

# COVID-19 border closures and community disconnect

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One year on from the re-opening of Australia's borders to international flights, new research from Flinders University has highlighted how the

border closures led people to feeling a profound disconnect from Australia, providing valuable lessons for future pandemic responses.

The research is the second stage of a large study conducted earlier this year of almost 4,000 people living in (63%) and outside (34%) Australia, which found that the Australian international [border](#) restrictions had a negative impact on the [mental health](#) of respondents.

"The vast majority of participants reported being negatively affected by the restrictions and showed high or very high levels of psychological distress," says Dr. Kathina Ali, Research Fellow in Flinders' College of Education, Psychology and Social Work and Research Associate at the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI).

Published in the journal *Health and Place*, the current study was conducted by researchers from the Flinders University Institute for Mental Health and Well-being, Flinders' Caring Futures Institute and SAHMRI's Be Well Co.

"Throughout the majority of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the [public health measures](#) imposed, such as stay-at-home orders and international borders closures, affected our experiences of our lived environment," says Dr. Candice Oster, a Research Fellow in Flinders' Caring Futures Institute and lead author of the current study.

"While these were aimed at keeping us safe, these measures also had unintended [negative consequences](#), including causing people to feel disconnected from where they lived and their wider community.

"Attachment and belonging to 'place' play a central role in people's positive mental health so any disconnect can cause significant distress, which is what we found for those impacted by Australia's international border closure during COVID-19."

The study analyzed responses to an open-ended question asked in the survey, with 1930 people (almost half of the original participants) providing a rich source of data about their pandemic experiences. Everyone who responded to the free-text question indicated they had been negatively affected by border closures, either from within Australia or overseas.

Dr. Ali, who initiated the study in June 2021, said the entire research team was amazed by the interest in the study and the diverse stories.

"We are currently running a 12-month follow up survey and within a few days, we again had almost 500 people responding. This alone demonstrates the impact the border closure had on people affected."

Stories ranged from feeling shut off from loved ones when the ability to jump on a plane to visit was taken away, missing out on seeing young family members grow up and feeling stuck due to being unable to move into or away from Australia. In some cases, people reported family breakdowns due to the inability to travel.

These experiences led people to feeling a great disconnect from Australia as a country and from its people, with many participants noting an "us versus them" mentality that surfaced during border closures. As one participant put it, "I feel heartbroken and betrayed by a country I love to call home."

This disconnect led some people to want to leave Australia once borders opened, or never return, and ultimately for almost all participants it led to feelings of anxiety and distress.

"The fact that so many participants responded to an 'Any other comments' text box in an [online survey](#), and with such detail, is indicative of the potency of these experiences," says Dr. Oster.

"From analyzing these responses, we can identify a profound disconnection from place resulting from Australia's international border closure that helps explain the levels of distress identified in the survey.

"These experiences can provide valuable lessons for future public health actions and support strategies, and highlights the importance of building connection to place, both prior to and post-pandemics."

While the authors acknowledge that public health measures are necessary during pandemics to mitigate pandemic-related risk, they say it is important to consider the mental health and well-being of those negatively affected and how they might be better supported both during and after any such measures are in place.

"This could include educating health and mental health service providers about the significant negative impact these individuals have experienced, as well as offering specific mental health support options for individuals who were born overseas or have family overseas," says Dr. Ali.

"Future policy decisions should take the need for mental health support and the importance of connection to place into account when implementing measures such as international border closures during times of crisis."

**More information:** Candice Oster et al, The experience of individuals affected by Australia's international border closure during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Health & Place* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.healthplace.2022.102928](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2022.102928)

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