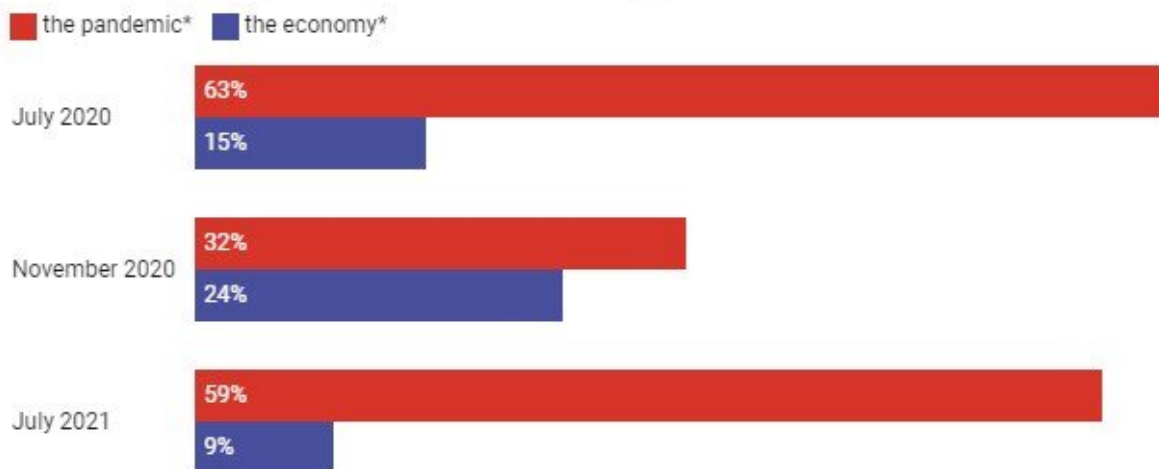


Survey shows community fears about COVID can spike quickly, as governments face omicron

November 29 2021, by Michelle Grattan

COVID-19 was the top concern for Australians in 2020 – and new variants have kept it that way into 2021

Open-ended responses to the question "What do you think is the most important problem facing Australia today?", July 2020 to November 2021 survey periods, Australia.



*as indicated in open-ended responses

Credit: Source: Scanlon Institute – Mapping Social Cohesion Report

Australians' concern about the pandemic ebbs and flows dramatically as waves come and go, according to research that also shows that COVID has not shaken the nation's social cohesion.

The Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's 2021 Mapping Social Cohesion Report found that in July last year, 63% of respondents believed the pandemic the "most important problem facing Australia today," while only 15% nominated the economy.

Monash University's Andrew Markus, who wrote the report, said the spike reflected "an unprecedented level of concern obtained in response to an open-ended question that typically obtains a broad range of responses."

But by November 2020 only 32% rated the pandemic as the most important problem, with 24% saying the economy.

Then in the July 2021 survey, with adverse publicity about the vaccine rollout and the third wave starting, the rating had jumped to 59%, and the economy was down to 9%.

This rollercoaster of public concern is especially relevant given the emergence of the new Omicron strain, about which information remains sparse. It shows how quickly developments in the pandemic can change people's priorities.

With an election looming in the first half of next year, the Scanlon numbers highlight that what will be to the forefront of the public's mind is unpredictable months out—partly dependent on the course of the pandemic abroad, and hence in Australia.

The Scanlon survey, which has been running since 2007, covered 3572 people in 2021 and asked more than 110 questions. It also included qualitative research.

As has been reflected in other research, the survey found that trust in government, which had been low, jumped after the pandemic hit but has

started to fall. Trust in the [federal government](#) to do the right thing for Australians all or most of the time was 44% in 2021. This was 10 points down on July 2020, but remained well above the long term average.

Approval of the federal government's response was 52% this year, down from 85% last year.

Despite the Morrison government's periodic condemnations of prolonged harsh interstate border closures, the public were supportive.

An overwhelming majority of people support their state's COVID restrictions

Response to the question "Do you think that the lockdown restrictions that were imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic were required?", %, by state, July 2021.

■ Definitely required
 ■ Probably required
 ■ Probably not required
 ■ Definitely not required

NSW



VIC



QLD



WA



SA



Credit: Source: Scanlon Institute – Mapping Social Cohesion Report

"The state governments that were able to halt virus transmission and avoid lengthy lockdowns continued to be rated very highly with approval of the Western Australian and South Australian government close to 90%, while New South Wales, which also had enjoyed a very high level of approval in 2020, saw approval fall to 59%," the report says.

"While there were protests against government lockdowns which gained much media attention, the survey finds that approval of lockdowns won close to 90% endorsement."

In July this year 87% across the nation viewed lockdown restrictions as definitely or probably required. In the states most affected, the numbers were 91% in NSW and 85% in Victoria.

Despite the difficult times, Australians were remarkably optimistic about the future: 71% were optimistic in 2021, actually up from the pre-COVID 2019 figure of 63%.

Reflecting the impact of the high level of government [financial help](#) during the crisis, "the surprising finding is that in 2020 and 2021 more positive responses were obtained for a number of financial questions when compared with the previous two years."

For example, 71% were satisfied with their present financial situation in July this year.

One dramatic change in the survey was a major increase in people's perception of how big a problem racism is.

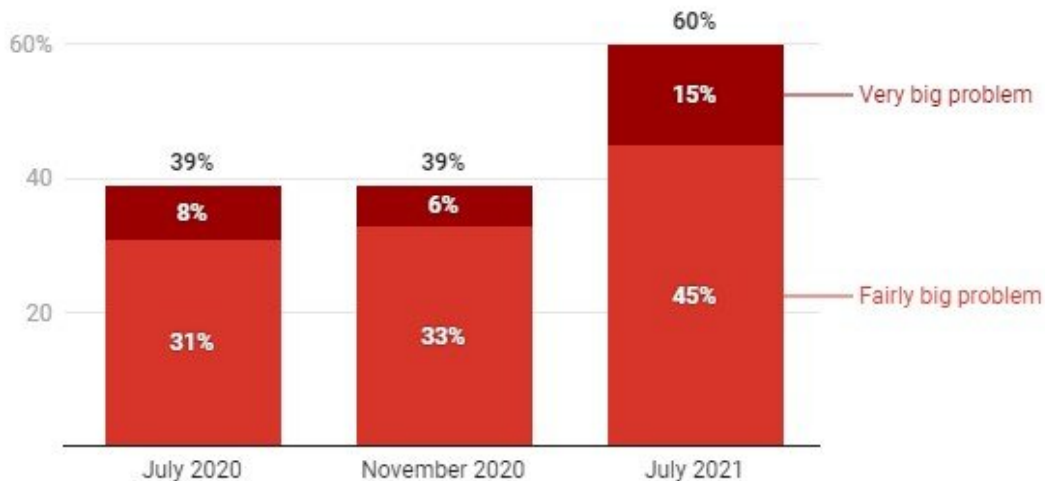
Since November last year there has been a 20 point rise in the proportion saying racism was a very big or big problem, to 60%.

The report says such a rise in response to a general question was almost unprecedented in the Scanlon surveys, and its timing was difficult to explain. There was no indication of an increase in the proportion of respondents with xenophobic and racist views, it says.

But in the latest survey, as in past Scanlon surveys over the years, the highest level of discrimination was reported by Australians of non-English speaking backgrounds.

Dramatic increase in people's perception of racism as a problem in Australian society

Response to the questions: "in your opinion, how big a problem is racism in Australia" (2021)/"in your opinion, how big a problem is racism in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic?" (2020), all respondents, July 2020 to July 2021.



Credit: Source: Scanlon Institute – Mapping Social Cohesion Report

Asked whether they had experienced discrimination in the last year because of their color, ethnic origin or religion, 11% of the Australian born said they had, as did 12% of those born overseas in an English

speaking country.

This compared to 34% of those born overseas in a non-English speaking country, including 38% of those born in China, Hong Kong or Taiwan, and 40% of all respondents born in Asia.

The qualitative research, undertaken by Trish Prentice, senior researcher at the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute, involved 66 interviews across all mainland states, with a focus on areas with relatively high cultural and religious diversity.

"The interviews indicate social cohesion has not been broken by the pandemic. There was no evidence of widespread tensions in communities, of conflict or the ongoing targeting of members of certain cultural communities," the report says.

But the interviews brought out differences in the experiences and ability to cope between different cohorts in the community.

Women felt particular impacts (for example in general they had greater responsibility for home schooling) and children were affected by reduced social contact, which had implications for their development.

Parents with poor English had barriers helping their children, and those with poor literacy felt helpless in dealing with home schooling. Refugees and asylum seekers experienced a greater psychological impact.

The report constructs a "cohesion index" which combines subjective and objective indicators to build a monitor of cohesion. The indicators used were income, employment, health, education and community participation. Indicators were tracked over the decade 2008–18. Using 2007–8 as a benchmark of 100, there had been a small decline of six points in the decade.

Despite the strong social cohesion, the report points to potential threats to it, including the substantial number of young people who do not make a successful transition from school to further education, training or employment.

The research for the report was funded by the Scanlon Foundation, supplemented by the federal government. The Scanlon Foundation was established in 2001, aiming to enhance and foster social cohesion in Australia.

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