

# TRANSCRIPT

## PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

### Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Melbourne—Thursday, 13 August 2020

*(via videoconference)*

#### MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O'Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Ingrid Stitt

Ms Bridget Vallenge



**WITNESS**

Ms Emma Dawson, Executive Director, Per Capita.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Dawson, for joining us today. We welcome you to the second series of public hearings for the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The committee will be reviewing and reporting to the Parliament on the responses taken by the Victorian government, including as part of the national cabinet, to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and any other matter related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Members are attending this hearing remotely in their homes or in their electorate offices, and we ask that people note that members are not required to wear a face covering if they are working by themselves in an office under the stay-at-home directions of 6 August, part 2, section 7(i).

We advise you that all evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible. We invite you to make a brief opening statement of no more than 5 minutes. We ask that you state your name, position and the organisation you represent for broadcasting purposes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you, Ms Dawson.

**Ms DAWSON:** Thanks, Ms Blandthorn, and thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. My name is Emma Dawson, I am the Executive Director of Per Capita, and I join you today from my home on the lands of the Boon Wurrung people of the Kulin nation and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. This is a difficult time for Victorians as we endure stage 4 restrictions and live with the uncertainty of being unsure when we can see our friends and families again. Personally, I am juggling full-time work with helping my six-year-old daughter navigate online learning while worrying about the health and wellbeing of my elderly but otherwise well parents, who live about an hour away, and of my husband who is immune suppressed.

But I am one of the lucky ones. Friends of mine have lost their jobs, had their hours reduced and their incomes cut. They have suffered relationship breakdowns and had to cancel a wedding in one instance. Some are struggling with mental health and at least two have tested positive for the virus. In my own family the current stage 4 restrictions are scheduled to end on my mother's 80th birthday, so I know I will not see her until at least the next day. But I and all of my friends and family support the stringent measures that are in place and believe we are all doing the best we can to avoid the deaths of loved ones and to give us the best chance of resuming our lives as soon as possible.

Certainly across the country in our response to this pandemic, at both a personal and systemic level, mistakes have been made. We are in uncharted waters, dealing with a health and economic crisis that is beyond our living memory. The Spanish flu is the last time the developed world experienced a pandemic of this scale. It was a century ago, and the world was very different, but there are lessons from that time that are useful in assessing how we should be approaching containment and lessening the economic damage of COVID-19.

A study by American economists Sergio Correia, Stephan Luck and Emil Verner released in June this year found that the earlier cities during the Spanish flu implemented lockdowns and social-distancing measures. The stricter those measures were and the longer they were in place, the better and faster was their economic recovery after the pandemic. The researchers combined data on mortality rates and economic variables with evidence of local social distancing and restriction of business activity in various cities and found that implementing shutdowns earlier and maintaining them longer led to higher and faster recoveries in employment, economic output and consumption of an average 5 per cent post pandemic compared to cities with more lax regimes. So the argument that we have to choose between containing the pandemic and protecting lives and protecting our economy would seem to be a false one, as it emerges from this evidence that the things we are doing to protect lives are also the best way of ensuring our economic recovery on the other side.

I would also note that many of the factors influencing the outbreak and spread of the virus in Victoria since June are less to do with decisions made by individuals or by politicians or public servants or others in leadership positions and more to do with the structural inequalities resulting from decades of the deregulation of our labour market and of growing social and economic inequality. Coupled with the failure over many years to invest in social infrastructure such as aged care and public housing, these existing fault lines in our society have exploded under the pressure of the pandemic. I am talking of course about things such as lack of sick leave, people having to work multiple jobs to earn a living income, crowded housing, crowded homes and multiple generations of families living in inadequate housing and the profiteering of aged care and essential services. These are the lessons I believe we must learn and rethink about how we set our economy and our society as we do emerge from this pandemic and begin to rebuild our society and our economy. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for that introduction, and I will hand to Ms Ingrid Stitt, MLC, for the first questions.

**Ms STITT:** Thank you, Chair. Hello, Ms Dawson, and thank you for appearing before the committee today. I wanted to start off with asking you a little bit about some of Per Capita's work and the research paper that you recently released, *Coming of Age in a Crisis: Young Workers, COVID-19, and the Youth Guarantee*, and in that paper you highlight that for the first time since the depression it is almost one in three young workers that do not have access to the hours and the work that they need. So can you give the committee a little bit of an understanding about that paper, its findings and what you are putting forward as the key policy solutions to this challenge?

**Ms DAWSON:** Yes. Thanks, Ms Stitt. So that paper really looked at the state of the labour market for young people, both in the years before the pandemic and in the months since it first struck. The key finding for us was that the labour market and the employment prospects for young Australians—and we are looking at two age groups; those between 15 and 24 and those between 25 and 34—were not great even before the pandemic hit. So we know that they were much more likely to be in a form of insecure employment, whether that be casual, fixed-term or part-time employment, and that was true of over half of those aged 15 to 24 and 40 per cent of those aged 25 to 34, even before the pandemic hit.

The rate of youth unemployment has gone up considerably faster than has unemployment across the general population since the pandemic hit. In June it had increased by over 5 per cent compared to just over 2 per cent more generally. We also know that around about 400 000 young Australians and at least 150 000 young Victorians have dropped out of the labour market altogether. So they have detached from the labour market—that is, they have stopped even looking for work. So they are not showing up in the unemployment figures.

We also have, and had, even before the pandemic, a high rate of under-utilisation amongst young Australians—particularly high rates of underemployment, which is where they want more hours than they can find. It is particularly acute amongst younger women, and it actually extends through women into that third age bracket, into the early 40s, and that is largely to do with child rearing and caring responsibilities.

These are people that work in the industries that have been hardest hit through this shutdown. So they are much more likely to work in hospitality, in retail, in food services and those jobs that are not able to be done from home, and they are in industries that have closed. A lot of those jobs will not come back, and if they do come back, they will come back with lower hours available.

The economic scarring that is potentially going to occur for that generation of young Australians is, I think, amongst the most damaging things that will emerge from this crisis, and the thing that we should be the most focused on. There is a lot of talk about worrying about the debts that we are leaving to the next generation of Australians, and public debt at this point should certainly not be our number one concern. The bigger concern should be that we will leave young Australians with an economy in which they are unable to find enough work and enough secure work to build the kind of good life that previous generations of Australians have taken for granted.

**Ms STITT:** Yes, thank you. I might pick you up on the issue of casual and precarious employment, and obviously that is not just confined to young people in this country. Given the impacts we have seen of the pandemic on casual workers and indeed the dependency in many industries on these sorts of precarious forms of employment, what do you think the lessons are that we should draw? And what do you think that means in

respect to the importance of the provision of requiring secure work when we get to the other side of this pandemic?

**Ms DAWSON:** I think it is absolutely critical, Ms Stitt. I think probably one of the most, if not the most, important lessons we can learn is that over recent decades what began as an attempt to modernise our labour force and create more flexibility has gone too far in the direction of casualising work and creating insecure work for too many people. And as I said, it is a majority of young people and 40 per cent of those under 35. It is also going to have an impact of course at the upper end of older workers, who we will see suffer unemployment and casualised work on the other side of this pandemic. But I would repeat that this was a situation that was in place. It is not a result of the pandemic; it has been exacerbated and exposed by it. And we are seeing this has terrible effects in our ability as a society to cooperatively and collectively deal with the impact of this crisis, because people simply cannot afford not to go to work. They are having to make a choice between risking their health or risking their home—risking the wellbeing of their families in terms of their physical wellbeing or in terms of their ability to put food on the table. Too many people have to juggle multiple jobs, and we have seen this particularly in the aged-care sector, where workers cannot get enough shifts in one centre. They are often employed through labour hire or other casualised and deregulated forms of employment. Often these are the workers that earn the lowest incomes in our society, but we have seen through this pandemic that they do absolutely essential work and work that is what many researchers, myself included, are beginning to term as the ‘foundational economy’.

Those measures that really many Australians have taken for granted—that our egalitarian society was not built, as were perhaps some of the Nordic states, on an over-reliance on welfare but actually a reliance on good, secure work and an ability to provide for oneself and one’s family—have been eroded over recent decades, and I think a lot of older Australians are quite shocked when they hear that almost half of Australians under 35 have never had a job with sick pay or never had a job with annual leave. These are things that most Australians would think are a fundamental right in our country, and we have seen now that removing them in the name of higher profits or more workplace flexibility can have really dire social and economic consequences, not just for the workers but for the communities around them and for society as a whole.

**Ms STITT:** Pretty sobering figures. Ms Dawson, yesterday we heard evidence from the economist Professor Gigi Foster. I am not sure if you are familiar with her work. She has argued that governments seem to actually weigh the effects of lockdowns or controlling the pandemic against the economic costs that it may have, and in that I think she is referring to the lockdown measures being more harmful than not. What do you think about that proposition, and do you have any views on what the government should be prioritising?

**Ms DAWSON:** Yes, I do. I think absolutely we need to be concerned about the economic impact of the measures we have had to take to deal with this pandemic, and it has caused the greatest economic depression in 100 years. But as I alluded to in my opening statement, research that looked into the impact of shutdowns in the Spanish flu, which is the last time the developed world experienced something like this, showed that actually harsher and longer and stricter lockdowns are not only better for saving lives but they lead to a faster return to economic growth. Now, the reasons for that are if you open up too early—or you do not close down at all, as we have seen in Sweden—you may maintain economic activity and it is not enforced from above that things are shut down, but people’s behaviour changes accordingly, so they live constantly with fear and with uncertainty. They modify their own behaviour, and that then goes on for a longer period of time because they are uncertain of where the virus is or when they may get it. Sweden has experienced both a huge number of deaths and an equivalent economic collapse to just about every country that has done more stringent measures, so it has not worked in Sweden and it did not work during the Spanish flu.

The fact is that what we need in order for our economy to grow again on the other side of this is for people to have confidence, for consumers to have confidence. The majority of our economic activity comes from consumers and the majority of our government revenue comes from tax receipts—income tax receipts. So the number one thing we need is for people to feel confident that they can go back to work, that they can go out into society and spend money and behave as normally as possible as soon as possible. If we do not get the virus under control, then that confidence will not return, and at the extreme level we may see further outbreaks, which will be much more damaging in the long run than an acute and concentrated shutdown now. So, no, I disagree that we need to lift restrictions for the sake of economic activity. In fact I think the opposite is true, and the empirical research shows that—that the harder and more strict and more concentrated the initial period of lockdown is, the faster the economy is likely to bounce back and people’s confidence will return.

**Ms STITT:** I guess part of tackling the economic pain and trying to rebuild the jobs market will see the role of education and training as a critical part of that. I am wondering whether you would care to comment on some of the initiatives that the Victorian government has announced in terms of a major expansion of the TAFE program. Actually Twitter tells me it is National TAFE Day today.

**Ms DAWSON:** It is.

**Ms STITT:** Yes, so I would be interested in your thoughts about how big you think the role of the Victorian skills system should be in terms of the economic recovery effort.

**Ms DAWSON:** I think it is going to be a critical part of the recovery. One of the interesting things about this crisis—this economic crisis—is, I believe, we will see that this has accelerated certain trends in economic activity in the labour market that were already going to occur and has brought them forward, so things like moving more quickly to online commerce—we will not return to the same number of bricks-and-mortar retail outlets as we had in the past—and the automation of some jobs. Not only for young people—I feel really strongly for any young person that is doing their VCE at the moment or finishing school and entering this labour market. It is going to be the toughest labour market for 100 years for someone to kick off their career, and we know that for every year it takes to get into secure work, lifetime earnings are reduced by roughly \$4000 a year. So vocational training and education and the ability to match the skills and qualifications of young people to where there is a need in the labour market, where there are skills gaps in the labour market, are absolutely critical. So I do think one of the good features of the Victorian government's TAFE program is making those courses freely available in the areas that have been identified as having labour market shortages.

At the same time, lifelong learning and the provision of TAFE and vocational education are going to be critically important for older people as well, because there will be a lot of people over 50 who will have become unemployed during this crisis and will find it difficult to get back into work and may need to reskill or retrain in order to do that. It is going to be really important that we have measures in place to support those people, because otherwise they could find themselves trapped for 10 or 15 years with very low incomes before they can access the aged pension or superannuation. And even those that were relatively well off before this crisis—a great number of people expect to be able to put additional money into super in their 50s, and that may be taken away from them. So allowing those people to access support, to retrain and reskill and get back to work, is going to be really important.

**Ms STITT:** Thank you. I know Per Capita is very focused on research around the economy and jobs and jobs of the future. In the short time that I have got left on the clock, I wondered whether you would like to comment on the adequacy of the JobKeeper scheme, and also I will just get you to quickly comment on how you think the federal government's policy of allowing people to access their superannuation funds is going to play out in the long term, because I know that is an area of interest for your organisation.

**Ms DAWSON:** It is, and I will start with that if I may, Ms Stitt. I am particularly concerned at the impact of the early super access scheme on young people and on women. We know that more than half of those that have cleaned out their super accounts altogether are under the age of 35, and almost half of those are women. Particularly for women in that age bracket, they are now looking at entering the years where they are taking time out of work to raise families with no super balance to accrue compound interest. We already have a massive gender disparity in retirement incomes due to women's interrupted work years and their greater likelihood of part-time work. We will have a generation now going into those child-bearing years with nothing in their super account that would otherwise have continued to compound and provided them at least with something.

Similarly young people will be effectively—a lot of them—starting from scratch to try to build up those super balances again when they re-enter the workforce, and they have effectively lost not only the money they have taken out now, but the compounding effect means that withdrawing \$20 000 when you are 27 could be as much of a loss as up to \$100 000 by the time you retire. So I think it was an unfortunate scheme, and sadly more money—it is around about \$32 billion of the so-called stimulus money—has come from low-income earners' super accounts compared to about \$30 billion in support for them from the federal government.

In terms of JobKeeper, I think it is a good thing that it has been extended. I do not believe that the government can indefinitely continue to pay people's wages, and I think the reforms that were made to acknowledge that we

could target it more carefully towards people's income levels were a good thing. But I do believe that when we start to see that income support withdrawn, we are going to see a lot of those people that are currently classified as employed, because they have remained attached to their employer through JobKeeper, entering the unemployment ranks. And the thing that is missing, from my perspective, from the federal government's response so far—and I am hoping there will be something in the federal budget—is a plan to actually create jobs, because—

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry to have to cut you off there, but the member's time has expired. I will hand the call to Mr Danny O'Brien, MP.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. I might just note that that last question was entirely relevant to the federal government's response and not actually relevant to the terms of reference. I do not object to it, but I just would hope that consistency is applied in ruling questions out of order when they are not relevant to the terms of reference.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry—before you go on, just for the record, the terms of reference do refer to the decisions of the national cabinet and how they impact also on Victoria, so I think it was relevant, which is why we also had discussions in our previous report in relation to JobKeeper and others.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Was superannuation related to the national cabinet? Was that a decision of the national cabinet? I am not going to quibble about it, Chair, but I just think consistency is important.

**The CHAIR:** Consistency absolutely is important, as are the terms of reference, and it was within the terms of reference.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Ms Dawson, I am interested in your approach and particularly your answer to the question about Professor Foster's evidence yesterday. Correct me if I am wrong, but effectively you are saying, 'Go hard early—go hard on the lockdown—and the evidence from the Spanish flu will show that that minimises the economic and health damage'. In the case of Victoria, Victoria has had a harder lockdown for longer than all the other states, and we have now got a second wave and other states have not. We have got now an even harder lockdown than we had the first time around, going to stage 4, and obviously we are going to have a much, much harder and longer economic response. So what should Victoria have done differently?

**Ms DAWSON:** It is very difficult to say, Mr O'Brien, what Victoria should have done differently. As I acknowledged at the start, I think certainly the response by all levels of government has not been and cannot be perfect because we are in uncharted waters. But my view certainly is, as I said at the outset, that a lot of the factors that have contributed to the second outbreak and the spread of the virus in Victoria that we have not seen interstate are due to the nature of our community, the nature of our population density and the nature of our labour force. So for example, Western Australia also used security guards in their hotel quarantine, and they did not have a similar outbreak there. It remains to be seen exactly what that inquiry will find. But I do believe it is important to consider the fact that workers that have no sick leave and are unable to isolate adequately at home because they live in crowded accommodation, that work multiple jobs—it will be more likely to see the pandemic spread amongst them.

This is not true only of Victoria; it has happened around the world. So in New York we saw that it was much more likely to spread amongst the black and Hispanic community and amongst low-income workers that lived in crowded accommodation and worked multiple jobs. We have seen the same in Europe. In Sweden, where there was no lockdown, they still had a massive outbreak amongst their immigrant communities. So it is as much I think to do with the nature of our community and the fact that particularly in those suburbs where the outbreak is most concentrated, in the north and west, they are very low-income, working class, multicultural communities that live in cramped conditions and work in insecure jobs. I am certainly not the person to say we should have done this or we should have done that. My analysis is about the underlying factors that have led to those outbreaks.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes. Continuing on the same theme, New Zealand was held up as a poster child, I guess, for the world, went very hard early, was criticised for doing so, and then six weeks later—four or six weeks later—they came out, nothing, and yet now they have got another outbreak. Do we actually have to accept that we are going to have to live with a level of the virus in the community until and unless there is a vaccine?

**Ms DAWSON:** To some extent, yes, we do. I think New Zealand is an example of that, where they had no new cases for over 100 days and now they have got four unexplained cases. So far it does not seem to have spread much further than that. That is a manageable level with which to live, and that is obviously where we would like to get to. We are not going to completely eradicate this. It is a highly infectious disease. We are not going to eradicate it entirely until we have either a cure or a vaccine, so we will have to live with some level, but I think aiming to get to the stage that New Zealand have got to, where they have quickly identified a single-family outbreak, been able to lock down quickly again and get on top of it with contact tracing, that is where we want to get to, where we can manage that within the community. So yes, we have to accept that we will have to live with it, but it is about getting control of it.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I appreciate you are not an epidemiologist—

**Ms DAWSON:** No.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** but in the case of both New Zealand and the early outbreaks here in June of the second wave, would it not have been—sorry, let me go back to New Zealand. They have gone straight to stage 3 for Auckland, and yet it is initially an outbreak of four people in one household. Would it not have been—and I believe this is consistent with WHO advice—better to test and contact trace and really clamp down on that particular outbreak rather than locking down a whole city?

**Ms DAWSON:** Look, I am no expert, but I think that is effectively what they are doing. They have locked down just for three days until they can contact trace around that family, because my understanding is one of the family members did move extensively through the CBD community. So a three-day lockdown to do the contact tracing and hopefully reopening I think is a pretty good outcome.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Cool. Just a question on your comments about casualisation and insecure work: the data actually shows that in terms of casualisation of the workforce it has been about 25 percent, roughly around a quarter, for 20 years. That is ABS; that has been fact-checked by the ABC and RMIT. Are you saying there is a distinction between casualisation and insecure work, or what is the case? You seem to be saying that has increased over a period of time, but the data does not reflect that.

**Ms DAWSON:** The data reflects stability amongst the number of people that are classified as casual, but the nature of casual work has changed considerably in those 25 years. Some research we did last year looking at the nature of casual salaries found that actually the vast majority of casual workers now no longer get leave loading. They no longer get adequate amounts of leave loading as people would expect them to get, so they are unable to, for example, set aside additional money for a rainy day.

At the same time we have seen the employment arrangements change so that now a much greater proportion of casual workers are employed at arm's length from their workplace—so they are employed through labour hire or other forms of casualised work—and we have had, of course, a much higher growth in the number of sole traders or contract workers who are not classified as casual employees but are independent. They work with an ABN, they are hired on a casual or insecure basis and they also have no sick leave and no annual leave or other such provisions. So while the headline rate of casual work seems to be stable, the actual fundamental shift in the labour market is much broader than that. It means that insecurity has spread amongst work that is not technically classified as casual, and the work that is classified as casual is worst paid and more likely to go for longer.

Twenty-five years ago if you were a casual, you tended to only be in that casual role for a short period of time. There was a lot of use of, for example, administrative temp work, which was relatively well regulated and people chose to engage in that, whereas now we are seeing people not given the option to go to part time and effectively being classified as casual when 25 years ago they would not have been.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** In the short time I have got left, can I just get a comment from you on the question of inequality and vulnerable communities and the issue of schools being closed and remote learning? Could you give us a comment on how that is going to impact on vulnerable students, those from difficult backgrounds where the ability to learn remotely is low?

**Ms DAWSON:** Yes. Look, it is an undeniable problem of equity there. I have got a six-year-old, who has not burst in here yet asking for a biscuit, as she usually does when I am on a Zoom. But my husband and I are

able to assist her with her learning. We are both educated people, we have good resources, we have good internet access and devices, and there are a lot of families that do not have that. There are a lot of families whose parents may not speak very good English or have high levels of literacy and numeracy, and there are families in regional and rural Victoria that do not have access to facilities, to adequate provision of communications infrastructure. So there is definitely a risk of inequitable outcomes there. Again this is one of those things where we have to say, 'Well, in the short term it's essential to shut down schools in the interests of safety', but we should—and I think all governments have said that as soon as possible schools should be the last thing to close and the first thing to reopen, particularly in the interests of those vulnerable kids. It is a very important issue.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, and the member's time has expired. I will hand to Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Ms Dawson, for appearing today. I wanted to briefly revisit one of the things that we spoke about yesterday, and it was brought up before, about what Professor Foster was saying. One of the things that she referred to yesterday was the idea that there are deaths caused by the disease and then there are deaths caused by government action. So it was not really about deaths versus the economy; it was deaths versus deaths. And she was talking about things like mental health issues, suicide—all of these other issues that harm quality of life and life expectancy. How can we be certain that the government's actions are not killing more people than other possible government actions that we could be taking? So, you know, I am not saying that the government should do nothing, but there is a range of actions that the government could take. A very extreme action might have one effect and then a less extreme action might have another effect. How do we know that we are not actually killing more people than other possible actions?

**Ms DAWSON:** Well, the short answer is we do not, but the long answer is that it depends on which counterfactual we are looking at, in economic terms. So if it is comparing how many deaths we would experience through this hard lockdown compared to no lockdown at all, then we can be reasonably certain that we will save more lives than we would lose if we had no lockdown at all and allowed the pandemic to rip. The evidence from the Spanish flu, the evidence from Sweden and other countries shows that that is the case. Then you get into, well, what is the alternative? Are there alternative counterfactuals? Is there a counterfactual that says we shut down certain things and not others? I think as far as possible the government in Victoria and governments elsewhere are trying to get that balance right on a daily basis. Fundamentally there are a number of risks with being confined to home, not only in terms of mental health impact and the increased risks of suicide and self-harm, but the increased risks of family violence and violence against women and children. These are all very difficult things to consider, but we know by the numbers in America, for example, or in the UK, that this virus can kill widely and indiscriminately, in much greater numbers than we have seen in terms of even the horrendous domestic violence rates that we see in Australia, with on average one woman a week. We are well and truly exceeding that even in the lockdown in terms of deaths due to the virus.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Yes, there are certainly some awful consequences of both the virus and the government's actions. Sweden has been mentioned a number of times throughout this inquiry. Professor Foster yesterday said, you know, Sweden made some big mistakes in looking after and isolating their elderly and vulnerable people, but I note that if you look at the daily death rate and daily infections in Sweden now, Victoria's number of deaths per day is actually worse than Sweden's right now and theirs seems to be tapering off to nil. So it looks like from the data that the virus has pretty much run its course in Sweden and there is not a lot more to go there. My understanding is that they are pretty much looking at opening everything up there now. How do we know that we are not going to suffer the same sort of deaths but just over an extended time frame, because we have run it in slow motion?

**Ms DAWSON:** Well, we are in a different stage of the pandemic than Sweden, so their peak was some time ago and they are coming down from that peak, whereas we have probably just reached our peak. So something that we will not know until hindsight is exactly when our peak was and how it compares to Sweden's, but certainly we are outnumbering the number of deaths in New York at the moment, on a day-to-day basis, but they have lost more than 100 times the number of people, just in New York, than we have in Victoria.

The fundamental thing to remember there as well is that Sweden's economy has still suffered—it has still collapsed—and with a much greater per capita death count and infection rate than we have. To say that the virus has sort of run its course—I think we cannot not assume that as yet. We are seeing some evidence that any immunity that may come from having been infected may be short lived. This is a coronavirus, and we have to

remember that actually it is not a flu; it is more akin to the common cold in terms of the nature of the virus, and we have never fully developed an immunity to a coronavirus before—is my understanding. So we cannot assume that if we let it run, we will get herd immunity and it will not come back year on year on year. These are all very difficult decisions to be made, but I think the evidence points to the fact that we are trying to get the transmission rate back below 1. We seem to be on track to do that at the moment, and we should if we continue as we have been end up with a much less dire outcome in terms of health, loss of life and in terms of the damage to our economy than has Sweden.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** You mentioned in your introduction that the government's actions have disproportionately harmed women in the response to the pandemic. Could they have done things differently that would not have had that effect?

**Ms DAWSON:** I think the nature of the economic shutdown itself harmed women. I do not think it was any particular decision by either federal or state government that targeted women as such. I think it is a function of several things. Firstly, women make up almost 80 per cent of the healthcare workforce in Australia, which is almost 10 per cent higher than the global average. They are more than 75 per cent of primary school teachers, 90 per cent of early childhood educators and 90 per cent of aged-care workers, so they are absolutely on the front lines in those jobs. They also tend to work in retail and hospitality and in sectors that were shut down because of the nature of the lockdown.

I am more concerned that there seems to be a lack of targeted support to help women recover. Again I do not want to go beyond the terms of reference of this committee. I know that the Victorian state government is also looking at some measures to support business, as well as federally, and to support economic growth, but I would urge the state government, just as I would urge the federal government, to look at investing in social infrastructure—so to lift the rates of pay and the quality of jobs in those caring industries that are dominated by women, to invest in better social housing so that we do not have such crowded communities living in public housing and to really think about how we can invest in that social infrastructure and not just manufacturing and construction jobs, which overwhelmingly favour men. It is women that have lost more work, and they are going to be the ones that are going to be needing support to get back to work.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Ms Dawson. I think I am out of time.

**The CHAIR:** You are out of time. Thank you, Mr Limbrick. Thank you, Ms Dawson, for your appearance before our committee today. If the discussion here today has raised any issues for anyone, I advise that the Lifeline number is 13 11 14 and Beyond Blue is 1300 224 636. Thank you, Ms Dawson, for appearing before our committee. We will follow up on any questions which were taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request. This concludes our evidence for today, so we thank all of those who have been involved: the witnesses, Hansard and the secretariat, and we will adjourn this hearing for today. Thank you.

**Ms DAWSON:** Thank you.

**Committee adjourned.**