

restrictions ahead of the holiday season. Instead, the province announced new restrictions starting on Boxing Day — after people would have already done their last-minute shopping and gathered for the holidays.

Experts now say the holiday period accelerated what was already an alarming trajectory before Christmas. According to mobility data shared exclusively with the Star, some health units that have seen dramatic increases in post-holiday infection rates also had among the province's highest rates of movement.

Warning people of a lockdown several days in advance is a “ghastly” way to communicate risk and gave people implicit permission to proceed with their holiday plans, said Dr. Jody Lanard, a risk communications expert who has consulted with the World Health Organization.

“The few days before the lockdown ... did the most damage of all the weeks leading up to Boxing Day,” Lanard said. “It was a big mistake to say, ‘Pretty please don't gather for Christmas, but the day after Christmas, we're putting down the sledgehammer.’”

What remains unknown is whether highly transmissible new variants of the coronavirus could have also contributed to recent case rises in Ontario. Public Health Ontario has only found six samples of the U.K. variant so far, and there's currently no evidence they're behind the recent provincewide surge, said Dr. Jeff Kwong, a senior scientist with the ICES, a non-profit research institute.

Last week, ICES released alarming new test positivity numbers for Ontario's 34 public health units, many of which spiked after Christmas.

“There were a lot of gatherings obviously happening because there's no other explanation for this,” Kwong said. “You could (argue) essential workers still had to go to work, but they've been having to go to work for all of these weeks and months and we didn't see all of this explosive growth all of a sudden.

“Just to see the jump — it was quite upsetting to see.”

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