

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

1,206,319
CASES

9,344
DEATHS

16,239,452
VACCINE DOSES

A snapshot of the Covid-19 situation in Hong Kong as of yesterday

Source: Hong Kong government

LESSON FROM SHANGHAI: WHAT NOT TO DO IN CRISIS

Financial hub tried but failed to live with the virus – something not lost on other cities, which rapidly imposed mass testing and sweeping lockdowns

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For Shanghai, the worst appears to have passed.

After more than a month of locking down the entire city, Covid-19 restrictions are easing in response to a decline in new infections and other signs that the spread of the disease is slowing.

But that is not all that has fallen. In the short time that China's financial centre has registered more than 600,000 cases, its reputation as a model city in tackling the coronavirus has plummeted to being a salutary lesson on what not to do.

Shanghai shows that imposing lockdowns at a late stage does not work that well

JIN DONG-YAN, HKU VIROLOGIST

"Shanghai was potentially a test bed for a more flexible zero-Covid strategy – one that would allow China to live with the virus," said Nicholas Thomas, an associate professor at City University of Hong Kong. "Unfortunately, logistical and communication gaps prevented that ambition from being successfully realised."

Shanghai started the year with a "targeted and refined" approach to containing Covid-19. Instead of sweeping closures and mass testing when cases were detected, the city targeted smaller areas such as neighbourhoods and buildings – even down to a single bubble tea shop.

The more granular strategy gave the city's 25 million residents more flexibility and freedom while keeping occasional outbreaks largely out of the community – until it didn't.

Authorities persisted with the playbook even after amassing thousands of cases and did not impose a lockdown for citywide testing to minimise the impact on society and economy until the end of March, when community spread of coronavirus was already rampant.

Soon after that the number of cases had risen to more than 20,000 a day – driven by the highly transmissible Omicron variant – and the health system was stretched to breaking point.

Under China's strict zero-Covid policy, anybody who tests

positive must be sent to a quarantine centre but there were not enough places to send people and home isolation was ruled out for even the mildest of cases.

Vice-Premier Sun Chunlan was sent in to oversee epidemic control and more facilities were built, but it still took weeks to see a turnaround.

So far, seven out of 16 districts and some neighbourhoods in the Pudong New Area have managed to clear their communities of infections, but some are still being reported elsewhere and the risk of a renewed outbreak persists.

Viologist Jin Dong-Yan, from the University of Hong Kong (HKU), said Shanghai showed at least one thing.

"The experience in Shanghai shows that imposing lockdowns at a late stage does not work that well. It can take a very long time and is difficult to achieve 'dynamic clearance'," Jin said, referring to the severing of transmission chains.

President Xi Jinping has insisted the country will stick to its zero-Covid path of using lockdowns, mass testing and contact tracing to keep the coronavirus at bay, citing the uneven access to medical care and uncertainty of the virus' evolution as reasons.

In Shanghai's aftermath, other cities have apparently decided to take no chances.

Shaoyang in Hunan province went into lockdown on April 18 when one Covid-19 case was found. The city reopened 10 days later after no new infections were detected outside a quarantined area.



A Shanghai resident peers through a gap in the barrier at a residential area during a lockdown. Photo: Reuters

On April 25, Baotou in Inner Mongolia banned residents from leaving their homes and ordered citywide testing when two Covid-19 cases were identified. The city reopened on April 29, in time for the Labour Day public holiday.

In Hebei, the city of Baoding imposed a three-day lockdown for citywide testing after finding four asymptomatic carriers. The lockdown was extended for two days and lifted on May 1.

Jin said such early measures were not necessarily effective. Shenzhen locked down for a week to achieve "society clearance" but continued to record new cases after the restriction was lifted.

"It's difficult to judge the perfect timing for measures under Omicron," he said. "Cases continue to show after such a lockdown as we have observed in Shenzhen."

Other cities have sought to avoid tough lockdowns while also trying to contain the spread early.

Xian in Shaanxi province decided to confine most of its residents to their residential areas for three days for citywide testing after finding cases outside quarantine areas in mid-April. Shops remained open and people could walk around outside their homes.

Guangzhou started to test residents overnight after finding positive cases in routine tests of hospital staff. Travel restrictions were put in some areas but most of the city remained open.

Even Beijing, which is on high alert for any large outbreak ahead of a major Communist Party meeting in autumn, has yet to ban all movement within the capital.

Some residential areas are under restrictions and everybody in the city has been through repeated rounds of testing but the toughest rules are limited to Chaoyang district, where most cases were found.

Thomas, from City University, said more targeted lockdown approaches had been successfully implemented in cities like Guangzhou, Xian and Zhengzhou, and they seemed to have learned from Shanghai's experience.

"The ongoing experience in Beijing also shows that this response can be successfully implemented, particularly when coupled with the provision of financial support for people

In the early stages of an epidemic... there is no need for citywide 'static management'

LIANG WANNIAN, COVID-19 ADVISER

adversely affected by movement restrictions and food aid, for people unable to leave their flats or compounds," he said.

Cui Eman, an analyst with Gavekal Dragonomics, said it was now possible to see an end to the current wave of lockdowns but the risk that new outbreaks or a new variant would result in another wave was still there.

That risk would remain until China made a more fundamental shift in its Covid policies, Cui said.

"There is certainly no political signalling of this sort, with government officials defending their record and silencing dissenting views," Cui wrote in a report on Friday.

Liang Wannian, a senior adviser on China's Covid-19 response, said Omicron demanded authorities be quicker and more decisive in prevention and control while also being "scientific" to balance containing the spread with maintaining socio-economic development.

"In the early stages of an epidemic, when the chain of transmission is clear and the risk is manageable, there is no need for citywide 'static management'," Liang said, using a coded term for lockdown. "However, when there is widespread community transmission and the transmission chain is unclear... stricter measures such as citywide static management need to be considered."

Jin from HKU said the most valuable lesson other cities should learn from Shanghai was to improve the vaccination rate, especially among the elderly, to prevent death.



Top to bottom: A panda statue looms over people in line for testing in Beijing's Chaoyang district yesterday; more testing in Chaoyang; and birds on sale from a bicycle in another part of Beijing. Photos: AP



Work from home order for another Beijing area

Capital's Communist Party secretary vows to end the outbreak with a swift response

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Work from home orders have been issued for a second district in Beijing as the capital aims for a swift "clearance" of coronavirus infections in the community.

Fangshan district followed Chaoyang's lead, with employees of government agencies and state-owned companies told to avoid their offices and work from home yesterday, a work day on the mainland.

"The order was implemented well. The city is quiet now," Fangshan official Zhang Mingzhi said. "We inspected more than 40 office buildings and shops on Saturday morning and everybody was working at home except for some security guards and property management staff."

Employees of private firms were encouraged to stay home, with only essential service personnel working within a "closed loop" between home and office, the district government said.

All public places such as libraries, museums, gyms and bars are closed, as are all shops, except for grocery stores, pharmacies and restaurants.

The orders came after Cai Qi, the city's Communist Party secretary, pledged to end the outbreak with a swift response.

"The city's epidemic is at a high plateau and there are still scattered cases outside quarantine areas," Cai said. "We must respond quickly to the fast transmission of the virus... and control all the risk areas and people as soon as possible to reach the tipping point of the outbreak and clearance of infections outside quarantined areas."

"At present, the epidemic prevention and control work is in a critical period of 'sailing against the current' and no progress is regression," Cai said, adding the battle must be won.

Beijing reported 53 new cases yesterday, sending the total for the current outbreak to above 660.

The capital is eager to contain the numbers to prevent further escalation ahead of the party's national congress in autumn.

Most of the Covid-19 patients in Beijing were mild cases and asymptomatic carriers, with only one severe case reported, according to Li Ang, deputy director of Beijing's health commission.

Beijing has admitted 210 people to its Xiaotangshan temporary hospital, including 39 asymptomatic carriers and 167 mild cases.

Beijing Ditan Hospital, the capital's designated infectious diseases hospital for Covid-19 treatment, has admitted 39 asymptomatic carriers, 371 mild cases, 58 moderate cases and one patient with serious illness.

"The number of cases associated with the elderly or those with comorbidities is high, with one-third of the patients having high-risk factors," Li said.

He said the severe case was a woman, 79, who had a history of hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, among other conditions.

More than 40 per cent of the cases in this wave have been reported in Chaoyang and some residential areas have been sealed off as "temporary control areas".

Public transport such as subways and bus routes passing areas where cases were found were suspended on Thursday.

City postpones major college entry exam

Shanghai pushes 'gaokao' test back a month as Covid-19 rules endure

Daniel Ren, Tracy Qu and Zhang Shidong

Shanghai has delayed the annual college entrance test to July, as the commercial and financial hub continues to observe strict Covid-19 control measures to contain the latest outbreak.

The National Higher Education Entrance Examination, or *gaokao*, will now be held from July 7 to 9 – a month behind the original dates – as students carry on with online classes, Shanghai Vice-Mayor Chen Qun said.

Chen said entrance exams to middle school in Shanghai have also been delayed for a month to July 18 and 19.

"After carefully assessing the current situation amid the coronavirus outbreak, we've made the decision to defer the exams after receiving approval from the Ministry of Education," Chen said. He also indicated that the municipal government would unveil a time frame for reopening schools once the pandemic had been contained.

The announcement came after daily new Covid-19 cases in Shanghai dropped for the 14th straight day, down 1.3 per cent to 4,214 over the previous 24 hours, according to official data released yesterday. Symptomatic cases rose to 253 from 245 a day earlier, while 13 patients died.

1.3%
Proportion by which Shanghai's new daily cases of Covid-19 dropped in 24 hours, according to data released yesterday

China reported 4,620 positive cases yesterday, with most of those being in Shanghai. Meanwhile, 53 positive cases were reported in Beijing, which is struggling to contain the spread of the Omicron variant.

Chinese high school students who want to enter colleges in the United States or Europe have also been affected by the latest Covid-19 disruptions.

The College Board, an American non-profit organisation which administers the Advanced Placement exams for post-secondary education in the US, announced on Friday that it had cancelled this year's AP test in China "given the scale and uncertainty of the situation" on the mainland, according to a report by the Associated Press.

In China, *gaokao* is widely considered to be the most important entrance exam that can make or break a young person's future. It is also intended to help level the playing field with the country's rich, providing an opportunity for students from poorer families to gain entry to a top university.

"Students are supposed to overcome a series of difficulties in preparing for the exams this year, and a one-month postponement can help them find their best form now that the [Covid-19] outbreak shows signs of stabilising," said Yan Jinglan, a professor of foreign studies at the East China University of Science and Technology in Shanghai.

"Those students who can hold their nerves to make better preparations during the next two months will be the winners."

Deferring the exams to a later date reflects the Shanghai government's strong commitment to keep in check new coronavirus cases, following China's dynamic zero-Covid policy.

All primary and middle schools in Shanghai have been closed since March 12, owing to a

resurgence of the Covid-19 outbreak, that required students to shift to online instruction.

The mainland's commercial and financial capital, with about 25 million residents, went into a citywide lockdown on April 1.

The municipal government has not yet announced when Covid-19 control measures would be relaxed.

As a hub for high-end manufacturing, such as electric vehicles, Shanghai has been ramping up efforts to resume production and reopen its economy.

Some 1,000 workers – about 90 per cent of total employees – at the Shanghai plant of lithium-ion battery maker Contemporary Amperex Technology (CATL) have already returned to their posts, according to local media.

CATL's plant is located in the city's Lingang free-trade zone, where US electric carmaker Tesla's GigaFactory is also based.

Covid-19 cases in Shanghai have surpassed 600,000 since the latest outbreak began on March 1. The cumulative death toll increased to 528 since an initial three fatalities were reported on April 18, with most cases involving unvaccinated, elderly patients with underlying ailments.

Shanghai has been chasing a societal zero-Covid goal since mid-April.

On Friday, the city's low-risk unguarded areas, known as "precautionary zones", recorded 18 new cases, down from 23 a day earlier.

'WOMEN MORE LIKELY THAN MEN TO GAIN WEIGHT DURING PANDEMIC'

Women were more likely than men to gain weight during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic, a study suggests. Experts also found both sexes under the age of 45 were more likely to put on the kilos than those in other age groups.

But the research found the vast majority of people stayed around the same weight or did not move into another weight category, according to their body mass index (BMI).

This came as awareness was growing of how severe Covid-19 was affected by weight.

The new research, involving almost a million British adults, was being presented at the European Congress on Obesity in Maastricht. It used data from the Clinical Practice Research Datalink of more than 200,000 general medical practices.

The study found most (83-93 per cent) remained in the same BMI category before and after lockdown. Of those who had a healthy weight, 83 per cent remained in the same BMI category post-lockdown, 14 per cent became overweight or obese, and about

3 per cent moved into the underweight category. Of those who were overweight, 11 per cent gained weight while 12 per cent lost weight.

Meanwhile, of those who were obese, 9 per cent lost weight and moved down to the overweight, normal or underweight categories, while 5 per cent moved up at least one category.

The study found more women than men gained weight. For example, in the overweight category, 13 per cent of women versus 9 per cent of men became obese.

Similarly, compared with older age groups, those aged younger than 45 were more likely to gain weight and move up at least one BMI category post-lockdown.

Dr David Kloecker, who worked on the study, said: "Prolonged periods of lockdown disrupted daily routines making it challenging for people to eat healthily and keep fit, with emotional eating and sports club closures likely intensifying the trend." Deutsche Presse-Agentur