreader" events usually happened indoors — and New Zealand's vigorous response to Covid, which he hoped meant the virus was not circulating in Whangārei or Kaitaia.

"Over time, if people congregate and don't follow the rules that will result in an outbreak spreading rapidly. But if you have a single episode, and by chance, there's no virus present, you might get away with it."

It was likely to be a different story at the protest in Auckland, where the virus was circulating.

Another risk of the Northland protests was that they eroded people's resolve to keep fighting the virus.

"If people see protesters flouting the rules they think, 'Why should any of us do it anymore?' It weakens that social cohesion."

The third risk was that such protests were often used to disseminate misinformation or even disinformation, Baker said.

"I find it remarkable that you can have someone with a placard saying they are anti-lockdown and anti-vax when vaccination is the way out of lockdowns. The absurdity of the messages people are promoting is enough to make a scientist weep. Have people learnt nothing about the simple logic of how you beat a global pandemic?"

The current Covid restrictions — including limits on gatherings — were part of the reason it appeared the virus had not taken root in Northland, Baker said. If an infected person had attended the Whangārei or Kaitaia events it was likely to take a week to 10 days before any cases showed up.

That was because the virus needed time to incubate and produce symptoms, and the person had to get sick enough to seek out a test.