10 ADOPTING MITIGATION STRATEGIES: A MARATHON NOT A SPRINT

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A majority of Australians support mask wearing, quarantine if exposed and restricted capacity on public transport when needed. The level of support for these policies, however, has declined significantly over the course of the pandemic. This is cause for concern. The health and economic wellbeing of Australia depends on the acceptance of mitigation measures until a vaccine is widely available and taken by a large majority of the population. Even with a vaccine, the roll out will be slow and effectiveness will be less than 100 percent. Mitigation policies remain vital in the coming months and possibly years.

Adopting mitigation strategies: A marathon not a sprint

Navigating life during the pandemic

With the absence of a viable and widely available vaccine for COVID-19, and a large proportion of the population willing to take it, mitigation measures are needed to keep Australians healthy and the economy open. Extreme measures, such as the July – October 2020 lockdown in Melbourne, are costly for the economy and the mental health of the population.

How have Australians navigated life with COVID-19? To explore this question, we have utilised the data from the *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey. Figure 10.1 shows how perception of compliance with physical distancing guidelines and limiting activities due to COVID-19 have changed week by week between April and November 2020.

The percent of Australians who report their neighbours complied with physical distancing requirements all or most of the time started at about 80 percent in April but has declined to roughly 55 percent by the end of June. Out of concern for contracting the virus, the share of Australians who limited their activities outside of the house, such as shopping, going to restaurants or using public transport, all or most of the time has dropped by almost half (60 percent to 35 percent) from the end of May to the beginning of November.

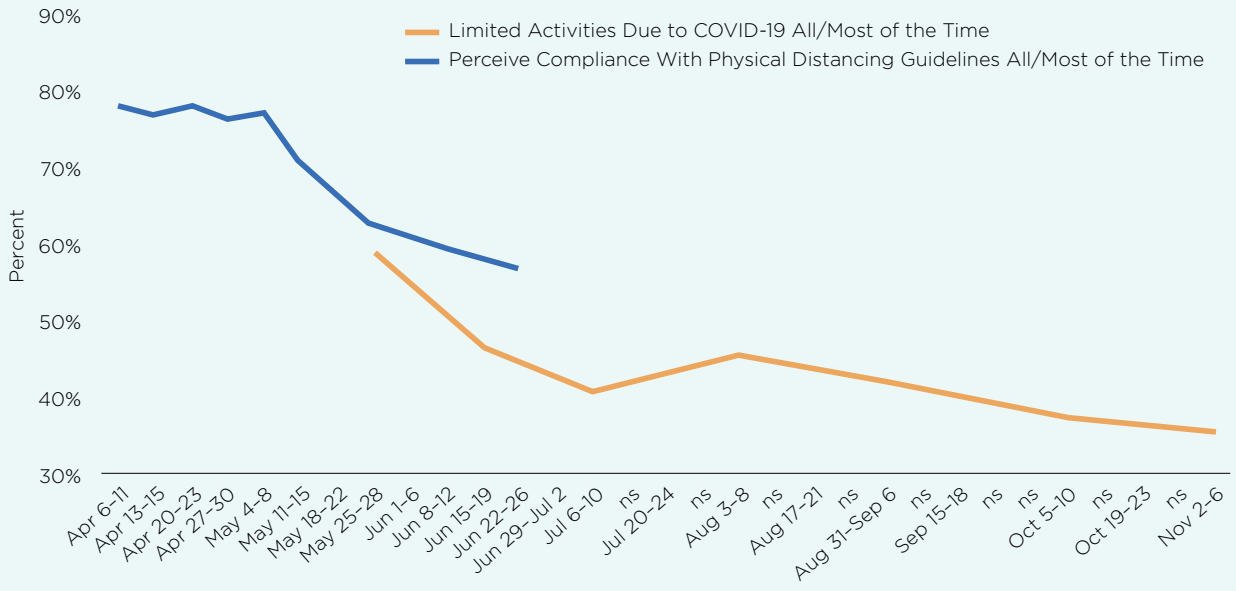
The short answer of how Australians have been navigating life is that it has evolved considerably over the course of the pandemic. Australians are venturing out more, yet about one-third have not fully returned to normal activities, even with a general decrease of COVID-19 cases in most Australian states through the second half of the year and most areas having moved to zero cases. Compliance with physical distancing has declined, and this may affect how willing others are to engage in activities if they feel it is unsafe to do so.

Australians' patience for new policies is growing thinner

Mitigation policies to prevent the spread of COVID-19 are still needed to keep Australians safe and willing to engage in the economy. General availability of a vaccine is not expected until the second half of 2021 (McGuirk (2020). What is the emerging view among Australians on the precautionary policies they are willing to accept to balance health and economic recovery during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey asked Australians which mandatory government regulations they would be willing to accept to allow a return to normal activities in the August 3-7 survey and again three months later in the November 2-6 survey (Castillo and Petrie, 2020a).

Figure 10.1 Percent Who Limited Activities Due to COVID-19 and Percent Who Perceive Compliance With Physical Distancing Guidelines All or Most of the Time, by Week Since Start of the TTPN Survey



Source. *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey (Melbourne Institute), waves 1–22 (April 6 – Nov 6, 2020).

Notes for Figure 10.1 Sample sizes are 1,200 for each week. Surveys were administered weekly for waves 1-14, then biweekly from wave 15 onwards "ns" indicates a week without a TTPN survey.

Figure 10.2 shows the percentage of Australians who would accept various regulations in August and November. For all regulations, at least half of Australians would be willing to accept them. Across both periods, support is high (78 percent or higher) for regulations such as mandatory quarantine if exposed, mask wearing in public places and restricting capacity on public transport. For regulations such as closing non-essential businesses, routine weekly testing and contact tracing with mobile phone data, acceptance drops at least 20 percentage points from August to November.

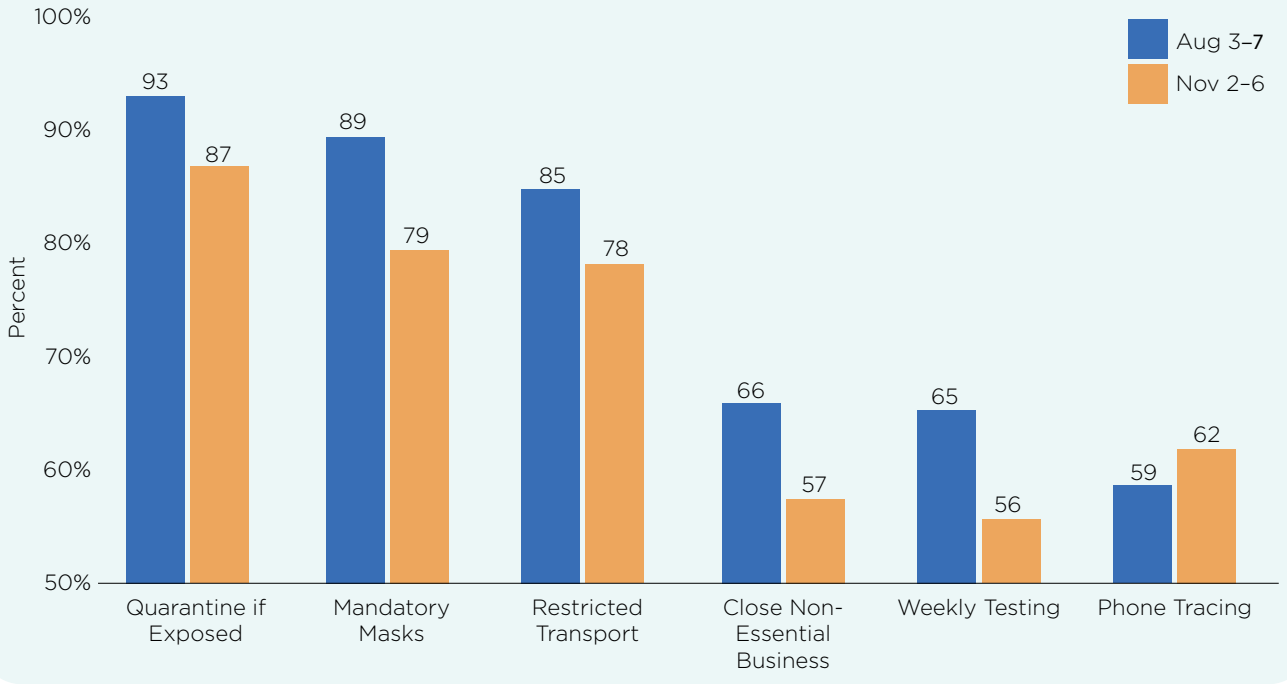
Overall, acceptance of these precautionary policies has fallen from August to November. The largest drops in support are for routine weekly testing (9.8 percentage points), mandatory mask wearing (9.6) and closing non-essential businesses (8.6). There is a slight increase in the willingness to accept contact tracing using mobile phone data.

Holding on until the vaccine arrives

A full return to normal activities in Australia will not be achieved until the population reaches herd immunity (at least 50 percent of the population under optimistic scenarios). The most acceptable path to attain this goal is through vaccination. Roughly three-quarters (73.8 percent) of Australians are willing to take a vaccine for COVID-19 if developed and approved for use by the Australian Government (Castillo and Petrie, 2020b). Unfortunately, full access to vaccines is not likely to take place in the immediate future.

With almost one-third of the population constraining their economic activity under current mitigation policies and no or limited access to a vaccine in the coming months, the Australian economy is likely to face prolonged hardship for the foreseeable future. Given the relative acceptability of some measures (like mask wearing) that have shown to be effective at reducing the spread of the virus, mandating their usage might increase the population's willingness to engage in economic activities. Given that Australians are becoming less and less willing to accept constraints on their behaviour, the window of opportunity for policy changes is closing.

Figure 10.2 Percent Who Would Be Willing to Accept the Government Regulation in Aug 3–7 and Nov 2–6 Surveys



Source. *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey (Melbourne Institute), wave 16 (Aug 3–7, 2020) and wave 22 (Nov 2–6, 2020).
Notes for Figure 10.2 Each week includes a representative sample of Australians (n = 1,200).

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The *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey was created for the purpose of being able to track the economic and social wellbeing of Australians and to provide measures of attitudes and willingness to take on risk given the coronavirus pandemic. These data have been used to provide timely insights that track behaviour and inform policy.

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