

Collateral Damage:

What the untold stories from the COVID-19 pandemic reveal about human rights in Australia

March 2025



Report summary

Led by Human Rights Commissioner Lorraine Finlay, this report examines the human rights impacts of Australia's COVID-19 emergency response. Drawing on the reflections of more than 5,000 Australians, including survey responses, personal stories, and community consultations, the report identifies significant challenges and lessons learned. The report's findings highlight the urgent need for a human rights-centred approach to ensure equitable, effective, and compassionate emergency responses in the future.

LESSONS LEARNT

The report recommends all levels of government in Australia adopt an Emergency Response Framework, anchored by seven key principles:

1. Human rights as a priority, embedded in decision-making from the outset.
2. Meaningful consultation with all communities, especially vulnerable groups, as a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective.
3. Proportionate responses that are constantly reviewed and adapted.
4. Balancing risk with compassion, ensuring timely and accessible exemptions.
5. Tailored communication, addressing diverse needs and combating misinformation.
6. Empowering and supporting local communities to help create more effective and targeted plans.
7. Planning beyond the crisis to avoid abrupt withdrawal of critical support.

You can read more about the guiding principles in the full report.

Key findings

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant tensions between public health priorities and individual rights. While Australia's government responses during the pandemic helped save lives, this report found that human rights impacts were not always considered or protected. Many people and communities the Commission engaged with said they felt they were overlooked or left isolated due to blanket and inflexible policies that failed to consider local realities.

The findings outline the human impact of pandemic response measures, including international and domestic border closures, lockdowns, school disruptions, quarantine, and healthcare restrictions.

Among the more disproportionate impacts on people include:

- Failures in compassionate exemption pathways, leaving many unable to visit dying family members or return home in their time of need.
- The 2021 Melbourne tower lockdowns: deemed a severe response that violated Victorian human rights laws.
- Barriers faced by First Nations communities, migrant communities and people with disability in accessing essential information and services.

Other findings

- **Border Closures**
Abrupt and inconsistent closures disproportionately affected border communities, disrupting access to healthcare, education, and employment.
- **Travel Bans**
The 2021 India travel ban violated the right to freedom of movement, leaving Australians stranded and exacerbating mental health crises.
- **Hotel Quarantine**
While effective in controlling virus spread, conditions in quarantine facilities posed significant challenges for people with disabilities, mental health conditions, families with children, and survivors of trauma.

- **Lockdowns and Family Violence**

Despite early recognition of risks, mitigation measures failed to prevent escalating domestic violence cases.

Communities impacted

Those in secure jobs with access to remote work often thrived, while casual workers, renters, and at-risk groups such as non-residents, First Nations peoples, and victim-survivors of domestic violence bore the brunt of the pandemic's impacts.

- **Border Communities:** Abrupt closures disrupted daily life, access to healthcare, education and employment, leaving many feeling abandoned.
- **Aged Care Residents:** Prolonged visitation restrictions caused loneliness and distress, particularly during end-of-life care.
- **Healthcare:** The measures introduced to treat and reduce the spread of COVID-19 helped realise people's right to health, but prioritising this health response meant other health issues were pushed down the list. Some remote First Nations communities and women about to give birth were impacted by such measures, and many spoke of the considerable distress it caused.
- **Education:** Remote learning exacerbated inequities, with disadvantaged students falling further behind due to limited access to technology and stable learning environments.
- **International Borders:** Stranded citizens and visa holders faced extreme stress and financial hardship due to inconsistent and restrictive travel policies.

While most people complied with health guidelines out of communal responsibility (for example, 3 in 5 people surveyed agreed the Australian Government did a good job in handling the pandemic and their state/territory took appropriate steps), inconsistent communication and perceived inequalities, such as the 2021 India travel ban, eroded trust in government decisions.

Report methodology

This report summarises the extensive engagement undertaken by the Commission between 2024 and 2025. Beginning with a desktop review of relevant literature (including academic articles, reports, Commission materials, relevant inquiry reports and newspaper articles), this project was a multi-phase study which engaged thousands of Australians from around the country.

This project undertook:

- A quantitative survey of 3,032 Australians from every state and territory aged over 18. Surveys were conducted from 24 May to 7 June 2024.
- An online story submission portal, known as the Your Story Portal, which was open from 16 May to 30 June 2024. It received more than 2,300 story submissions from people over the age of 18.
- 56 targeted stakeholder interviews/workshops with impacted groups, advocates and subject matter experts.

KEY SURVEY STATS

42% of people felt the overall outcome of COVID was neutral, 40% felt it was negative, and 19% positive.

74% believed the greater good of the community should always be considered before individual rights.

Restrictions on gatherings had the most negative impact overall on people, followed by the fear of catching COVID, lockdowns or restricted movement and reduced income.

Read the full report on the Commission [website](#).

