

Mental health plummets but more trust in politicians **Young people's experience of COVID-19**

Young Australians surveyed during COVID-19 experienced the sharpest drop in mental health since the survey started 15 years ago.

But the news is not all bad. After declining for years, young people's trust in the Australian government and politicians improved markedly, with most of those surveyed indicating their approval of the government restrictions enacted during the early stages of the pandemic.

The results come from a study of 1,094 27-year-olds in June 2020, which is part of the Our Lives project, a wide-ranging longitudinal study of a cohort of young people by sociologists based at Australian Catholic University. The cohort, who began secondary school in Queensland in 2006 and are now in their late 20s, are regularly revisited for their experiences and opinions on issues including careers, relationships, political positions, and mental and physical health.

The survey results show that many young Australians found the onset of the pandemic tough, with more than half experiencing a negative impact from the national COVID-19 'lockdown' restrictions.

ACU Vice-Chancellor Professor Zlatko Skrbis, who is the study's lead researcher, said the most concerning result from the COVID-19 study was the substantial decline in mental health experienced by many of the young people.

"We've been tracking this cohort for 15 years and have seen a steady decline in their mental health. But with COVID we saw a much sharper drop."

Forty-four percent of the group described their mental health as only fair or poor in June 2020, compared with 39% just six months earlier.

"Secure housing and stable relationships were the best buffer against negative psychological impacts" said Professor Skrbis.

Feeling lonely or isolated, lacking personal space or alone time and greater tension in the household were common problems. Economic impacts were also significant with 28% of the cohort experiencing a job loss or a reduction in work hours or pay.

On the other hand, one quarter of the group reported the national COVID-19 'lockdown' restrictions had a positive impact on their lives, enabling more personal time and strengthened family or partnership relations.

Also, on the upside, civic trust has increased. Medical experts have the most trust, at 96% but the news is encouraging for government too. Trust in the Australian government is up from 31% to 45% and trust in politicians went from a mere 7% to 17%.

There was widespread support for the government's policies on COVID restrictions with almost three quarters indicating that the measures taken were 'about right'. Of those who didn't, the overwhelming majority favored tougher restrictions.

But that support for compliance did not extend to heeding calls to download the COVIDSafe contact tracing app with 57% of the cohort opting not to install the tracing app on their phones – most of whom cited concerns about privacy.

Professor Skrbis said the sudden, mass social and economic disruption posed heightened risks to the social, economic and psychological well-being of the cohort. "Our research suggests both the risks and opportunities posed by COVID-19 are being experienced unevenly within the cohort, with the potential for a widening of social inequalities."

But he said the increased trust in government and the awareness of these social problems also suggested the lessons learnt from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young Australians could provide opportunities for positive change. "It is critical that some of the more enduring social problems facing younger generations in Australia are addressed in a way that will validate and sustain their trust in these institutions long after the pandemic passes," he said.

[The full report is available here.](#)

More information about the [Our Lives study is available here.](#)

Researchers from the Our Lives team are available for interview.

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