

Research Insights

How are Australians returning to the new normal, and staying safe, as restrictions ease during the COVID-19 pandemic?

As stay at home restrictions due to COVID-19 ease, Australians must decide how to navigate a return to activities in a way that they can remain safe as they get on with life as we now know it.

Navigating a return to activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

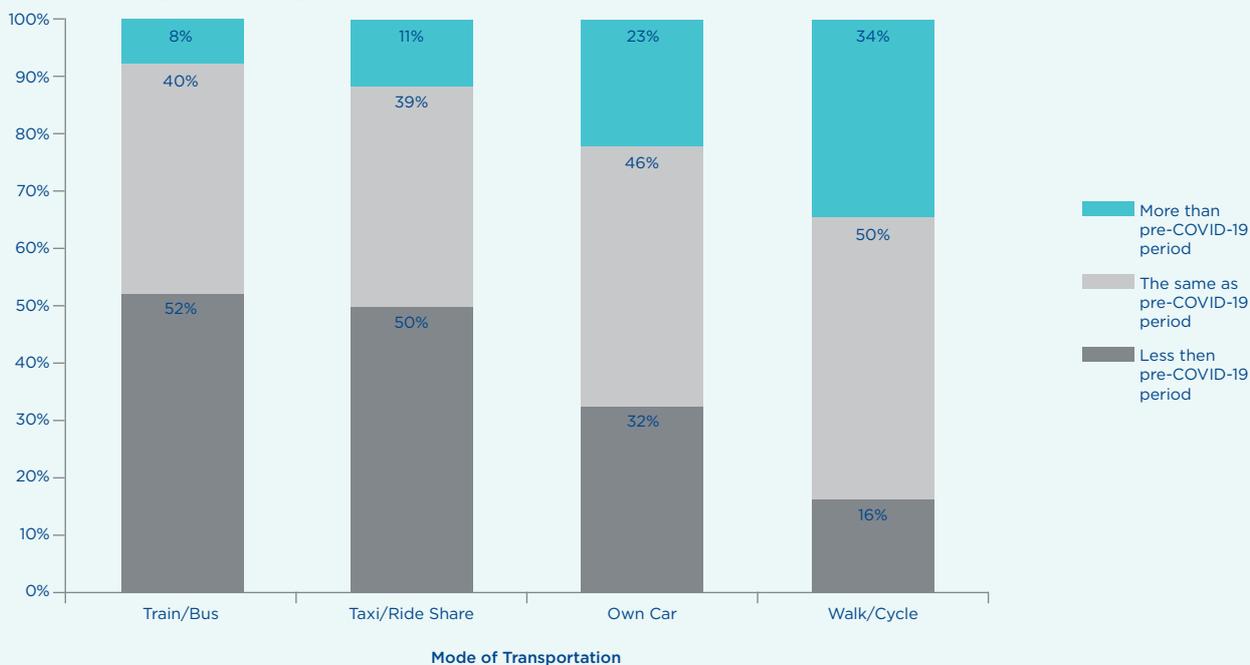
In the absence of a vaccine, assured immunity or cure for COVID-19, it seems unlikely the pandemic will go away any time soon. The government has begun to ease restrictions and Australians need to get back to their lives and daily activities. But how do they do this safely?

Health experts say to stay home if you are sick, wash your hands, limit trips outside the house to essential activities only, maintain physical distance from others and do not gather in large groups. A recent analysis of multiple studies (meta-analysis) found that mask-wearing significantly reduces the risk of viral transmission of COVID-19¹ – suggesting that this practice can also help make the return to daily life safer.

But how each person returns to pre-pandemic activities depends on their ability to cope with the substantial remaining risks and their available alternatives to resuming daily life. Some people may need to travel to work, especially if they are not part of the small segment of the population that can work from home.² Certain households can substitute the mode of transportation that they use to get around but others cannot. Children could be driven to school instead of putting them on a crowded school bus. More workers could drive to their job instead of cramming into a tram, train or bus. Walking or cycling are options if the workplace or shops are close to home. For the 43 per cent of the population that either does not have a car or lives in a household with one car, and must commute, they will be moving about in the new normal with potentially limited options.³

How are Australians navigating transportation in the new normal? The short answer is they are cautious about using shared transport. The Melbourne Institute's *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey has been collecting data weekly since April 6, 2020 to assess Australians' views of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. The wave 12 (22-26 June) survey asked whether various modes of transportation are used more, less or the same in the previous two weeks relative to pre-COVID activity (i.e. in February 2020). Half of respondents say they are using trains, trams, buses, taxis and ride share services less than before the pandemic (Figure 1). Seventy per cent are using their car more or the same, and 85 per cent are walking or cycling more or the same.

Figure 1: Change in transportation usage from pre-COVID (February 2020) to June 2020



Source: Results based on weekly responses from 1,200 Australian adults surveyed over the period 22-26 June. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population.

Key Insights

1 Australians are engaging in more activities outside of the home.

The survey reveals that Australians are venturing out of their homes more and feeling safer. The proportion of respondents who say they limited their economic activities all or most of the time dropped by 21 per cent from the wave 9 (25-28 May) survey to the wave 11 (15-19 June) survey.⁴ At the same time as Australians are returning to their typical daily activities, the adherence to physical distancing recommendations has declined.

The proportion of respondents who say people in their neighbourhood are complying with physical distancing guidelines most or all of the time has declined by 28 per cent (from 78% to 56%) over the past 12 weeks, from the wave 1 (6-11 April) to wave 12 (22-26 June) surveys.⁵ Australians are taking risks beyond what is recommended.

2 Australians differ in the way they expose themselves and their family to the risks associated with returning to daily activities.

Transportation usage differs for men and women and for those with children under 18 years of age living in the household. Those with children are 44 per cent more likely to say they are using their cars more compared to those who do not have children. Women are taking public transport slightly less than men, and men are walking/cycling more now than women.

These shifts in transportation, especially to the greater use of cars and less use of public transportation, have implications for the timing of traffic congestion. It also reveals that Australians are differentially avoiding the risks associated with public transportation options.

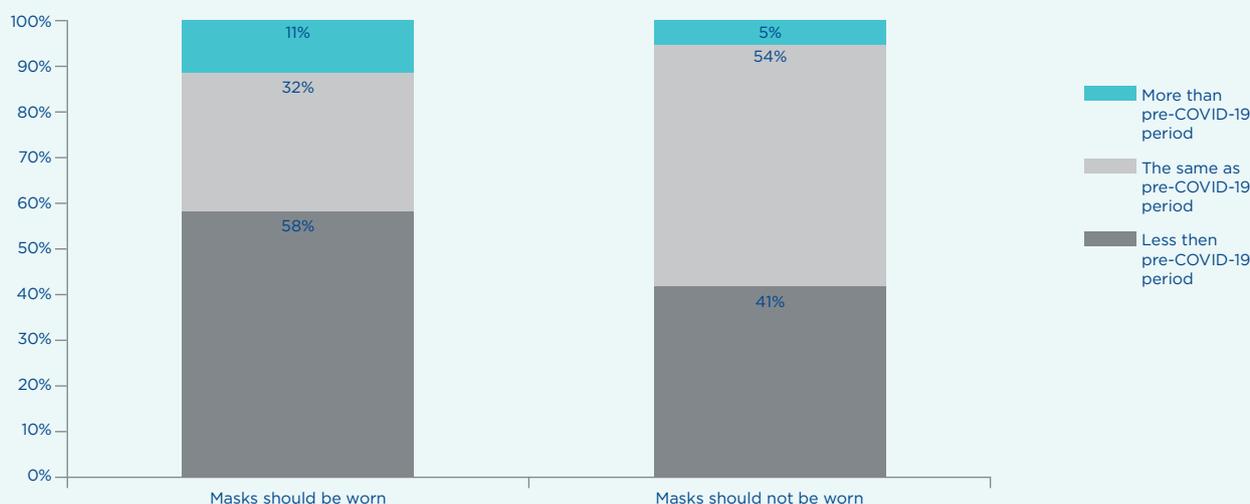
3 Wearing a mask makes return to daily activities safer, but Australians might not be following this advice when it is needed most.

In terms of mask usage, from the wave 10 (8-12 June) to the wave 12 (22-26 June) survey, more respondents say masks should be worn in many common public settings – the workplace, in supermarkets and shopping complexes, in cinemas and theatres and on public transport.

Interestingly, the interaction of whether Australians think masks should be worn and transportation usage is telling (Figure 2). Of those respondents who say masks should be worn on public transportation, over half (58%) are using public transport less. But of those who say masks do not have to be worn, close to three in five (59%) are using public transportation more or the same.

This suggests that Australians might be more likely to use public transportation if everyone wore face masks, thus making it safer. What might be happening now is that those who are more willing to take risks are also more willing to use public transport and expose themselves to contagion. These actions, however, put extra burden and risk on those who have no choice but to use public transport to get around.

Figure 2: Opinion on whether masks should be worn on public transport and changes in use of public transport from pre-COVID (February 2020) to June 2020



Source: Results based on weekly responses from 1,200 Australian adults surveyed over the period 22-26 June. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population.

The path to navigating activities in the new normal

Australians are changing the way they use transport and are embracing face masks as they begin to venture outside home to conduct their daily lives and minimise risks to COVID-19 exposure. As the nation continues to reassess how to move on with their lives, go back to work, take their children to school, go shopping or to a restaurant, it is important to emphasise a few points.

Protective individual behavioural changes (like physical distancing and mask wearing) are a good bet for everyone.

There is no vaccine or cure for COVID-19, and it is highly contagious. With restrictions eased and more people moving around and interacting, infection rates are increasing. Since restrictions have started to ease in Australia, cases have risen in some states, such as Victoria where daily cases have doubled in recent weeks.⁶ In the USA, cases are surging in all states that eased restrictions in early May and have not required masks or enforced social distancing.⁷ No one can control what others do, but individuals can lower their risk by physically distancing and wearing a mask at indoor public places.

Government infrastructure and support are important.

The *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey reveals that some people are able to take protective measures like avoiding public transport and driving a personal car. This is not an option for all Australians and many workers in essential industries. Many people have to endure long commutes and be exposed to potential infection in close quarters. Government enforced mask-wearing requirements and stricter physical distancing in certain venues – i.e. public transportation, supermarkets, retail businesses – might make the path back to business as usual activities safer. The USA example is a cautionary tale of the tradeoff between opening up businesses too soon or without proper procedures that minimise the risk of contagion. While it is natural to desire a speedy return to normal life, lack of precaution might end up being counterproductive. Importantly, the costs might be borne by those with limited resources to cope with them.

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Further Information

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. Each week, the survey contains responses from 1,200 persons, aged 18 years and over. Sample weights can be used to make the sample representative of the Australian population on gender, age and location.

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End notes

1. Chu, Derek K, Elie A Akl, Stephanie Duda, Karla Solo, Sally Yaacoub, Holger J Schünemann, "Physical distancing, face masks, and eye protection to prevent person-to-person transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19: a systematic review and meta-analysis," *Lancet*, 395(10242), 1973-1987, June 27, 2020
2. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census, 4 per cent of the population work from home.
3. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 Census, 8 per cent of households do not own a car, and 35 per cent own one car.
4. The survey question asks, "How often do you limit activities outside of the household, like shopping or going to restaurants, out of concerns of contracting COVID-19?"
5. See Melbourne Institute Research Insight, "Is the Collective Action of Social Distancing the New Normal?" No. 8/20, May 2020, for more information on social distancing in Australia.
6. Victoria Department of Health and Human Services COVID-19 tracker, <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-daily-update>
7. Washington Post, June 28, 2020, "Live updates: Arizona, Florida, Texas are latest coronavirus epicenters," <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2020/06/28/coronavirus-live-updates-us/>

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