

Resilient Victorians recovered from lockdown within months

EXCLUSIVE

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Melbourne's 112-day lockdown caused increased psychological distress, isolation and loss of work but the mental health of Victorians recovered within two months of lockdown rules being eased, a landmark Monash University study has found.

The study involving 898 workers is believed to be the first to look at the long-term mental health impacts of an extended stringent lockdown.

It found financial stress was highest during the early stages of the pandemic, decreasing nationally regardless of whether a person was in lockdown or not.

The authors said this suggested that dedicated pandemic-related lump sum payments, grants and the national wage subsidy program played an important role during the lockdown-related loss of work.

Workers in Victoria were surveyed before, during and after the 2020 lockdown, and their responses were compared to workers across the rest of the country.

"Following an abrupt national decline in mental health observed during the early stages of the pandemic, people exposed to an extended lockdown experienced a delay in the recovery of mental health observed in the rest of the country," the study, led by Daniel Griffiths from the Monash School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, found.

Dr Griffiths said the decline in mental health during the Victorian lockdown recovered "within months after lockdown restrictions were lifted, bringing the mental health of Victorians in line with the rest of the country".

Of the unplanned nature of the study, he said "we had set out to study changes in health and work loss during the pandemic, but the lockdown changed those plans, providing a unique opportunity to study the impacts of the lockdown itself. What we found was a story of resilience."

The researchers surveyed 305 people from Victoria and 593 people from the rest of Australia.

During the most stringent period of the Victorian 2020 lockdown, restrictions included a curfew between 8pm and 5am, a 5km distance limit from home, maximum gathering limits of two people outside the home and no visitors to a home, and mandatory face coverings outdoors.

The researchers said their findings demonstrated the extended Victorian lockdown had negative mental health consequences for people of working age, including increases in psychological distress and decreases in mental health.

"However, these effects were short-lived," the study says.

"Following the easing of lockdown measures, we then observe a resolution of the negative mental health impacts of lockdown within a two-month period, bringing the mental health of Victorian residents back in line with that of the rest of Australia.

“We also observed a pattern of deterioration during lockdown, followed by recovery post lockdown, in ... social interactions and engagement in paid work.”

The study did not identify any significant differences in financial stress due to the lockdown.

“This may be due, in part, to several financial supports for businesses suffering significant losses or closures during the Victorian lockdown such as dedicated lump sum payments, and extended eligibility for a national wage subsidy program due to the lockdown measures,” the study says.