

## Research Insights

# Is there a clear pathway out of the pandemic? Australians disagree

Australians have diverse views on which mandatory government regulations are acceptable to reduce the spread of COVID-19. While most Australians support some policies, they diverge on the acceptability of others. These differences reveal a generational and educational divide.

# Differences of opinion

Absent a vaccine for COVID-19, Australians may need to accept additional mandatory regulations to prevent the resurgence of the virus and keep it at bay. The costs of these policies are not borne equally by all members of society, and Australians disagree on their desirability. Policy alternatives currently implemented in different countries include regular testing of vulnerable populations (i.e. children, teachers, health workers, aged care residents) and widespread use of contact tracing. Their success depends on how acceptable these restrictions are to the broader population.

The Melbourne Institute's *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey collects information from a representative sample of Australians. The wave 16 (3-8 August 2020) survey asked Australians "which mandatory government regulations would you be willing to accept to allow a return to normal activities?" These policies are a mix of those currently, or previously, in place and under consideration. These include a 14-day quarantine if exposed to the virus, wearing a mask in all public places, restricted capacity on public transport, closure of non-essential businesses, routine weekly testing for COVID-19 and the use of mobile phone data to allow for better contact tracing.

Australians are in broad agreement about their willingness to accept some restrictions. At least 90 per cent are willing to abide by wearing masks in public places, quarantine in case of exposure, and restricted capacity on public transport. The difference in support of these policies is small across sex, age, level of education and political views. The wide acceptance of these policies in Australia contrasts sharply with that in countries like the United States, where support for restrictions, such as wearing masks or social distancing, is divided along political lines.<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, much less agreement exists on policies that affect an individual's livelihood, personal freedom and privacy. Overall, there is between a 16 to 27 percentage point drop in the support of policies such as closing non-essential businesses, routine weekly testing for COVID-19 and contact tracing using mobile phone data. These policies have lower support even in areas where the virus has re-emerged and Australians have returned to Stage 4 lockdown, as is the case currently in the state of Victoria.<sup>2</sup>

Men and women show similar support for the various policies (see Figure 1). However, conservatives are 8.9 percentage points less likely to support closure of non-essential businesses, compared to non-conservatives.<sup>3</sup> But, conservatives are 12.9 percentage points more likely to support the use of mobile phone data for contact tracing. This suggests that conservatives might be willing to accept contact tracing using mobile phone data as long as businesses remain open.

The largest gap in support of policies is by generation and education. Younger Australians (age < 35) are 16.4 percentage points less likely to support routine testing and are 9.5 percentage points less likely to support contact tracing using mobile phone data. Respondents with a university or post-graduate degree are 7 percentage points more likely to support routine testing and 9.9 percentage points more likely to support contact tracing using mobile phone data.

These differences across generations and levels of education are sizeable. Nonetheless, they are less pronounced than the difference in support for mask wearing, quarantines and restricted transport compared to other regulations, such as closing non-essential businesses, routine testing and contact tracing using mobile phone data.

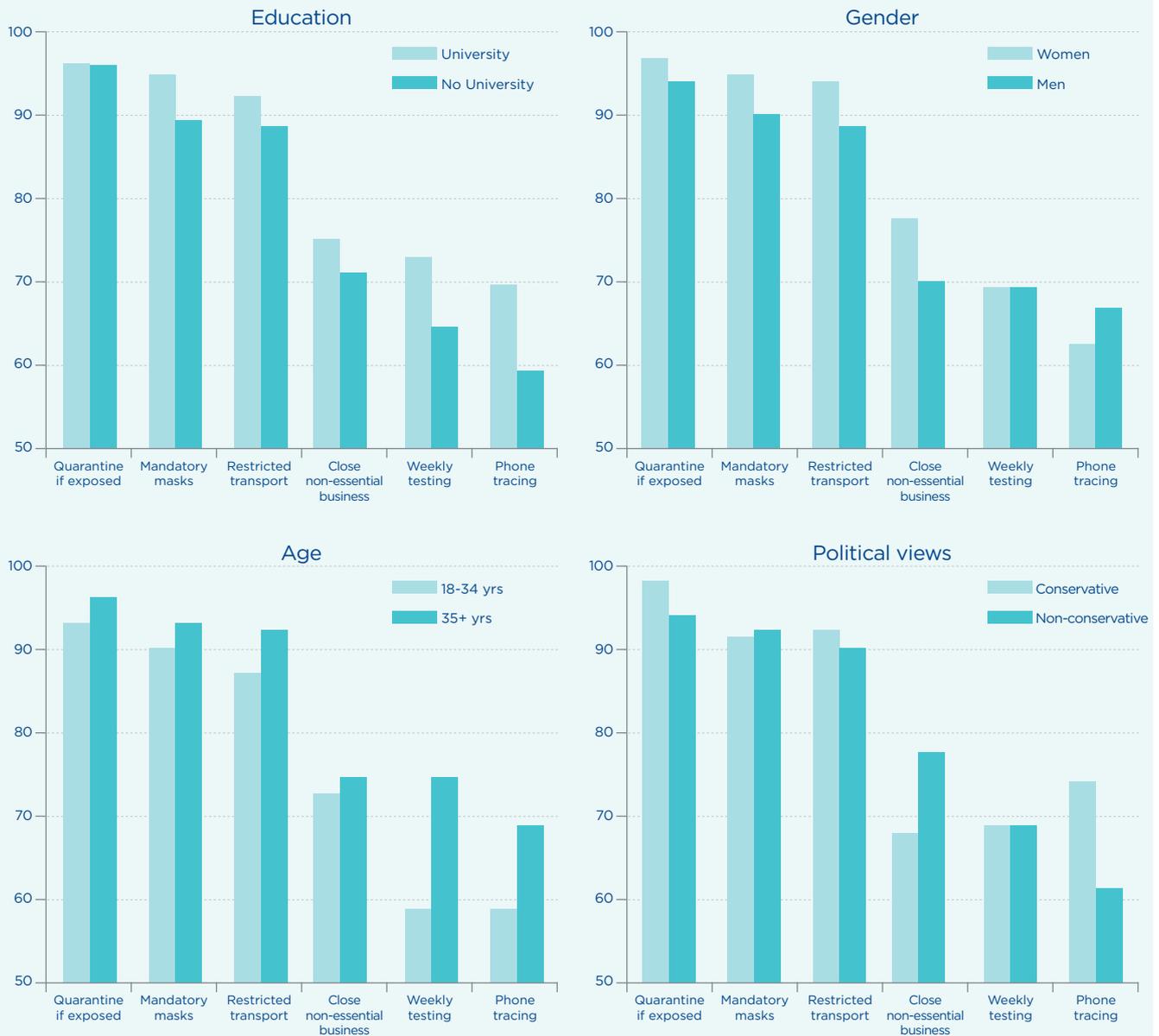
## Key Insights

### 1 Australians overwhelmingly support some restrictions on behaviour to reduce the spread of COVID-19, but they are divided on others

All groups of Australians, be they young or old, male or female, high or low income, university educated or not, politically conservative or not, are willing to wear masks, self-quarantine if exposed and face capacity restrictions on public transport. This high level of support of basic public health policies contrasts with the divergence of opinions observed in countries like the US where public health policy is coloured by political views.<sup>1</sup> The widespread support of these policies is a first step toward successful implementation given that these are mostly voluntary.

However, the survey shows much less acceptance of routine weekly testing, closure of non-essential businesses and contact tracing with mobile phone data. This is a point of concern given that, absent a vaccine, more aggressive policies might need to be put in place. The lack of universal support for these policies is notable given the recent outbreak of infections in Victoria where restrictive policies are currently in place.<sup>4</sup> Consensus needs to be built on the need for further restrictions as a pathway back to normal.

Figure 1: Percent of agreement with policy by education, gender, age and political views



Source: *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* wave 16 survey data. Note that graphs exclude “don’t know” responses. Survey responses are from 3-8 August 2020 and include a total of 1,200 respondents.

## 2 Income is not the main driver of opinion differences, but age and education are

COVID-19 has upended many lives as well as revealed old and new differences of opinion within the population. The survey reveals clear differences of opinion by age and education on the acceptability of public policy measures. There is more agreement across levels of income, by sex and, to some extent, by political views. Where there are differences of opinion, these might reflect the perceived costs and trade-offs that different segments of the population face during the pandemic, as well as differences in preferences for and attitudes towards proposed policies.

Younger people are less willing to accept new restrictions that would further constrain their lives. Those with a university or post-graduate education are more likely to accept additional restrictions. This likely reflects that the normal lives of those with a university education can adapt more easily to these constraints and a perception that additional costs might be necessary to curtail the spread of the virus. The generational divide observed in Australia is a pattern emerging across many countries affected by the pandemic and suggests the need to find balance between public safety and personal welfare.<sup>5</sup>

# Policy Conclusions

## The cost of implementing policies

Australia has made great strides in its fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The recent outbreaks in Victoria remind us of the difficult balance between protective policies and the return to pre-COVID-19 life. The experience of the US, and some other countries, is a constant reminder of the costs of reopening the economy without proper safeguards.

Here are a few items to consider:

### 1. Consensus building is a necessary condition for the success of mostly voluntary public health policies.

Australians are in remarkable agreement on the acceptability of wearing masks, self-quarantine and restricted public transport. The broad support of policies is a necessary condition for their success. There are no monetary fines steep enough nor police force large enough to successfully implement policies that are not acceptable to the majority of the population. If there is broad support in the population, the policy is less expensive to implement. Reaching a level of consensus on basic safety measures is a notable achievement.

### 2. The re-emergence of COVID-19 cases suggests additional measures may be needed to return to normal. There is no agreement among Australians on these regulations.

The virus has shown itself to be resilient and extremely adaptable. The recent surge in cases in the state of Victoria has prompted strict lockdown measures to squelch its spread. While necessary, these are costly and burdensome. Alternative solutions that balance public safety and the return to normal economic activity may be needed. Measures like routine weekly testing and use of mobile phone data for contact tracing can help transition out of the current restrictions and help open the economy. Unfortunately, there is far less consensus in the Australian population that these measures are acceptable. Given that some restrictions are viewed as intrusive, consensus building is of paramount importance.

The recent experience of the United Kingdom is illustrative. The UK started with a lackadaisical approach to the pandemic that led to one of the highest number of deaths in the world.<sup>6</sup> The cost of the pandemic has resulted in a 20 per cent drop in Gross Domestic Product in the second quarter of 2020, some of which surely comes from efforts to control the spread.<sup>7</sup> Currently, deaths per day have dropped to 40, and economic activity is slowly recovering. However, to make this sustainable, the British government has introduced creative inducements to abide by new rules like contact tracing. For example, those going to a bar to have a pint of beer need to fill out a “track and trace” form first.<sup>8</sup> Recognising the costs implied by new regulations is important to produce behavioural changes that minimise the spread of the virus.

### 3. Acceptance of new policies requires giving all groups a voice in building public policy

Building consensus on policies requires knowledge of the costs faced by different segments of the population. The challenges faced by parents, young adults or essential workers are different. Thus, how willing any group is to accept new restrictions will reflect the costs these policies impose on them. It is important that all groups are represented in the public policy decision-making process. Those that bear a larger share of the costs need to have a voice as well. Our survey shows some emerging gaps in opinion by age and education that need to be taken into account as new restrictions are introduced or lifted.

# Further Information

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## Datasets

This analysis has been drawn from *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* – Melbourne Institute’s survey of the impact of COVID-19. The aim of the weekly survey is to track changes in the economic and social wellbeing of Australians living through the effects of the coronavirus pandemic whilst adapting to various changes in Federal and State government policies. The survey contains responses from 1,200 persons, aged 18 years and over. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population. The current analysis draws on survey responses collected between 3 August and 8 August, 2020.

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## References & Endnotes

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8. UK Government coronavirus guidance, as of 2 July 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/maintaining-records-of-staff-customers-and-visitors-to-support-nhs-test-and-trace>

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