

# Adaptation and response in times of crisis

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The COVID-19 strategy of the City of Buenos Aires

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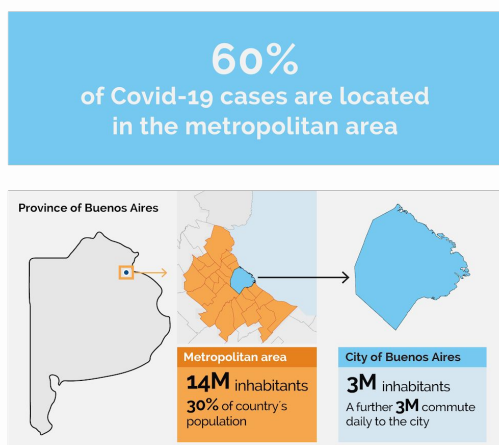


**Buenos Aires Ciudad**

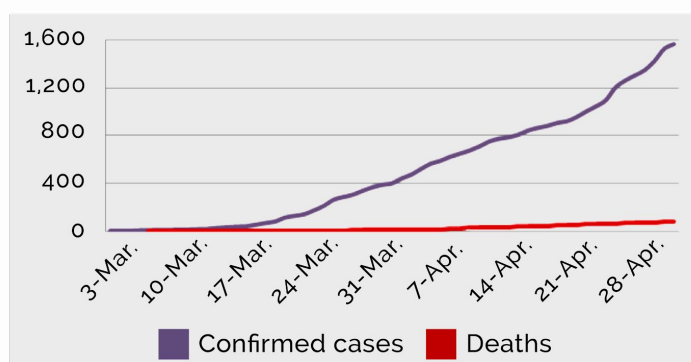


## Current situation and context

Argentina detected its first Covid-19 case in the city of Buenos Aires, on 3 March 2020. Within two and a half weeks, the national government and the government of the city of Buenos Aires had issued over 100 decrees and measures, including mobility restrictions, quarantine in hotels for repatriated citizens, remote working, online courses for students of all ages, healthcare system reinforcements, maximum assistance for senior citizens, and a nationwide lockdown that began on 20 March.



Total confirmed cases & deaths in the City of Buenos Aires



GCBA data

The city is currently in an **advanced lockdown**, with strict controls, mandatory use of masks in public, and decentralized testing. Compliance is high; with 96% fewer passengers on the metro; 92% fewer passengers on the train; 78% fewer passengers on the bus; and a 62% reduction in vehicle use.

Total cases in Argentina as of 4 May 2020 stand at 4,887, with 260 deaths. The city of Buenos Aires has had 1721 cases overall, and 74 deaths. A peak was initially expected in mid-April, but measures to flatten the curve have delayed this. A peak is now expected in early June.

## City government adaptation to the crisis

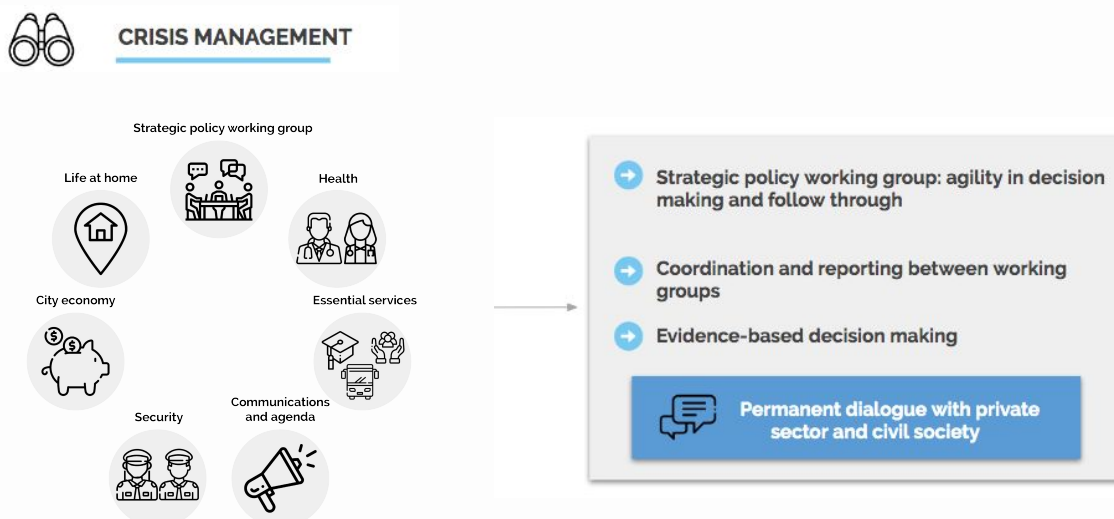
Over a decade of rigorous planning, monitoring, and evidence-based policymaking, as well as competencies in health, transportation, security, and education, enabled the city government to quickly adapt, reallocate resources, and develop coordinated and consistent responses.

The city immediately put in place a **Suppression Strategy** to flatten the contagion curve, based on **mandatory quarantine, early identification and isolation of older people**, and launched a set of innovative initiatives, emanating from the assets that define it as a global capital - **talent, diversity and creativity**.

In terms of health, this can be seen, for example, in how Buenos Aires is using technology and innovation to diversify assistance channels and increase the capacity of the health system. It can also be seen in the specific policies to provide special care to older people; in the use of hotels to house repatriated citizens and provide rooms for minor cases and vulnerable populations; and in the launch of an online culture portal that offers the best of the city's cultural content for free to people at home.



A series of interconnected and highly responsive **working groups** were set up to manage the crisis and prepare for the “day after”, all reporting to a strategic policy working group that meets daily every morning. Decisions are data-based, a close eye is kept on how other cities across the world are acting, and the working groups maintain a permanent dialogue with the private sector and civil society.



## Permanent dialogue with the private sector, civil society and academia

The city is working hand-in-hand with large companies, NGOs and universities to coordinate and strengthen collaboration on multiple joint initiatives, ranging from straightforward donations and on-the-ground support for vulnerable communities and individuals, to facilitating educational qualifications and jointly developing solutions to support the easing of restrictions as the city switches back on.

## Leading initiatives of key working groups

- **Health**

In line with the city's suppression strategy, health systems were restructured to **increase installed capacity** and **diversify emergency support channels**.

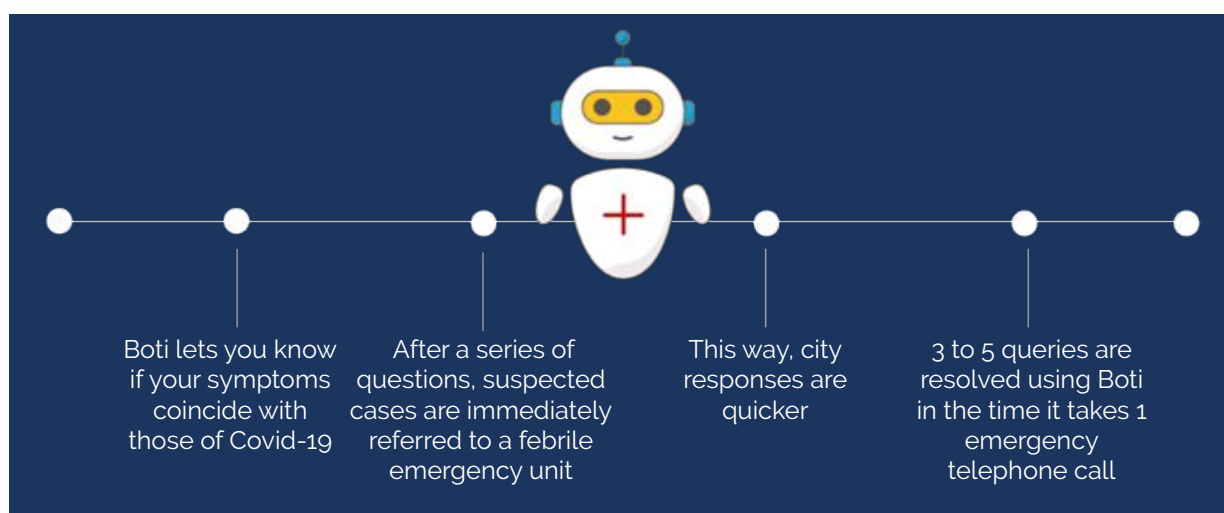
To increase installed capacity, the city **doubled the number of intensive care beds**, added a further **600 general hospital beds**, **790 beds in isolation centres**, and installed **18 febrile emergency units** outside hospitals to screen patients with Covid-19 symptoms.

Over **5,500 rooms in 80 hotels** were made available to house repatriated citizens for the mandatory 14-day quarantine as part of a **hotel relocation policy** to keep potential cases separated from the general population. Over 20,000 Argentines have been repatriated since early March. 5% of the 6,000+ repatriated city residents who were quarantined in hotels tested positive for Covid-19.



Relocation to hotels for self-isolating has therefore prevented at least a thousand more cases in the city. Over 2,000 beds in hotel rooms have also been earmarked to look after mild cases and older people as repatriated citizens are now returning to their homes.

To **diversify emergency assistance channels**, the city's "**Boti**" whatsapp chatbot for government services support was upgraded, reducing pressure on traditional emergency response services. It enables detailed queries and responses on Covid-19, and provides immediate referrals for suspected cases to the closest febrile emergency unit(s). To date, it has had over 186,700 queries, with a response rate up to five times quicker than the traditional telephone emergency response line which has also been reinforced.



Further **technological improvements to remote attention and monitoring within the health system** have been made, including the enabling of digital prescriptions and digital medical records, new software to map the development of confirmed cases, a hospital survey app, and patient self-monitoring technology.

- **Essential services**

### **Comprehensive plan for older people**

With people over 70 representing 8 out of every 10 deaths related to Covid-19, the core priority of the city government at this juncture is looking after the city's older citizens, with initiatives designed for people living alone, those at home with family, and those living in vulnerable neighbourhoods.

Over **38,000 volunteers are working for the "Mayores Cuidados"** programme that matches volunteers with older people living alone to provide them with round-the-clock assistance as needed. They are available to buy food and medicines, to carry out daily essential activities, like banking operations, or help out one of the **80 flu vaccine centres** for older people that have been set up away from hospitals, as winter approaches the southern hemisphere. Over 170,000 older citizens have already been vaccinated.

**Extra-quarantine agreements and protocols** have been put in place to ensure family members and apartment block porters are also able to provide food and care to older people.



Several sites with over 1,600 beds in lower-income neighbourhoods with high population densities have been opened in community centres, hotels and nursing homes to offer older people the opportunity to maintain social distancing and receive medical and psychological support outside their homes.

## Education

Talent is a great competitive advantage of Buenos Aires. The city is distinguished internationally for the quality and quantity of qualified human capital, and for its ability to generate, attract and retain talent. This leadership is the result of a quality educational offer at all levels and a high capacity to transform this into a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Buenos Aires' education system is well-prepared for transitioning towards online teaching and learning, thanks to a curriculum focused on new technologies. For over 10 years the city government has been making a sustained investment in technological infrastructure, teacher training and delivery of portable netbooks and devices to students.

Schools were closed within two weeks of the first case in Argentina and in Buenos Aires an **online educational platform, Mi Escuela**, was set up, along with an online educational community support initiative, **Comunidad Educativa Conectada (CEC)**, to connect families with teachers. Mi Escuela **has over 5,000 didactic tools** and activities for home learning, with **74,300 daily users** and over 126,700 downloads to date. CEC has had over 16,500 interactions since its launch. Over 10,000 students are also able to take exams online.

And as schools across Buenos Aires have a social responsibility and mission, over 350,000 food rations have been distributed to school children from vulnerable environments as well technological equipment and printed school materials to help them continue studying. Every two weeks, **1,200 schools receive food baskets for 300,000 students**, while city day care centres for 0-3 year olds have had their food provisions tripled, to reach over 34,200 children.

## Vulnerable sectors

Economic assistance and urban integration initiatives for vulnerable and at-risk populations are being strengthened.

**470 community kitchens have had food provisions increased by a third**; local churches and clubs have been converted into shelters; new house payments for hundreds of families in vulnerable neighbourhoods have been suspended; local businesses are offered training and support to provide services online.

**33 social inclusion centres and a further 7 shelters** provide beds, food, showers and leisure activities - while respecting social distancing - for the city's homeless people. The "Buenos Aires Presente" programme has increased its capacity and has over 100 staff on the ground every night to help homeless people find shelters.

The city's **gender violence helpline has been reinforced**, along with available refuges and halfway houses. **Gender perspectives and sexual and reproductive health** are incorporated into communications campaigns, digital education programmes and across containment and assistance programmes for older people.



## Transport & Security

**Minimal public transport services with reduced standardized timetables** have been maintained; all public transport is subject to rigorous cleaning and disinfection. Mass public information campaigns on personal hygiene and recommendations to avoid public transport where possible have been carried out.

**Social distancing markings** between seats are set out on public transport; commuters and transport staff must wear masks at all times and **health controls are in place at busy junctions**. The main Constitucion station uses **thermal cameras** to measure passenger temperatures.

For private vehicles, as for any individual seeking to leave their house, **permits** available by request online are required to move around the city. There are 390 vehicle controls in the city, with **20 exclusive access lanes** reserved for public transport, logistical transport and medical staff. Toll payments have been suspended.

- **Life at Home**

The city of Buenos Aires is known for its quality of life, its vibrant and eclectic cultural offering, and the talent and warmth of its citizens. As all of these elements are an integral to the city's identity, it is particularly important that they are safeguarded and promoted as much as possible during isolation at home.

Several **cultural and wellbeing initiatives** have been put in place to support physical, emotional and spiritual health, provide guidance on how to take effective preventative measures, and provide **free entertainment** for people at home. **Cultura en Casa (Culture at Home)** is a successful example of the latter, offering quality cultural content, from theatre, opera and ballet, to museum and gallery tours, audiobooks and TV series. The platform has had over 2.5 million visits. Productions from the Colon Theatre have had over 200,000 views.

With such demand for cultural content, **Buenos Aires and Mexico City** have agreed to broaden their cultural offering by **sharing their digital content**. Agreements with other cities are in the pipeline.

- **Communications and Media**

The Covid-19 response is prioritized across every area of communications in the city. Communications are open, transparent and proactive, based on one of the government's core principles: proximity to its citizens. Measures are explained before being carried out; cases announced before being picked up by the press; results are communicated so that citizens can see the effects their isolation is bringing .

Besides the roll out of **extensive public information campaigns** on personal hygiene, coronavirus symptoms, social distancing and supporting older citizens, city communications have also been focused on encouraging citizen participation in the care and assistance of those most in need, and on developing or incorporating new communications platforms, such as the new digital education platform, Mi Escuela, or using TikTok to generate awareness amongst younger people.



Since the outbreak, the city government holds at least **two press conferences per week**, with **situation reports send out twice a day**. To date, the mayor has held over 74 interviews and 18 video conferences with over 100 journalists; his senior ministers have given over 500 press conferences.

Furthermore, the public media have placed themselves at the service of the fight against Covid-19, not only in terms of dissemination and prevention, but also with regard to educational, cultural and programming content for older citizens.

## **Switch on and the new normal**

Reversal plans are in place for a staggered lifting of restrictions with special protocols for each sector, and a **blueprint for the new reality** that is being designed in coordination with the private sector, the academic community, and civil society. Policy reversals will be determined by the speed of contagion, the capacity of the health system and a careful impact analysis of each economic sector.

