

What actually are 'essential services' and who decides?

March 31 2020, by Gary Mortimer,

The Morrison government [keeps using the word](#) "essential" to describe [employees](#), [public gatherings](#), [services and businesses](#) that are still allowed and not restricted as it tries to reduce the spread of the coronavirus.

But what is essential, and who gets to decide?

By its very [definition](#), essential means "something necessary, indispensable, or unavoidable".

When it comes to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, there are no recent precedents for governments. There is no pre-determined list in place on what is an essential [service](#). Instead, "essential" appears a moving beast that is constantly evolving and that can be confusing.

Confused messages

On March 22 the Victorian premier Daniel Andrews [called](#) for "a shutdown of all non-essential activity" within 48 hours. Supermarkets, banks and pharmacies were some of the things he said were essential but he did not provide an exhaustive list of what was considered an essential service.

Naturally confusion reigned. [For example](#), in the rural Victorian town of Ballan, some stores closed while others remained open.

We've now seen [a number of retailers](#) decide to voluntarily shutter stores for the safety of their workers and the public, considering their businesses "non-essential".

On Sunday, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said a meeting of the national cabinet had agreed to a raft of new restrictions, such as [limiting](#) "shopping for what you need, food and other essential supplies".

But he also described his wife's recent purchase of a number of jigsaw puzzles for the family as "absolutely essential". While toy and hobby retailers may find comfort in this statement, in reality such businesses may not be considered "essential".

Guns and pastries, essential?

There are differences too overseas in what people consider essential as part of any COVID-19 restrictions.

In the United States, [it's recommended](#) employees of gun stores and gun manufacturers should be seen as "essential" workers, according to a [memo](#) from the Department of Homeland Security.

While in Europe, "necessities" [are said](#) to include Belgian Fries, French Baguettes and Dutch Cannabis. In France, it's also shops specialising in pastries, wine and cheese [reportedly declared](#) essential businesses.

In Ireland, [reports say](#) the government there has issued a detailed list of what it considers "essential workers". As for [essential retailers](#), they include pharmacies, fuel stations and pet stores, but not opticians, motor repair and bicycle repair outlets.

The essential essentials

Here in Australia there is [broad agreement](#) supermarkets, service stations, allied health (pharmacy, chiropractic, physiotherapy, psychology, dental) and banks are essential business and services.

Similarly freight, logistics and home delivery are also considered essential. Australia Post [says](#) posties and delivery drivers continue but [some posts offices are temporarily closed](#).

Some bottle shops can stay open but many are now [imposing restrictions](#) on how much people can buy.

The government has moved to progressively add more business, services and activities to its "non-essential services" [list](#).

This includes cafés, food courts, pubs, licensed clubs ([sports clubs](#)), bars, beauty and personal care services, entertainment venues, leisure and recreation (gyms, theme parks), galleries, museums and libraries.

Some of these entities do have exceptions. A café can remain open for take-away only. A hairdresser or barber can trade if they comply with the one person per four square-metre rule.

Others remain convoluted, such as [outdoor and indoor markets](#) (farmers markets), which are a decision for each state and territory.

In and out of work

In reality, no worker should ever be considered, or consider themselves, as "non-essential".

But due to how the restrictions have been broadly applied, some workers in one industry may now find themselves out of a job, while others in that same industry remain fully employed.

Take for example chefs. Due to bans on restaurants and licensed clubs, chefs there are being stood down, but chefs inside hotels can continue to cook and provide room service meals.

A barista in a café can still be gainfully employed, as long as they only make take-away coffee, but a barista inside a licensed sports club, is unfortunately stood down.

Further restrictions and essentials

While we have seen many businesses reduce their operations and several retailers voluntarily close their doors, [many are standing by](#) waiting for further announcements to potentially close all "non-essential" services.

What should the government consider before deciding what is and isn't regarded as essential?

Some decisions are easy: we need health workers, police, fire fighters and other emergency services workers, and we need those who maintain services to the public such as food supply, clean water, sewerage and so on.

But we also need those services required to keep these people functioning. The military describe this as tooth to tail ratio: the number of people required to keep any soldier on the battlefield (estimated up to three for every soldier).

In the civilian context this includes those responsible for the supply of consumables, personal protection equipment, transport, power, fuel, computer systems, and someone to look after their families while they do the heavy lifting.

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