



INSIGHT: GREATER CHINA

In Remote Provinces, Zero-COVID is Worsening Inequality



THE TAKE-AWAY

The final months of 2022 have seen outbreaks in China's northern and northwestern hinterlands, spanning Xinjiang, Tibet, Inner Mongolia, and, most recently, Xining—all regions characterized by low incomes, dispersed populations, and high percentages of ethnic minority residents. All of these regions are seeing strict enforcement of zero-COVID exacerbate existing inequalities.

IN BRIEF

Xining, a city of nearly 2.5 million and the capital of northwestern Qinghai province, entered lockdown on October 21 after nine asymptomatic cases were discovered at one of its main wholesale food distribution centres. Just four days later, reports surfaced that residents were struggling to buy food, stock essential supplies, and access medical care. Viral social media posts showed napa cabbages being sold at C\$9.25 (49.31 yuan) per head and locals **rationing food to survive**.

Qinghai province consistently ranks in the bottom third of China's 34 province-level administrative divisions in terms of income. The ethnic

minority-heavy region imports most of its fresh food, rendering it even more dependent on ever-shaky supply chains. Facing public pressure, the city government said at an October 26 press conference that it was working to counter price gouging and ensure that 60 per cent of supermarkets in the city stayed open. On November 2, the city announced that six officials were punished for "failing to fulfill requisite duties in this round of pandemic control work."

IMPLICATIONS

In 2022, COVID-19 outbreaks have occurred in many of China's remote borderland regions. This contrasts from earlier in the pandemic, when lockdowns mostly occurred in heavily populated megacities. As a result, these new outbreaks are revealing large disparities in China's implementation of zero-COVID across its diverse regions.

Remote regions with high percentages of ethnic minority residents are often subject to **heavy-handed enforcement of policies**, whether during the COVID-19 pandemic or for other purposes. This is because local officials in these regions are especially incentivized to go above and beyond in compliance

to show political commitment and loyalty to their superiors. Misconduct is also less likely to be amplified online. Between August and September 2022, around [15 per cent](#) [of] residents in Tibet's capital city, Lhasa, were sent to a quarantine facility — *fangcang* — at least once. Many parts of Xinjiang including its capital, Urumqi, have been under strict lockdowns since early August with no clear exit plan.

When rigid compliance to zero-COVID meets limited resources and sparse populations, the result is often **chaos and dire conditions for residents**. The dismissals of officials in Xining point to systemic dysfunction. In Yili, Xinjiang, local officials issued a rare public apology in September for mismanagement of pandemic affairs. Outbreaks at the Inner Mongolia University of Technology saw students transported to quarantine en masse in packed trains, apparently without separating those who had tested positive from those who had tested negative.

WHAT'S NEXT

- Food shortages in Xining have raised alarm bells for other local officials. Fuzhou, in coastal Fujian, is one of the more recent cases of a Chinese city that has plunged into lockdown. Officials there explicitly stated that they are working to ensure at least a month's **stock of food** for the entire city despite the plan to lock down for three days.
- Lockdowns in remote northwestern regions have, unintendedly, increased public awareness of **ethnic minority experiences** and even encouraged solidarity. A [Bloomberg report](#) in September 2022 notes ethnic Han social media users stepped up to criticize government actions online during the Xinjiang lockdowns and amplified the voices of Uyghurs and Kazakhs, as it is much riskier for ethnic minorities to do so publicly.

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