

Research Insights

Is it time to mask the problem?

Australians are reporting mixed feelings about wearing masks in public, but it could be the measure that helps reduce the spread of COVID-19 and speed up our national economic recovery.

Complacency a major risk during the COVID-19 recovery period

Australia has seen a sustained reduction in the number of new cases of COVID-19, but infections continue to occur.¹ New cases of community transmission are reported almost daily and, while the numbers are relatively low, complacency remains a major risk factor for a second wave of infections.

Much of Australia's success in controlling community transmission has been attributed to a high-level of adherence to physical distancing requirements. Physical distancing has been well established as the most reliable way to reduce transmission but, as restrictions ease, situations will arise where it is not feasible. The use of masks may be an effective second-best solution in such circumstances.²

The tide is turning on mask-wearing

Masks are generally accepted to be effective at reducing virus transmission in a clinical setting, but their use in the general community has been more controversial. Part of this has been due to concerns over limited supplies of N95 or equivalent masks during the pandemic. There have been significant shortages of personal protective equipment in much of the world and, until recently, the World Health Organisation (WHO) recommended that medical masks "should be reserved for health care workers."³

Even where masks are readily available, debate still rages over whether they are effective in preventing community transmission of COVID-19. In early April 2020, WHO stated that "there is currently no evidence that wearing a mask (whether medical or other types) by healthy persons in the wider community setting, including universal community masking, can prevent them from infection with respiratory viruses."³ But necessity is the mother of efficient research and, since then, a number of studies on community masking have been published (albeit sometimes without peer

review) that provide the very evidence the WHO reported to be lacking. One study, which exploited regional variation in the time when community masking was implemented across Germany, estimated that face masks had reduced the daily growth rate of reported infections by around 40 per cent.⁴

The research that likely turned the tide on the debate, however, was a WHO-funded systematic review and meta-analysis, published in the *Lancet* in early June. The review found that even reusable cotton face masks "could result in a large reduction in the risk of infection"-rebutting arguments over both efficacy and supply-chain effects in one hit.²

Following the release of the *Lancet* paper, WHO updated its guidelines to recommend that nonmedical masks be used by healthy people in settings where physical distancing cannot be achieved, including on transportation and in working conditions that place employees in close contact with others.⁵

Social distancing has limits

Situations where physical distancing cannot be achieved are becoming increasingly common. As people return to workplaces, social interactions increase, sporting events begin again and public transport use increases, physical distancing will soon become unrealistic as the sole means of controlling the transmission of COVID-19.

In Australia, growth in public transport passenger volumes is evidence of this challenge. New South Wales (NSW) public transport services saw a 55 per cent increase in the number of journeys taken in May compared with April.⁶ Other states are likely to have seen a similar increase. The NSW Government has responded by introducing passenger capacity limits but these are already close to being met - even though total passenger volumes are still down more than 70 per cent on the same period for 2019.⁷

State governments face a considerable challenge managing the physical return to work of the community. Already, bus drivers in NSW have reportedly been advised not to enforce the limits.⁸ Such inconsistency only serves to highlight the problem.

As people return to work and socialise again, there is evidence that mask-wearing could be an effective tool in helping reduce the spread of COVID-19. But many Australians are not yet convinced. This Research Insight considers when and where masks might have a role in reducing the risk of community transmission of COVID-19, particularly where physical distancing is not feasible.

Mixed feelings about masks

In the Melbourne Institute's *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey conducted between 8-12 June 2020, we asked respondents whether they thought that because of the coronavirus, people should wear a face mask in common public spaces, including public transport, parks and beaches, the workplace, supermarkets and shopping centres, or cinemas and theatres.

The results suggested that many people supported the use of masks in some settings. One in five (20%) of respondents said "yes" to wearing face masks in each of the public settings identified in the survey, and more than seven in ten (71%) indicated that masks should be worn in at least one of these settings.

However, there was also strong disagreement in some cases. One in five (19%) respondents said that masks should not be worn in any of these settings, and 71 per cent of respondents indicated that masks should not be worn in at least one of the settings mentioned.

Key Insights

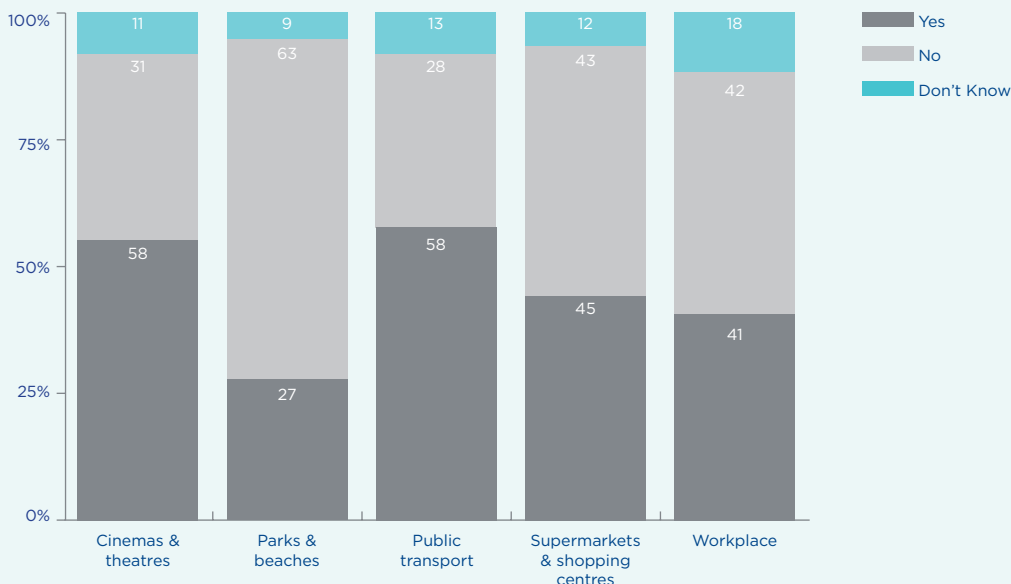
1 Australians divided on wearing masks in different public settings

Opinion on mask-wearing in public places varied considerably by setting (Figure 1). People were most in favour of mask-wearing on public transport with about six in ten survey respondents (58%) indicating that masks should be worn in this setting. About 28 per cent of people believed they should not be worn, and around 13 per cent were unsure.

A similar proportion of people surveyed (just under 58%) believed that masks should be worn in cinemas or theatres, although a slightly greater proportion (31%) of people disagreed.

People were less convinced about the necessity of masks in shopping centres, workplaces and parks. Less than half of respondents thought that masks should be worn in each of these settings. Masks in parks and on beaches received the most opposition, with a majority of people (63%) responding that masks should not be worn in these settings.

Figure 1: 'Do you think that, because of the coronavirus, people should wear a face mask: on public transport; in parks and beaches; in the workplace; in supermarkets and shopping centres; or in cinemas and theatres?'

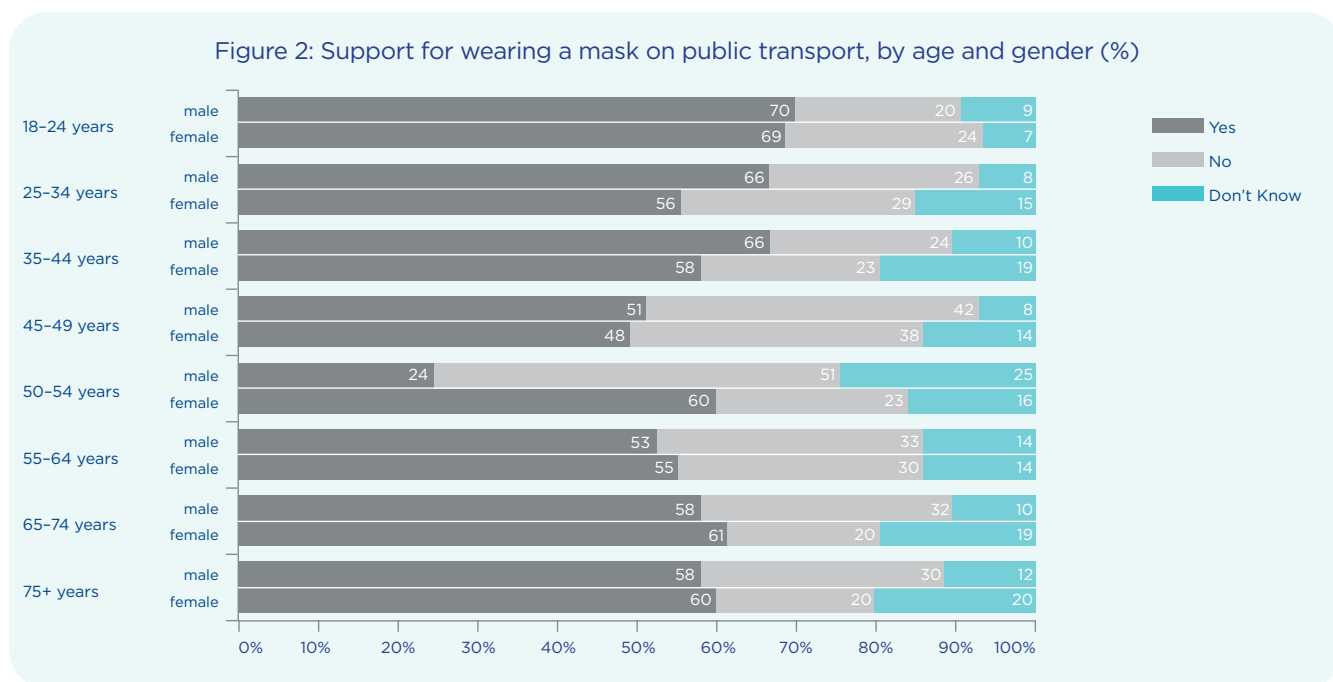


Source: Results based on weekly responses from 1,200 Australian adults surveyed over the period 8–12 June. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population. Bars may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

2 Support for mask-wearing lowest among men aged 50-54

Opinion on mask-wearing varied significantly by age and gender. Less than one in four men aged 50-54 years were in favour of wearing masks on public transport (Figure 2), although more than half of men in this age group said no to wearing face masks in this public setting.

This trend was more pronounced in supermarkets and shopping centres, where only 16 per cent of men aged 50-54 considered that masks should be worn. 18-24 year olds were the most likely to support mask wearing in all settings.



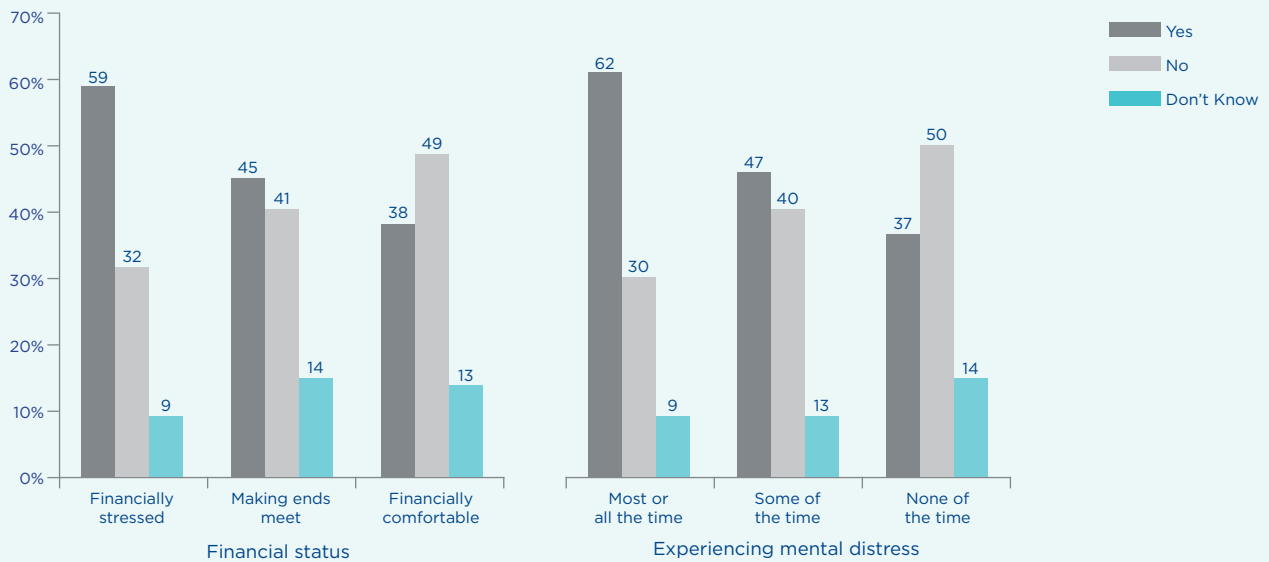
Source: Results based on weekly responses from 1,200 Australian adults surveyed over the period 8-12 June. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population. Bars may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

3 Those experiencing financial stress or mental distress are more likely to believe that masks should be worn

People with higher levels of financial insecurity were more likely to believe that masks should be worn in all public settings (Figure 3). This was also the case among people experiencing mental distress (respondents who reported feeling depressed or anxious all or most of the time during the past week*). Across all settings, respondents who considered themselves to be financially stressed were

20 percentage points more likely to believe masks should be worn (59%) than those who indicated they were financially comfortable (38%). This difference was even more pronounced among those reporting mental distress. Respondents who reported feeling depressed or anxious all or most of the time during the past week were 25 percentage points more likely to say that masks should be worn (across all public settings).

Figure 3: Support for wearing a mask in public, by financial status and level of mental distress (aggregated across all settings) (%)



Source: Results based on weekly responses from 1,200 Australian adults surveyed over the period 8-12 June. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population. Bars may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

*The survey does not measure clinical depression or anxiety conditions.

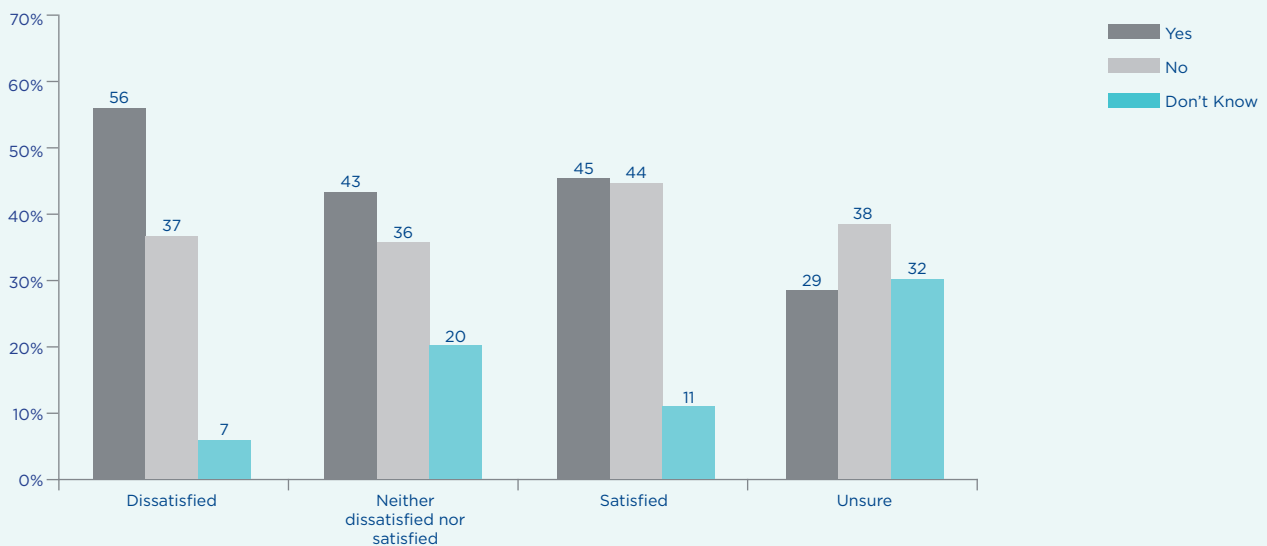
4 Those who were dissatisfied with government economic policies more likely to support wearing masks

The *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey asks respondents if they are satisfied with economic policies to support jobs and keep people at work as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

A strong majority (83%) of survey respondents reported that they were satisfied with government economic policy. Among those who were dissatisfied, however, more than half (56%) were in favour of wearing masks (Figure 4).

Those who were satisfied with government policies were more evenly split – 45 per cent were in favour of masks and 44 per cent were not. In about 11 per cent of cases, respondents were 'unsure' of whether masks were necessary.

Figure 4: Support for wearing a mask in public, by satisfaction with government economic policies in response to pandemic (aggregated across all settings) (%)



Source: Results based on weekly responses from 1,200 Australian adults surveyed over the period 8–12 June. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population. Bars may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding.

Changing perceptions around masks

As social distancing restrictions ease, more than 50 countries around the world have introduced regulations around mask-wearing.⁹ The UK government is the latest to change its tune on masks, with mask-wearing on public transport to become compulsory from mid-June.¹⁰

Australia has not followed suit. As of 14 June 2020, the Australian Government still recommends against the use of masks in public settings, while suggesting that “some members of the public may choose to wear a mask in situations where it is not feasible to maintain physical distancing.”¹¹ Such inconsistent advice is likely to discourage people from wearing a mask and does little to ease anxiety among those who are forced to use public transport to enable them to return to work.

Regulation on mask-wearing can reduce transmission and put minds at ease

Regulation to enforce mask-wearing in situations where physical distancing is unfeasible (on public transport, for example) would have the dual effect of reducing transmission and increasing awareness among the general community of the need for ongoing vigilance. This will encourage a safer and more confident return to work and social activity, essential for an economic recovery.

Responses to the *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey are a case in point. Survey results indicate that many people think masks should be worn, although recent scenes on many metropolitan train stations raise questions over whether the real proportion of people who believe masks should be worn is much lower. A likely explanation for this discrepancy is that people feel uncomfortable wearing a mask unless others are wearing masks too.¹² Clear, consistent rules around mask-wearing are therefore necessary not only to increase compliance and reduce the risk of a second wave of COVID-19 infections, but also to ease anxiety among those who would wear a mask anyway, and to enable a safe return to work.

The authors of the Lancet study, among others, have called for more research into the efficacy of cotton masks. Yet a second wave of infections would likely result in further deaths and wipe an additional \$25 billion from the already slowing Australian economy. Like physical distancing, mask-wearing could save lives and help speed up the economic recovery. The potential benefits of mask-wearing to individuals and to others significantly outweigh their inconvenience.¹³

Public mask wearing is most effective at slowing the rate of virus transmission when compliance is high. More clear guidance may go some way towards increasing the proportion of people wearing masks, but in the short term, compliance can only be achieved through regulation.

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.

Data on NSW public transport passenger volumes was obtained from the Transport for NSW Open Data website. The data consist of aggregated Opal daily tap-on/tap-off data, by transport mode.

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