



We need to go easy on COVID vaccine coercion to get doubters back in the mainstream

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This article by Associate Professor Katie Attwell, from The University of Western Australia's School of Social Sciences, was originally published in *The West Australian* on December 20.

Amidst the excitement over WA's long-awaited border reopening, city dwellers may miss an important detail applying to the State's regions.

Perth will reopen by hook or by crook and only the unvaccinated will shift further into the shadowy economy of exclusion.

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Perthlings will need to wear masks on public transport and in some public institutions but can broadly expect to face the new normal with relatively few restrictions.

However, after February 5, every single regional resident faces a future determined by the vaccination status of those around them.

For regions with vaccine coverage below 80 per cent, this future includes mandatory masks at shops and roadhouses, and other local businesses implementing a vaccine passport system.

If you're an unvaccinated regional resident, you can forget about a chicken parmi at the pub.

But the landlord is likely to be doubly unimpressed that, thanks to your non-vaccination, she has to ask every other customer to show their proof of theirs.

Vaccine mandates have been employed for many years to impose consequences on parents who don't vaccinate their children. However, these have always operated on individual families, whilst everybody else goes about their business as usual.

By contrast, contemporary COVID-19 vaccination policies utilise collective governance.

These policies may lead us to lean on our neighbours and friends, because their decisions affect our freedoms.

Using "collective requirements", governments apply carrots or sticks to whole populations based on vaccine coverage rates.

When Premier Mark McGowan announced that he would set WA's reopening date only once we hit 80 per cent second dose, he activated a collective requirement.

Those eager to leave, come home or have family visit faced strong motivations to urge those around them to get vaccinated.

Everybody's freedom hinged on those who had not yet taken the shots.

Now, in the regions, the Government is applying the same mechanism.

Struggling local economies are desperate to reopen to interstate and international tourists.

But the ease with which they can do so depends on how many locals have had their two doses of the vaccine.

Business owners may need to employ extra staff to check the mask or vaccination status of patrons, as well as handling the difficult matter of excluding the non-compliant.

These measures will only be required if not enough people have been vaccinated.

Vaccine coverage rates remain worryingly low in the Pilbara where there is significant cause for concern about outbreaks amongst vulnerable Aboriginal populations.

But they also remain sub-optimal in other regions that draw sea-change and alternative lifestyle communities – and which are also heavily reliant on tourism.

Imposing higher restrictions on the unvaccinated in regions with low coverage rates makes sense from a disease prevention point of view.

However, the government is also passing on some of the work of public health governance to the public, who can apply social pressure to holdouts.

Business owners, tourism operators and others who seek a smooth reopening may resent governments making them the agents of disease prevention.

However, many are likely to push that resentment downstream to those in their communities who are forcing the government's hand.

Do people want these collective requirements?

Our Coronavax Project's research found broad public support for collective requirements of the kind now being introduced.

Research participants saw logic in this form of inducement, given that we are all used to lockdowns, masks, limits on gatherings and border closures applying to us as a collective.

Perhaps a more important question is whether collective requirements will prove successful.

The social pressure has potential. Research from the United States in 2013 found that the strongest predictor of vaccination was the people in one's social network.

For those on the fence in WA's regions, family and friends may now start making more assertive recommendations to vaccinate.

As we move into the festive season, some families may already be excluding unvaccinated members due to fear of disease.

That unvaccinated individuals are contributing to a more burdensome reopening may be further motivation to rescind that invitation to the turkey dinner.

However, we should be wary of extending public or private coercion too far.

Australia is on a knife-edge of polarization. The far-right is recruiting amongst those who fear the vaccine and face losing their jobs or social participation.

If mainstream society completely excludes those who do not vaccinate, we cannot be surprised when they take succour from those who seek to radicalise them.

If we want them to come back to the vaccinating mainstream, then we have to retain a space for respectful and supportive dialogue.

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