

**EXCLUSIVE**

# Covid lockdown-weary Melburnians fleeing to country Victoria

Exhausted by lockdowns, Melburnians are moving to the country and many are leaving Victoria entirely, as leaders warn the state must act urgently to stem the exodus.

**Shannon Deery and Olivia Jenkins**

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Brooke and Phil Anderson with their kids Tasha, 18, Ella, 12 and Chloe, 17. Picture: Alex Coppel  
**Victoria**

Melburnians tired of a year of Covid lockdowns are looking to leave the city and move to regional Victoria, a new poll has found.

An exclusive poll of 1,500 Victorians, carried out by research firm RedBridge, found 36 per cent of Melbourne residents would prefer to move out of the city for the country if their work circumstances allowed.

The Sunday Herald Sun can also reveal that more than one fifth of Melburnians said they had seriously considered, or were seriously considering a tree change and six per cent said they had already made the move.

And a third of all respondents – both from Melbourne and regional Victoria – said they'd prefer to live interstate if they had the chance.

Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry chief Paul Guerra said ongoing Covid-19 lockdowns and restrictions had damaged Melbourne's reputation.



An empty Bourke St. Mall during Melbourne's multiple lockdowns. Picture: Ian Currie

Demographer Mark McCrindle said the pandemic has ramped up the number of Melburnians chasing affordability and liveability in the regions as they saw how vulnerable the CBD was to restrictions.

"Internal migration patterns show that people really are heading out of Melbourne to the regional areas," Mr McCrindle said.

"It's quite phenomenal. We've got that triple green light of growth, we've got the liveability, affordability and the employability in the regions and so that's been the big game changer.

"People realise that capital cities are more vulnerable in a pandemic."

It comes after Melbourne fell six places to eighth on the world's most liveable cities list.

Melbourne scored 100 for both education and infrastructure on the index, but compared with previous years was let down in healthcare (83.3) and culture and environment (88.2).

An Australian Bureau of Statistics report released this week also found Victoria had the lowest population increase of any state or territory in 2020.

The state grew by only 700, a massive 121,500 down on the previous year, and lost a net 12,737 people moving to other states.





More than one fifth of Melburnians said they had seriously considered, or were seriously considering a tree change. Picture: Getty Images

“It’s so important now that we reclaim the mantle as the best place in Australia to live, work, learn and run a business,” Mr Guerra told the Sunday Herald Sun.

“Our future prosperity will be compromised near term if we start to see a brain drain and skills shortage play out around the state.

“It’s why we have to ensure that every Victorian business can operate because if they can’t the flow on effects are not just the business and jobs that will be lost, it’s the damage it does to our reputation and liveability that will take years to get back.”

Mr Guerra said fatigue and frustration was evident in the wake of Melbourne’s fourth lockdown.



Victoria had the lowest population increase of any state or territory in 2020. Picture: Paul Jeffers  
“There’s been no footy, no events, we haven’t been able to enjoy hospitality, haven’t been able to go to the theatre or galleries,” he said.

“Many of the things we love about Victoria have been shut but let’s not forget what a great city we have and fight to ensure it’s still there when we come out of this.

“It remains a health issue, but that doesn’t make it easier for Victorians living through lockdowns.”

Small Business Australia executive director Bill Lang said he was not surprised by the poll.

“The confidence of business owners and those who work in the private sector are at a low level that has not been seen in Victoria since the Cain/Kirner years,” Mr Lang said.

“The decisions of the Andrews government to choose the hammer and nail over a NSW style nuanced approach to dealing with the virus will hurt Victoria for a generation.

“I have had multiple conversations with dozens of business owners over the past few weeks who are fed up and investing now in businesses up north, planned projects for expansion in Victoria have been scuttled and this money redirected to NSW and Queensland as they have no faith that the Victorian government will not close them down again.

“The consequence of the government’s failure in Victoria will be felt for a generation.”



VECCI chief executive Paul Guerra said fatigue and frustration was evident in the wake of Melbourne's fourth lockdown. Picture: Mark Stewart

Former Committee for Melbourne chief Andrew MacLeod said there was an opportunity to capitalise on this drive toward the regions.

"It is a great opportunity for the government to release a plan of regional infrastructure investment, transport investment and telecommuting encouragement to ensure that the people who move to the regions can continue their careers and work there post-pandemic," he said.

"If the government does not do so, and jobs come back to central Melbourne, the move to the regions will reverse, property price rises in the regions will collapse, potentially leaving people in negative equity and a historic opportunity to drive regional growth will be lost."

RedBridge director Kos Samaras said the polling was in line with global trends.

"Melbourne is the only city in Australia that has come close to experiencing the same COVID-19 exposure and lockdowns comparable to other large global cities," he said.

"Right across the world, where breakouts and lockdowns have occurred, a sizeable number of people fled the cities for the countryside or warmer climates."





Brooke and Phil Anderson made the move from suburban Pakenham to Noojee, with their kids, Tasha, 18, Ella, 12 and Chloe, 17. Picture: Alex Coppel

### **MORE 'FREE' IN THE COUNTRY**

Escaping the concrete jungles of suburbia became top priority during the pandemic for Noojee residents Brooke and Phill Atkinson.

The pair left their home in Pakenham and moved with their three teenage daughters to the regional town two hours east of Melbourne in April after February's snap lockdown prompted them to make the move they had been planning for years.

"It was the lockdown that sort of pushed us to make that leap," Ms Atkinson said.

"I feel like I've got a lot more freedom.

"We also got a bit sick of the humdrum of suburbia."

Ms Atkinson said the dual purpose move meant they felt distanced from the ballooning exposure sites and never-ending Covid news cycle that hung over the family before they made the snap decision to surround themselves with lush greenery in time for the most recent circuit-breaker lockdown.

"I love the scenery out here and it feels a bit more free."

"This feels like our little home away from home sort of off grid and out of the rat race."

While travel bans between Melbourne and regional areas crippled small businesses reliant on out of town visitors, Ms Atkinson said she appreciated the different restrictions for each area during the most recent lockdown.

"We have beautiful surroundings, not just five kilometres of concrete jungle."

"I drove home (from work) and felt like I was getting away from the lockdown."



Zoe Simmons says the devastating impact of Covid lockdowns on small businesses and mental health prompted her desire to move. Picture: Rob Leeson

### **LOCKDOWNS ‘DROVE HOME’ DESIRE TO MOVE**

Ringwood resident Zoe Simmons has been “desperate” to move back to New South Wales’ south coast to be reunited with her family after enduring the lockdowns without them.

Ms Simmons, 25, said she loved living in Melbourne, but longing to see her friends and family with whom she endured horrendous bushfires trumped the change in scenery she sought in suburbia three years ago.

“I feel very isolated in Victoria,” Ms Simmons said.

“I want to leave Melbourne desperately.

“Many of my friends and family are also in this area (the south coast), and after living through the Black Summer bushfires together, I just want to be with my community.”

Ms Simmons said the devastating impact of the lockdowns on Victoria was what prompted her to consider going home in recent weeks.

“I love Melbourne and the time I’ve spent here, but the past 12 months have just highlighted how much I want to leave,” she said.

I know Victoria isn’t the only place that’s going to be locked down before this pandemic is over, but the impact on small business, mental health and more is just so severe.

“ If I’m going to be locked down, I’d rather have beautiful beaches in my 5km radius”

.....“I miss my home and I think the lockdown drove home that point.”

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