

## A 'Visible Region' for the New Normal

How can the Hunter accelerate its recovery from COVID-19 shutdowns and flourish in the 'new normal'? We can become a 'visible region' to drive more astute decision-making by business and government here and in Sydney, Canberra and elsewhere. This visibility means sharing data on trends over time as well as case studies explaining cause and effect to reflect our experiences. Visibility can highlight opportunities more clearly to those who are considering visiting, living, working or investing here.

How do we make the Hunter more 'visible'? That requires describing in an accurate and compelling way what is happening in our communities and enterprises socially and economically. Agreement on what information to gather and share necessitates the enhancement of working relationships and common understandings across sectors and across the region. That should result in stories of recognised success and ongoing disadvantage, but also agreement on judicious use of the growing array of data.

We hunger for information, particularly in a time of high uncertainty. We want the latest data on current trends, what we can expect in the future, and identification of those with great need. To represent the region, we can adapt recent work on quality of life indicators and smart city data analytics.

Traditional measures of how our communities and people are faring are being augmented by emerging sources, such as location data from smart phones that are telling us about how people move during the day. Familiar metrics, such as unemployment rates, are masking under-employment and not clearly describing the situation for those who have been stood down temporarily or who have given up looking for work.

Infection rates and counts of jobs lost suggest the more visible and immediate impacts of COVID-19 and associated shutdowns. There are also long-term effects, with studies indicating that extended unemployment in early years can have effects throughout one's career. Within the home, largely hidden impacts on mental health and levels of family violence need attention. Data indicate disproportionate effects on those who live alone or in poorly-resourced areas or are caring for dependent family members. Particularly at risk are members of marginalised minorities, working mothers and other women, and those in younger age groups.

This difference in vulnerability among sectors, social groups, and communities make localised data essential. These data can guide governments, community organisations and private enterprises to determine what to do for the people they serve as well as for their own staff. Businesses and individuals want to know how to make their savings last. Such insight is particularly important when the light at the end of the tunnel seems to flicker with the threat of virus outbreaks and renewed lockdowns.

Fortunately, such 'transparency' is becoming more accessible. Location data from smart phones provided by Apple, Google and others has enabled assessing how effectively people

are social distancing, as alluded to above. The HRF Centre has been analysing traffic volumes collated by Transport for NSW, which led to a write up in this newspaper on when to shop in order to avoid the crowds on a busy Saturday.

However, too much data can alienate those who are not enamoured with numbers. The person in the street and the business operator may already be experiencing the effects that the data are meant to represent. They can respond to such information with a shrug, explaining, “I know that is what’s happening. I am living it.” It makes little sense to quote unemployment figures to the unemployed. To identify those facing adversity and those on the threshold of success, high-level decision-makers in the capital cities can benefit from newly available data, effectively presented.

Which indicators can best measure impacts, resilience and changes over time are contested. What works locally is often determined by local factors. That can stymie benchmarking between cities or regions. Nonetheless, one can make provisional choices on what to measure, reflecting agreement here and now where we live and work. Then, update those choices as the need arises.

The HRF Centre has been seeking such agreement over the past two years through a range of projects, and we convened a ‘data tent’ group. This sharing of information across organisations, as noted above, is essential to make the region more transparent. We have developed a dashboard including traffic volumes alongside COVID-19 infections, plus long-term trends in population growth, unemployment rates, housing costs and crime rates across different locations.

The importance of up-to-date, accessible and transparent information has been one lesson from the COVID-19 era. Recovery of both the economic and the social capital that the pandemic has claimed can be accelerated by a collaborative effort to create a ‘visible region’.

