

The Optimise Study: COVID-19 worry and perceptions about infection and potential severity

Report 14 | March 2022



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The Optimise Study is a partnership between Burnet Institute and Doherty Institute in collaboration with University of Melbourne, Swinburne University of Technology, Monash University, La Trobe University, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, the Centre for Culture Ethnicity and Health, and the Health Issues Centre.

Optimise is a longitudinal cohort study. Recruitment of participants commenced in September 2020 with completion of recruitment in September 2021. Optimise follows approximately 700 participants who complete surveys and diaries every month. Regular reports are prepared for the Government and community, with the focus of each report varying based on topical or critical issues arising related to COVID-19. Past reports can be found at <https://optimisecovid.com.au/>. The focus of this report is on people's worries and perceptions about COVID-19 infection and its severity.

Study participants were not intended to be representative of the broader population but instead have been intentionally recruited from key groups who are:

- at risk of contracting COVID-19,
- at risk of developing severe COVID-19 or,
- at risk of the adverse consequences of the restrictions.

At recruitment, participants were asked to nominate people who play a key role in their lives, and where permission is given, these people were invited to participate in the study. Establishing a map of social connections is important because it can be used to examine the influence of the social network on an individual or key groups 1) behaviour including adherence to government directions on COVID-19, 2) attitudes and level of engagement in key COVID-19 interventions such as testing and vaccination, and 3) experience of the consequences of COVID-19, or the government restrictions imposed due to COVID-19. The resulting social map increases our understanding of the interplay between the individual, social and community-level impacts of COVID-19. For more detail on the Optimise study please visit <https://optimisecovid.com.au/>.

COVID-19 worry and perceptions about infection and potential severity

This report explores participants'

- Worry and concerns about the COVID-19 pandemic
- Perceived likelihood of COVID-19 infection and potential severity
- Confidence in the federal and state governments' responses to COVID-19

550

**SURVEY
PARTICIPANTS**

1

**COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT GROUP
MEETING**

This report draws on the findings from several Optimise research activities including:

- Responses from 550 participants who completed the Optimise baseline survey, follow up surveys and contact diaries between 14 September 2020 and 1 March 2022.
- A Community Engagement Group meeting facilitated by the Centre for Health Communication and Participation at La Trobe University on 22 March 2022. The Community Engagement Group was comprised of participants representing healthcare workers, people who have had COVID-19, people with chronic disease, people who are living in social housing and/or culturally and linguistically diverse communities (including Afghan, Fijian and Pasifika, Indian and South Asian communities).

OPTIMISE COHORT

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

This report evaluates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants' lives: their main concerns, risk perception, and confidence in the State and Federal Governments' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. This report focusses on trends over the past six months (between September 2021 and February 2022).

Key findings

- People's main concerns continue to be the risk of friends and family being infected with COVID-19, being infected with COVID-19, and their own mental health.
- Participants aged 45–65 years were more likely to report that they were very worried about the pandemic compared to other age groups.
- Over time, the proportion of participants who perceived that it was 'very likely' that they would contract COVID-19 has increased from 15% in September 2021 to 36% in February 2022.
- Participants living in regional areas perceived their risk of infection and potential severity of COVID-19 to be higher than people living in metropolitan areas.
- Confidence in the Federal Government was consistently lower than confidence in the State Government, though confidence in governments generally has declined over the past six months.

MAIN CONCERNS

In February 2022, the top three concerns were risk of friends and family acquiring COVID-19 infection (57%), participants acquiring COVID-19 themselves (43%), and participants' mental health (28%). These concerns are consistent with those most commonly reported by participants over the past six months (between September 2021 and February 2022). Notably, concern for regular health services not being available has increased between September 2021 (12%) and February 2022 (16%) with a peak in January 2022 (22%). Concern about the impacts on jobs and unemployment decreased between September 2021 (21%) and February 2022 (13%).



Friends and family
being infected (57%)



Risk of personal infection
(43%)

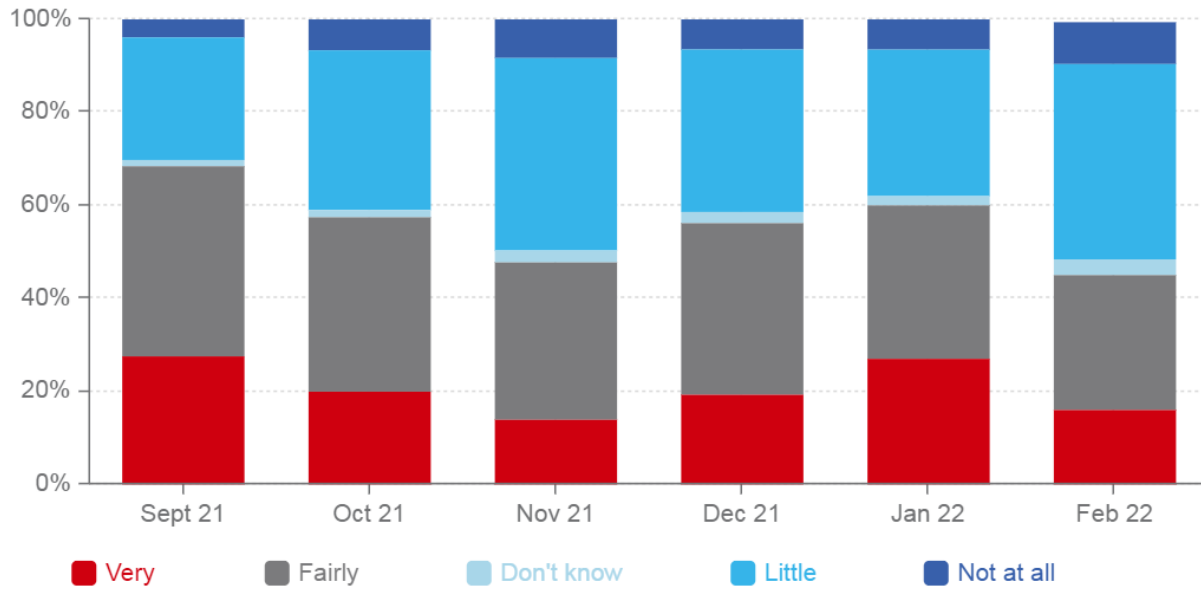


Personal mental/emotional
health (28%)

WORRY ABOUT COVID

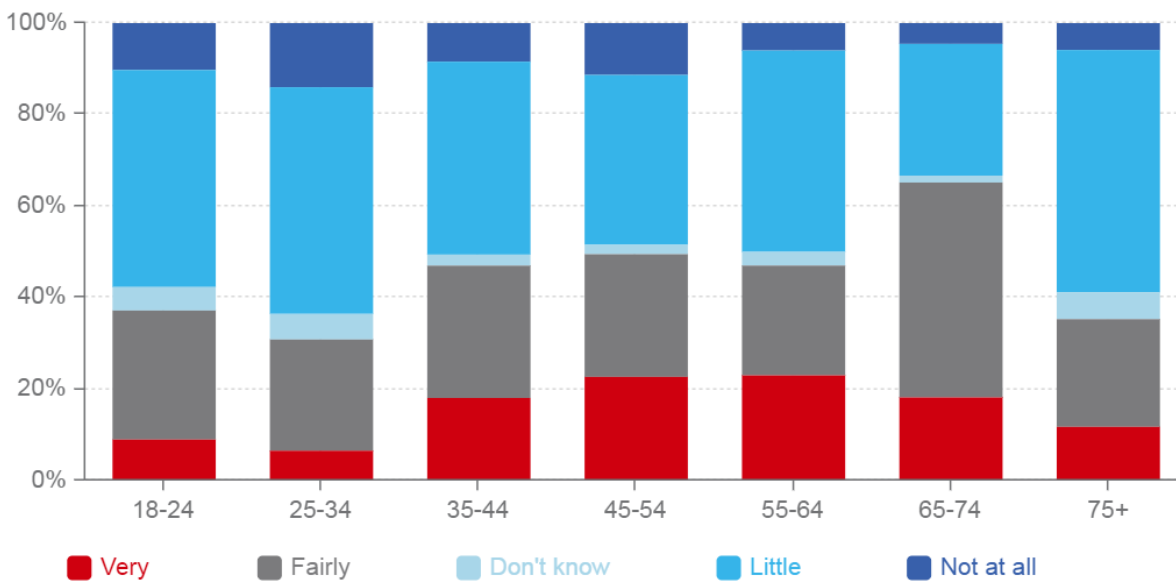
Participants were asked monthly how worried they are about the current COVID-19 situation in Australia. Overall, participants' level of worry about the pandemic was highest in September 2021, declined over October and November 2021 and then increased again in January 2022. It then declined again in February 2022.

Worry about the pandemic over time



In February 2022, participants aged 65–74 years were more likely to report being worried about the pandemic compared to other age groups; around two-thirds (65%) of participants aged 65–74 years reported being 'very' or 'fairly' worried about COVID-19. Conversely, appropriately two-thirds (64%) of participants aged 25–34 years reported being 'not at all' or 'a little' concerned about the pandemic.

Worry about the pandemic in February 2022 by age group

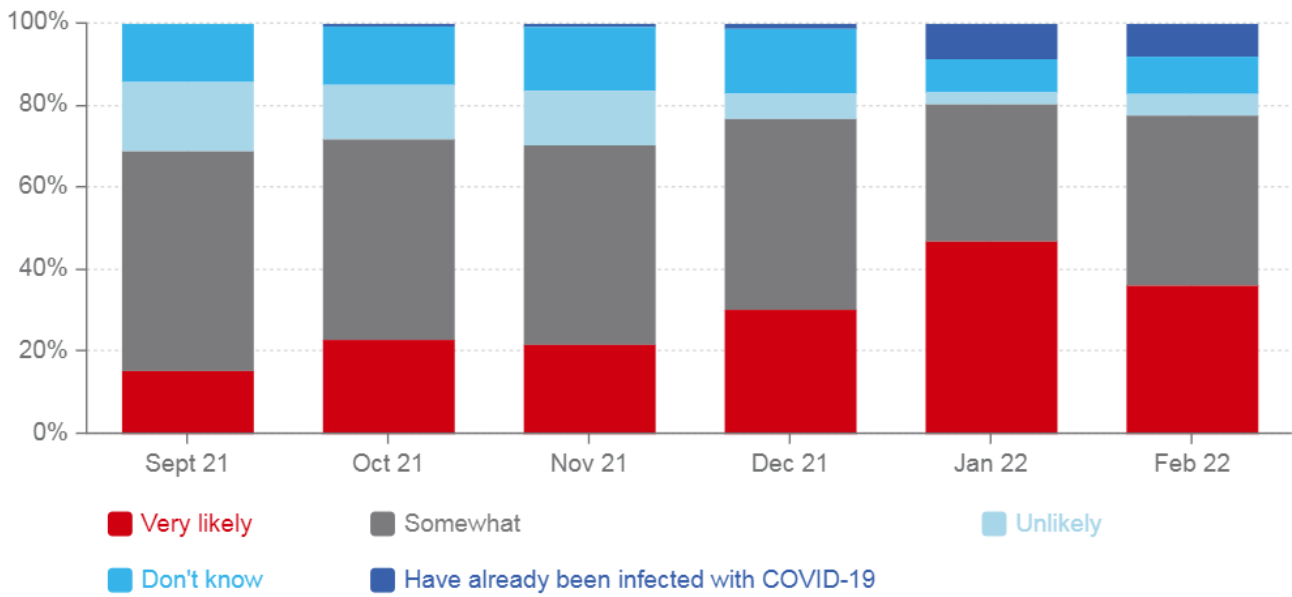


EXPECTED INFECTION

Participants are asked monthly to report their perception of the likelihood that they will contract COVID-19 at some point in the future. Over time, the proportion of participants who perceived that it was 'very likely' that they would contract COVID-19 increased from 15% in September 2021 to 36% in February 2022 (peaking in January 2022 at 47%).



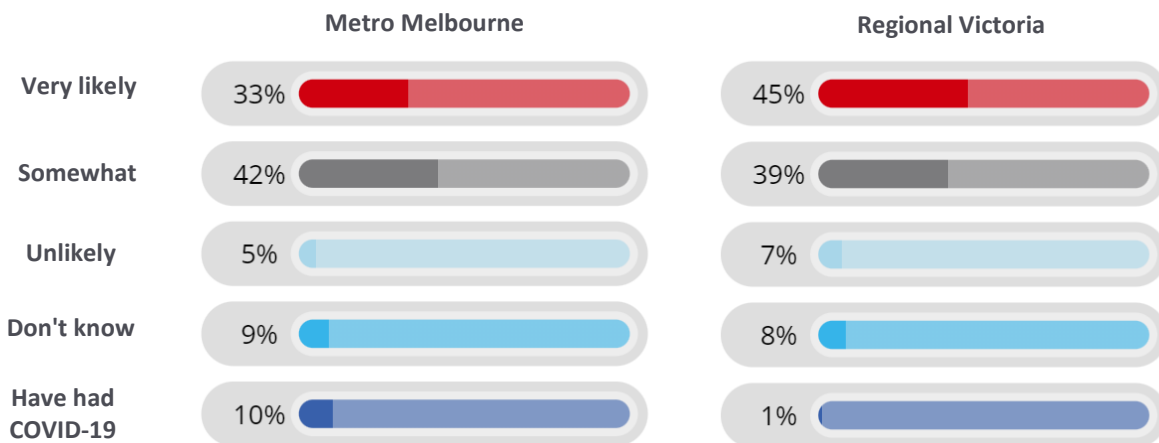
Perceived likelihood of COVID-19 infection, over time



*Note: 'Have already been infected with COVID-19' is not equivalent to prevalence estimate as some people who have previously been infected may consider themselves at risk of reinfection. Estimates of prevalence are available in Optimise Summer 2021–2022 Snapshot.

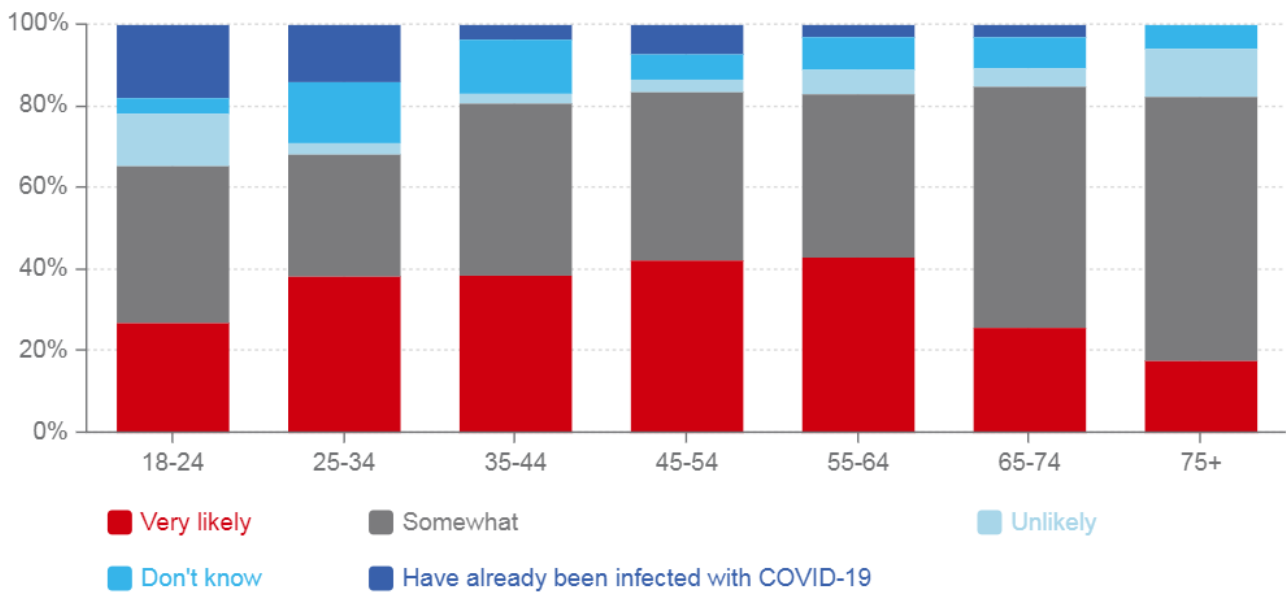
Participants living in regional Victoria perceived their risk of COVID-19 infection to be higher than those living in metropolitan Melbourne. In February 2022, 45% of participants living in regional Victoria perceived their likelihood of contracting COVID-19 to be 'very likely' compared to 34% of participants living in metropolitan Melbourne.

Perceived likelihood of infection by geographic area in February



In February 2022, 42% of participants aged 45–54 years and 43% of people aged 55–64 years considered that it was 'very likely' that they would contract COVID-19 at some point in the near future, whereas 26% of participants aged 65–74 years and 18% of participants aged over 75 years considered it to be 'very likely' that they would contract COVID-19 in the near future. Participants aged 18–24 years had the highest proportion who perceived it to be 'unlikely' that they would contract COVID-19 in the near future (13%) followed by participants aged over 75 years (12%).

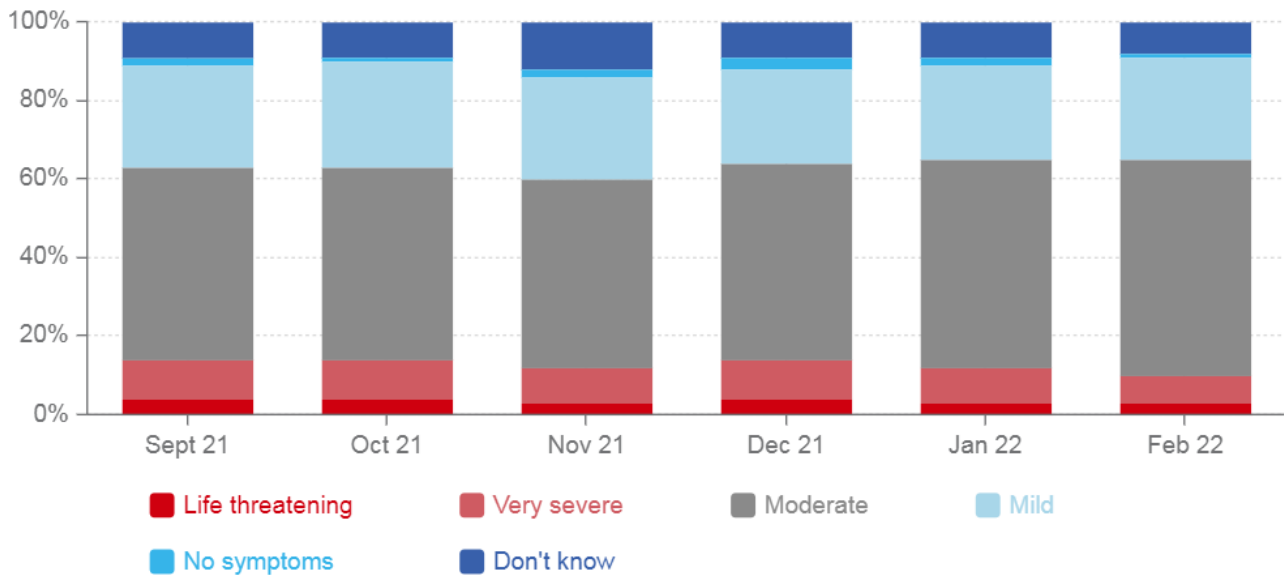
Perceived likelihood of infection by age group in February 2022



SEVERITY OF INFECTION

Overall, in those participants who had not previously had COVID-19, the proportion of those who anticipated COVID-19 to be 'very severe' to 'life threatening' if contracted almost halved from 14% in September 2021 to 9% in February 2022. The proportion of participants responding 'moderate' remained constant at around 50%.

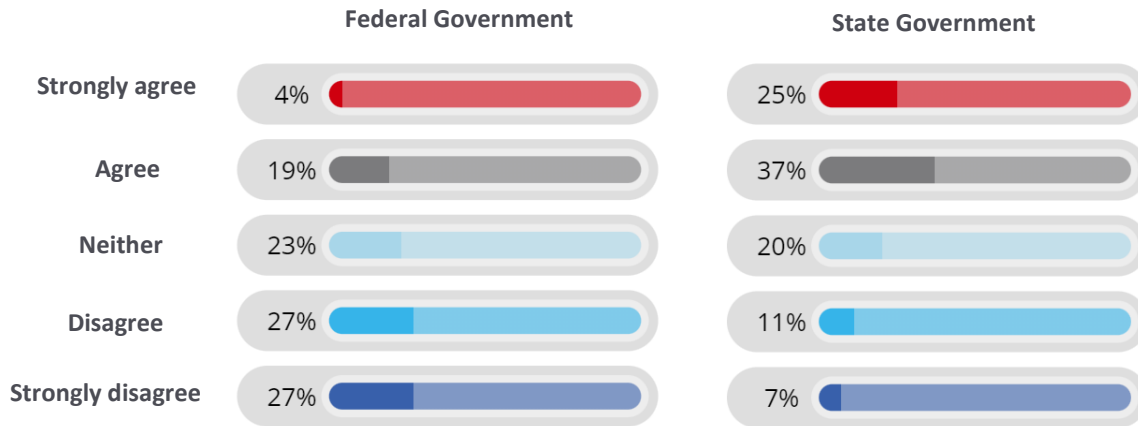
Expected severity of COVID-19 infection, over time



CONFIDENCE IN FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO COVID-19

Participants are asked monthly to rate their confidence in the Federal and State Governments' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. In February 2022, a higher proportion of participants strongly agreed (25%) or agreed (37%) with the State Government's response to COVID-19 compared to those who strongly agreed (4%) or agreed (19%) with the Federal Government's response to COVID-19.

Confidence in governments' responses to COVID-19 in February 2022



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT GROUP INSIGHTS

The findings presented above were presented to a Community Engagement Group that met on 23 March 2022. The Community Engagement Group was comprised of participants representing healthcare workers, people who have had COVID-19, people with chronic disease, people who are living in social housing and/or culturally and linguistically diverse communities (including Afghan, Fijian and Pasifika, Indian and South Asian communities).

The discussion among the Community Engagement Group participants demonstrated a range of perceptions about COVID-19. Some participants reported that people in their communities believed 'COVID is over'. If they contracted a respiratory illness, 'It's a cold, not COVID'. A representative of the Fijian and Pasifika communities also commented that members of her community in regional areas were less worried about COVID-19 than those in metropolitan areas. She also said many in her community perceived getting COVID-19 was now inevitable. The representative noted that many found it difficult to isolate because they were the sole income earner for their household.

A representative of senior Indian community members stated his community was feeling more confident now because they were vaccinated and boosted, and the strain was less severe. He said some had been infected with COVID via their grandchildren but had recovered within a few days. He was now encouraging community members to get the flu shot.

Participants in the Community Engagement Group also described barriers to risk-reducing behaviours including a lack of role-modelling from the government. For example, at a recent large event organised by the state government, which was attended by a couple of the participants, there was no social distancing enforced in queues or at tables, and most people were not wearing masks. One of the participants said: "You probably can't expect people to act responsibly if governments are not acting responsibly".

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