

COVID-19 INSIGHTS

Towards just futures

Setbacks at 30: Life Chances and COVID-19

Ursula Harrison, Matthew Curry, Dina Bowman
December 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly affected the financial and personal wellbeing and economic security of Australian households and individuals. This report provides insights into the varied and uneven impact of COVID-19 on 30-year-old men and women in the longitudinal Life Chances study.

Key findings

The economic downturn caused by the pandemic has created widespread insecurity. The impacts are uneven: Life Chances participants in permanent jobs with secure affordable housing and strong family relationship tended to cope better than those with insecure work and fewer resources.

- The pandemic slowed down life plans. Some 30-year-olds have postponed having children, buying a house, getting married or travelling.
- Some respondents said they couldn't make plans because of the uncertainties of work and financial security in the future.
- Those with secure jobs fared the best, especially if they could work from home. But they also reported increased workloads and blurred work-life boundaries.
- Many respondents reported mental distress due to overwork; anxiety about work, money and the future; or isolation from family, friends and colleagues.
- Those 30-year-olds with insecure work experienced income losses, financial insecurity and increased distress and were the most likely to have pre-COVID living arrangements and plans disrupted.
- Temporary measures such as the JobKeeper Payment and the Coronavirus Supplement have helped—but in the absence of a longer-term plan they have exacerbated uncertainty.
- Most of the 30-year-old respondents experienced negative financial impacts, but how they responded differed. Those who could, drew on savings or cashed in shares. Others drew on—or completely drained—their superannuation; cut down on expenses; borrowed money; or sold belongings to raise some extra cash.
- Almost one quarter made new housing arrangements due to the financial and social impacts of the pandemic. These included moving to live with parents, moving to a cheaper residence, having someone move in or out, negotiating reduced rent or mortgage payments and postponing plans to purchase a home.
- Both men and women reported doing more domestic tasks. But women had the greater load of housework and parenting. Women were also more likely to reduce hours of paid work, withdraw from the workforce or defer studies.
- While those living alone reported feeling isolated, those with partners said they were an important source of support, with many reporting increased closeness and improved relationships. Several welcomed babies or pregnancies.
- In the shadow of COVID-19 pervasive insecurity is undermining the ability of young adults to plan and invest – and this not only affects individuals but exacerbates [community] inequalities which, in turn, affects all of us.

Background

Turning thirty is often regarded as a pivotal year, when life goals and values are consolidated or re-assessed (Edwards 2017; Panchal & Jackson 2007). It is a time when young people are expected to become financially independent, form long-term relationships, plan or start families, move towards home ownership, and consolidate their careers or reconsider their futures (Burke, Nygaard & Ralston 2020; Hall 2017).

Born in 1990, the young people in the Life Chances Study left school in the middle of the global financial crisis (2007–2009). They were hardest hit by the economic slowdown and the end of the mining boom (Productivity Commission 2020). For many, their post-secondary qualifications have not translated to job security (Allan, Bowman & Levin 2019). Instead, they have faced a labour market characterised by a growth in part-time rather than full-time jobs, with high underemployment (ABS 2020b), inadequate income support (Whiteford 2017) and unaffordable housing (Burke, Nygaard & Ralston 2020).

At thirty, with the COVID-19 pandemic, they once again face a crisis with potentially long-term impacts.

In response to the pandemic, the Australian and state governments introduced international and interstate travel restrictions and measures such as shutting down non-essential services, limits on gatherings and social distancing rules. To soften the economic impact of these restrictions, the government introduced measures including

- a \$550 per fortnight Coronavirus Supplement from 27 April to eligible income support recipients. This was reduced in late September and is likely to be reduced further to \$150 from December to March 2021; and
- a JobKeeper Payment passed in legislation on 15 April and paid to employers, to keep more Australians in jobs and support businesses affected by COVID-19. This payment was also reduced in September but extended until March 2021.

Uncertainty remains about what will happen beyond March 2021.

Restrictions were eased in many states and territories, but in Victoria, a second wave of COVID-19 from mid-June led to tighter restrictions, including:

- ‘stay at home’ restrictions including curfews and only four reasons to leave home: exercise, grocery shopping, essential work, and medical care and caregiving
- a return to remote learning, with onsite access to schools and child care restricted to essential workers with permits
- except for essential businesses, closure of onsite retail, hospitality, sports, tourism and the arts.

A roadmap for reopening in Victoria commenced from 13 September. This outlined steps depending on public health advice and progress in areas including case contacting and testing numbers. Businesses began to reopen in late October, but working from home where possible continued to be advised, until at least late November.

The Life Chances Study

The Life Chances Study is a small longitudinal study started by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) in 1990 in two inner Melbourne suburbs. The study began with 167 babies and their parents and grew from the BSL concern with the level of child poverty in Australia and a desire to better understand what affects children’s life chances.

The families in the study came from a range of ethnic backgrounds, incomes, employment circumstances, and education levels, reflecting the heterogeneity of the chosen suburbs.

Stage 12 of the study focuses on economic security as the then babies now approach 30. An online survey was followed by in-depth interviews with the 30 year olds in late 2019, and with some parents in early 2020. The COVID-19 survey was conducted from late-August to mid-September during the Stage 4 lockdown in Melbourne.

This report complements other reports identifying the economic, social, health and labour market impacts of COVID-19 in Australia (for example, ABS 2020a; Botha et al. 2020; Hand et al. 2020; Victorian Health Promotion Foundation 2020).

COVID-19 survey

The survey, designed to collect qualitative and quantitative data, combined multiple choice and closed and open-ended questions. This was a practical way of gathering detailed insights into how the

COVID-19 pandemic affected the Life Chances participants (Braun et al. 2020).

The survey asked about the impact of the pandemic on:

- health and wellbeing
- labour market experience
- financial situation
- living arrangements
- relationships,
- plans for the future.

It also asked questions about sources of support and how they had responded to the crisis in each of these areas.

The sample

We sent the survey to the 123 young people (49 men and 74 women) who are currently in the study. Seventy-seven responses were received. More women (50) than men (27) responded. Over three-quarters (59) lived in Victoria, which has been worst affected by the pandemic and lengthy related restrictions. Fourteen lived in other Australian states and territories, and four lived overseas.

Forty-seven were partnered, and ten had children (including one whose child did not live with them).

Table 1 Selected characteristics

	Men N = 27	Women N = 50	Total N = 77
Labour force status			
Employed	24	39	63
Unemployed	3	6	9
NILF	0	5	5
Income support			
JobSeeker	4	4	8
JobKeeper	6	6	12
Housing			
Renting	12	18	30
Mortgage	5	20	25
Own home	1	1	2
Board	4	3	7
With others– no board	4	8	12
Unstable housing	1	0	1

Limitations

A limitation of the Life Chances study is that the sample is small and not representative of the general

population. And any survey provides a snapshot in time. Nevertheless, the study’s value overall is its qualitative longitudinal nature, which allows us to set respondents’ survey responses in the broader context of their lives since 1990. This report illuminates how the COVID-19 pandemic and accompanying economic crisis interact with larger structural forces to differentially affect individual life chances.

Ethics

The COVID-19 survey received ethics approval in August 2020 from the Brotherhood of St. Laurence’s NHMRC-accredited research ethics committee.

Setbacks

In 2020, the young adults in the Life Chances study marked their thirtieth birthdays. Many were looking forward to celebrating with family and friends. But these plans were delayed or cancelled due to the pandemic, as Layla¹ explained:

My 30th birthday is in December, and ever since my 21st I had planned to have a big party with all of my family and friends. However, as soon as COVID started, I knew those plans would have to be cancelled. It saddens me, but I’d rather everyone be safe than sorry. And even if restrictions are eased, I still won’t be celebrating my birthday this year. (Layla, not in labour force, lives alone, Melbourne)

Many major life plans were also disrupted: getting married, starting a family, purchasing a home, making a career change were postponed:

This has slowed down life plans. Having kids, buying a house, getting married and travel have all been delayed. Ultimately, 2020 feels a bit like a lost year in my life, in that my ability to engage in the things that matter to me has been severely limited. (Jacob, working from home, business services, moved in with partner’s family for financial reasons, Melbourne)

Indeed, some respondents did not feel able to make plans because of the uncertainties about work and financial security. Inga, who had lost contract work, explained that her anxiety and sense of insecurity had increased:

Due to the pandemic nothing is certain anymore. Every day something else changes. No one is safe

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout this Insight.

in their workplace ... [it]'s very difficult at times.
(Inga, actively looking for work, interrupted study plans, Melbourne)

The small number of 30-year-old respondents living in other states generally expressed less insecurity and uncertainty than those who experienced the longer, stricter lockdown in Victoria, who are the focus of this Insight.

Overworked and uncertain

Of the 65 respondents who had jobs before the first community transmission of COVID-19 was recorded in Australia, more than half (35) had experienced changes in their employment, when surveyed:

- Four lost jobs.
- Eight were working fewer hours.
- Nine had lost salary, bonus or business income.
- Fourteen were doing more work for the same pay.

Increased workload and longer hours

Adapting to the online environment increased workloads—especially for teachers:

The hours have increased due to creating lesson videos and uploading them for the students to do, which take a long time to prepare and edit. There are days that we do live video calls with the students and that takes up half a day, so I stay up later in the night to give feedback on the work they have submitted. (Marilyn, working from home, living with partner, Melbourne)

The impact of working from home depended on location, resources and relationships. For many, it blurred the boundaries between work and home life, with work taking up available time. Shane, a public servant working from home in Melbourne, explained how his workload had increased and working hours expanded following a promotion, crowding out other activities:

I went from working a standard number of hours per week, about 40 on average, to about 50–60 hours per week. I found myself regularly working weekends and late into the night, being part of a flexible workforce employed as part of the government response to the pandemic. Despite regular leave accruing through overtime work, I found myself swamped by work and unable to pursue fruitful activities in my own time.

Increased restrictions combined with the dominance of work under lockdown had negative impacts, 'removing his ability to deal with stress', as he explained:

With Stage 4 restrictions, my workload has increased even more. I am no longer able to get outside, let alone catch up with friends or family.

While grateful for stable and fulfilling employment, he pointed out that this level of work is unsustainable and damaging, not only to individuals but to families and communities.

Vivian, working from home in administration, also found lockdown difficult, with little social interaction and few boundaries between work and non-work:

The main difficulty comes with the restrictions in Victoria—you're working from home each day and are confined to your home after work and on the weekends. The days become monotonous and the distinction between work and non-work time becomes blurred.

For those who lived alone, working from home could be isolating. For example, Jacinta had changed from a fixed-term job in a company hard hit by COVID-19 to a better paid, continuing role elsewhere. Although still on probation she felt more secure in this employment. She had been working from home for five months; while she enjoyed the benefits of saving money and travel time, she also found it isolating: 'Sometimes, I don't speak to another person until mid-afternoon—don't actually use my voice (in the physical sense).'

Some parents—mainly women—who were required to work from home faced the extra workload of caring for preschool children or supervising home schooling.

Where workplace communication was poor, some workers felt abandoned and disrespected. For example, Melanie wrote that:

It feels as if they are preparing for my role to be made redundant; and there have already been some redundancies for my colleagues. It's been extremely challenging as I've felt completely overlooked and devalued by my employers—there's been no consideration of employee wellbeing or banding together as a team, but rather micromanaging and discouraging collaboration and teamwork. (Melanie, working from home, finance sector, loss of income and hours, Melbourne)

Although unhappy at work, Melanie felt trapped:

[I am] stuck in a corner because I can't afford to not have [a job]/ look elsewhere or not receive JobKeeper and I'm conscious there aren't many jobs available, especially in my field of experience.

For self-employed women and men, the uncertainty was amplified, as in Rosita's case.

Rosita

Rosita, a designer, had decided to go freelance following years of intermittent employment. Her work was 'ticking along nicely'. But the onset of COVID-19 turned her life 'upside down'. Business has fallen away as many of her clients' businesses have closed, or budgets have been trimmed. She explained:

I have virtually lost all my work. My partner has also lost all his work as a carpenter. Of course, these changes have been very difficult. I have no idea when and if I will be able to return to [my work].

Prior to receiving JobKeeper, Rosita borrowed money from her father to pay two months' rent, which she found 'degrading and humiliating' because she felt that 'by 30 I should not have to do such a thing'.

Rosita knew that finding secure employment in design 'is very, very tough' as her parents were both in similar fields. Like many, she was considering changing course, but was unsure how to weigh up the associated risks:

I'm feeling hesitant to spend my savings to retrain in another area during this time. My future and career are hanging in the balance and there is complete uncertainty.

She didn't feel confident in making any plans because 'there is no guarantee where the money will come from'.

There was widespread anxiety about job security and how to cope with insecure employment, and uncertain incomes. Vivian was concerned about her job prospects if her fixed-term contract was not renewed:

I am on a fixed-term contract, which is due to come to an end at the end of October. I've

received great feedback in my role and my manager has expressed that he would like to keep me on ... but he is waiting to see if he has the budget to do so. Because of COVID I'm worried that I won't be extended and will therefore have to look for another job in what is a fairly bad job market at the moment. (Vivian, working from home, administration, living with parents, Melbourne)

For some this translated into an increased concern about having a savings buffer against the next setback.

I'm much more worried about job security because so many people I know lost their jobs. In hindsight I wish I hadn't spent most of my savings on a renovation. Given what's happened I think I will try to make sure I always have significant savings set aside (if I can) in case something like this happens again. (Mandy, case manager, concerned about loss of funding for work, negotiated reduced mortgage payments, regional Victoria)

Study challenges

Fourteen were studying to upgrade qualifications or skills for their current employment, or to qualify for their chosen profession. Most students had shifted to online classes with minimal disruption. For post-graduate students, communication with supervisors was affected, with some feeling cut adrift.

For those who needed to be in the lab or on placement there was increased stress and anxiety about the impact on career plans. For example, Elena, a nursing student living in Melbourne, with casual part-time work, explained:

It's made things extremely difficult, as the university isn't supporting students at all. Our clinical placements keep getting cancelled, potentially meaning our graduate year applications are not relevant (and you can only apply once!) so there's a lot of additional pressure on us to complete our courses, but we haven't had support, financially, emotionally, physically, mentally, anything. It's been a struggle turning up to placement (when it isn't cancelled), no clear directives and no protection against COVID until the government and DHHS put into place rules stating that students can't be in COVID or aged care areas.

Women's plans to study were disrupted by the lockdown, some considering giving up or deferring courses. This was particularly the case for those from low-income backgrounds who were not in secure

work. An additional difficulty for women with children was the costs of child care and study.

For example, Caria's study plans had already been put on hold for two years after the birth of her daughter. With another baby on the way and her practical placements on hold, she said:

It's made me stress a lot more and wonder if I'll be able to complete my course and start my career that I've been working really hard to gain entry into for the last few years.

She was thinking about finding work to supplement the household income. Prior to COVID-19 she had relied on limited support from her parents, because her husband's new business had not yet guaranteed a steady income.

Temporary support increased uncertainties

Twelve respondents had kept their jobs, or were attempting to keep their businesses afloat, with the help of JobKeeper Payment—albeit with fewer or no hours of work. While grateful for JobKeeper support respondents were also concerned about what would happen when the subsidy ceased. Melanie explained:

When JobKeeper is no longer available I anticipate being made redundant unless there is a shift in my employer's profits.

Similarly, Bennie, running his own business in the music industry, who had received JobKeeper Payment, then met the criteria for JobKeeper, was anxious about the future because 'I don't see my business bouncing back nearly as fast as the support programs are being rolled back'. To manage ongoing costs, he had negotiated reduced rent on his studio.

Moving house

Most of the 30-year-olds rented, paid board or lived rent free, perhaps reflecting the disappearing dream of home ownership for young people in Australia. Nevertheless, two owned their home outright, and twenty-five had mortgages.

COVID-19 disrupted living arrangements and plans. Almost one-quarter (18) made new housing arrangements due to the financial and social impacts of the pandemic. These included moving to live with parents (4), moving to a cheaper residence (1), having someone move in or out (7), negotiating reduced rent

or mortgage payments (3) and postponing plans to purchase a home (3).

These changes were made to mitigate the impacts of financial stress resulting from actual or anticipated loss of work and income, uncertainty about future employment options, the social and health impacts of COVID-19, and uncertainty about the housing market.

Those who were already in precarious employment and/or who had lost income were the most likely to have pre-COVID living arrangements and plans disrupted. Minimising rental costs became a matter of urgency. For example, Mary Rose resigned two part-time jobs in the arts sector for health reasons at the onset of COVID-19 and was receiving JobKeeper Payment. She moved to reduce her rent, but this increased her risks as it 'involved moving into a [COVID-19] hot spot' and further away from her family.

Shared housing, with partners and friends, reduced rental costs, minimised inter-household visits between partners and was considered 'a better situation' by some. It offered social and emotional support for Stacey, who keenly felt the isolation of working from home:

Moved out of my parents' house and into a share house. Better for my mental health to be in a share house. (Stacey, administration, Melbourne)

Saving the cost of rent was also achieved by moving back with parents—or delaying plans to move out. Nathan, having lost a casual job and sessional work in the arts, and now on JobKeeper, postponed plans to move out of his parents' home and was saving as much as he could. Ashlee, who had had three jobs pre-COVID, was only able to maintain one half-day position on JobKeeper; she had planned to move by September, 'but the second lockdown has prevented this'.

For a few, property market uncertainties led to delayed or reassessed plans to buy or sell a home or an investment property.

Making ends meet

Those receiving income support payments valued the additional support of the \$550 per fortnight Coronavirus Supplement and the Economic Stimulus payments of \$750 in April and July. For example, one young woman observed:

The increased amount of \$550 and the \$750 bonus on top of the normal JobSeeker Payment have been very helpful as they make the government payments closer to a living wage. (Beverley, lost casual hospitality work after returning from travel overseas, Melbourne)

The Coronavirus Supplement meant that people could afford essentials and it was ‘now actually feasible to live off’, as Beverley put it. But she was concerned about the planned cut in payments, saying, ‘It will make things more difficult especially as there are fewer job opportunities.’

The lockdown changed patterns of expenditure, with less spent on commuting, travel, going out or clothes, and more spent on heating and costs of working at home. Low-income respondents were the least able to cover the increased costs. Layla told us: ‘My electricity bill is through the roof ... it’s been very cold, and I use an electric heater’.

People adopted different strategies to weather the economic crisis and make ends meet. Some saved what they could, limiting spending on essentials, and cutting down on other items, in expectation of future costs and uncertain income. Several withdrew funds from their superannuation account to meet everyday costs such as food or rent. Rhonda, a part-time student, lost casual work in technology support due to COVID-19. From a low-income background, she was relying on ‘superannuation early access funds for rent, bills and groceries’:

It was my only option as I am currently still studying part-time this year, making up for prerequisites of many other subjects in the coming year. It was a smooth and easy process. I do not have any superannuation left and the account was closed.

Others borrowed from family or friends, delaying loan repayments and reducing spending. Melanie wrote:

I was already in debt both to my partner and my mother, from whom I have borrowed over \$3000. Repayments have been put on hold until I have more financial security in my job. Day to day I simply can’t spend money on myself as most of it goes towards bills/rent/food. It makes me feel like a failure to be honest—I am the only one of my friends who has been put on JobKeeper and is in such a vulnerable position and I feel incredibly conscious and aware of that.

Fai was another respondent whose financial situation was precarious.

Fai

Fai was working full-time on a fixed term contract as a labourer in the manufacturing sector prior to COVID-19. Fai’s family had been refugees. His father had spent many years unemployed, and his mother spoke very little English. Although the family struggled to buy books or pay for excursions, Fai enjoyed school and completed a post-secondary diploma. After his studies, he had applied for many jobs, but had very little regular work until securing his current job. At the onset of the COVID-19 restrictions he was stood down until the commencement of JobKeeper payments, then reinstated for three days a week until late May when he was directed to take leave. During the Stage 4 lockdown he did not work, but JobKeeper ensured that he kept his job, and he did not become ‘a jobseeker without a job and income’.

He said he was ‘just getting along’ financially, and to manage he used the Early Access to Superannuation scheme, and the household reduced their electricity and water usage to save money, ‘because we are all home now and expect that bills will increase’.

Fai found the protracted period of loss of income and work stressful and depressing, and not being able to go anywhere ‘feels like jail’.

In contrast, some of the 30-year-olds from higher income backgrounds adapted to changed circumstances such as job loss by limiting expenditure or changing strategies, keeping savings in cash rather than investments.

Staying healthy and keeping calm

The lockdowns of the first COVID-19 wave throughout Australia, and the second hard lockdown phase in Melbourne, had repercussions for the young adults’ physical and mental health. Lockdowns created various kinds of stress:

- financial stress due to loss of income and work and delays in completing study
- social stress due to missing workplace collegiality and support, and visiting family and friends

- stress about the future due to uncertainties about the economic and health consequences of the pandemic.

Reported symptoms of psychological distress ranged from increased agitation and irritability, to serious incapacity due to depression. Psychological distress was strongly linked to lack of social interaction and emotional supports, the loss of everyday wellbeing activities, and employment and financial insecurity.

Both women and men experienced higher anxiety, stress and depression than they had pre-COVID. Melanie's fear of being made redundant exacerbated an existing mental health conditions. Mary Rose said her mental health had deteriorated:

I've struggled with depression and anxiety, and my issues with disordered eating have returned after many years of being managed. My partner is helping me to still feel cared for and eat well, but it is difficult for us both to manage. My close friend who lives many suburbs away from me is struggling with seizures and I can't even go over to visit or help them. (Resigned from work for health reasons at the onset of COVID-19, Melbourne)

Some respondents reported poorer physical health due to exercising less because of gym closures, not walking or cycling to work or being more sedentary while working at home. Some mentioned making fewer visits to health practitioners and delaying medical procedures. A few reported eating more due to stress, boredom and easy access to food and snacks while working at home.

Marsha, who worked from home in the finance sector, explained how her mental and physical health was affected by the lockdown.

Due to the restrictions it's been more difficult to exercise, and motivation has recently reduced. This has made it more difficult to manage stress and has affected my mental health. Doctors' appointments have been over the phone / zoom though it is an adjustment to seeing them face to face. I have definitely justified eating more unhealthy food and an increase in alcohol as a result too.

Financial insecurity put relationships under stress. For example, a respondent who had lost work contracts said:

Being at home a lot with my partner has been difficult. Both not working. It is stressful financially. We both had jobs lined up in Sydney. So, we have

lost about four months of work each. It is difficult mentally. (Wendy, arts sector, JobKeeper, Melbourne)

Some respondents explained how they had introduced new daily routines to manage the physical and mental impacts. These included exercise regimes, cooking and meal planning, limiting alcohol consumption, walking the dog, prioritising selfcare, and enjoying the sunshine and the slower pace of life. Regular yoga practice helped Jacob, who 'exercised more' with 'nearly daily yoga sessions'. He observed: 'Honestly, that and running has got me through'.

COVID-19 has forced some to stop and reassess priorities. Kitty, for example, appreciated the slower pace of life, and explained:

I think the impact of COVID has really made me stop and assess what is important and what do I want to prioritise for a happy and healthy life. This includes working on myself both professionally and personally, valuing my family and connecting/ supporting my friends. COVID has been shit but it also has allowed insight I don't think I would have been able to see if I kept moving in such a fast-paced life.

Similarly, Shane was considering his options for buying a home to provide a better work/life balance.

If anything, the pandemic has prompted me both to want to move to the country/out of the city, and to reduce my working hours to enjoy the time I have more to live a meaningful life.

Home life

The pandemic meant people spent more time at home, affecting relationships and requiring adjustments to the organisation of home and working life. Most of the respondents lived with partners (47) and most worked from home (45), so partners spent all day every day with each other. Some said spending more time together was challenging. Marsha commented:

It's also put more pressure on my relationship with my partner as we are together much more often and don't have the same balance in being able to manage our time with friends or activities. (Marsha, working in finance sector, Melbourne)

Respondents noted spending more time and attention on domestic tasks, particularly cooking and preparing food, cleaning and home improvements. Some found pleasure in beginning new projects—learning crafts,

experimenting with new recipes, developing a film script and preparing for newborns.

More women than men reported a greater burden of home and childcare duties, especially if they were working at home, had lost work, or their partner continued to work. The closure of childcare centres during the Stage 4 lockdown in Melbourne made it very difficult for women who were working from home, or who had intended to return to work or study in 2020. Inga who had lost most of her contract design work, struggled to juggle home schooling with her business projects.

I do feel quite isolated at home with most of the childcare duties falling onto me unsupported. I am stuck at home with my three children, trying to manage work from home as well as home schooling. Not able to have any help due to the lockdown. It's tough. But I'm hanging in there. It has affected my plans to study due to having to home school and [being un]able to get to the city to uni.

For some mothers, like Nisa, whose husband worked full-time, the lockdown meant 'more workload and no rest'. With three small children, she had no time for herself, and could not get help from grandparents or child care, leaving her 'overtired, overworked'. This had delayed her career plans, but she had worked hard to 'do more activities with my children, things that they are usually doing at kinder, I expose them to at home, which has been fun and new for all of us'.

Isolation

Overwhelmingly, people missed seeing family and friends. Enforced social isolation accompanied the early lockdowns across Australia; and during the prolonged Stage 4 lockdown in Melbourne travel was limited to five kilometres from home and regular face-to-face contact between family members was not possible. While Mary Rose missed family catch-ups, having not seen her mother and brother for most of the year, Ashlee commented on the difficulty of maintaining relationships when isolated:

Maintaining relationships is very hard, as everyone is under a lot of pressure and stress and virtual catch-ups require a level of structure and facilitating that can be really exhausting. Some of my friends are not coping at all, and want a lot of support which I am not always in a position to give.

Petra missed the support of grandparents who played an important role in regular childcare arrangements.

The biggest difference has been the social restrictions. I have found these to be very difficult. Our son is nearly 12 months old, and previous to COVID-19 I was very reliant and enjoyed having lots of support from his grandparents, aunts and from my friends. Now that we can't visit these people, I do feel quite isolated at home with most of the childcare duties falling onto me unsupported.

Some respondents missed the funerals of close family members and friends. Others, like Ian who was living interstate, were concerned about ill and frail relatives:

A lot of my friends and family are in locations that have been more adversely affected by the pandemic. Some of my family are in not very good health and so that has led to concerns about their wellbeing ... being so far away has meant I haven't been able to provide that immediate support that I would have been able to give in other situations.

Several respondents had young babies. The birth of a baby is usually the occasion for family gatherings and providing support to the new parents. However, Alexa found parenting a newborn in the pandemic was an isolating experience:

I had a newborn baby during COVID and it has been difficult to get help or for family and friends to visit. It has been a much more isolated experience and majority of my family and friends have not met my daughter which is upsetting. Being at home day in and day out since my pregnancy, then birth and now looking after my daughter is disheartening.

Nevertheless, she saw 'the positives', including having her husband at home, being able to establish some sort of routine and spending time together.

Like Alexa, most respondents tried to see the bright side of things, even when times were hard. For example, Jacob, who lives in Melbourne, missed family in regional Victoria, but explained:

It's really tough and I miss them quite a bit. On the flip side, it's really made me appreciate just how much I love them and value their company, and I can honestly say I'll never take advantage of it again.

Discussion

For thirty years, the Life Chances Study has provided insights into the nature of advantage and disadvantage. The young women and men in this study have lived in an increasingly financialised environment. Many have experienced several years of unstable employment; others have only recently gained regular and satisfactory employment. Now, as they enter their thirties, they are experiencing economic insecurity, health impacts and uncertainty about life following the pandemic.

The impacts of COVID-19 have been uneven: those hardest hit had precarious employment arrangements. While JobKeeper helped, there is great uncertainty about what will happen when this subsidy ends. The cuts to the JobKeeper rate have made things worse for those already struggling to make ends meet.

Similarly, for those 30-year-olds relying on JobSeeker Payment, insecurity and stress are compounded by uncertainty about when the Coronavirus Supplement will end or whether an increase to the underlying rate of JobSeeker Payment will be made.

Not surprisingly, some are reassessing their employment futures, and some are contemplating study options at a time when the costs of tertiary education in the humanities are becoming prohibitive.

For many of the study respondents, who are still renting or sharing accommodation, the hope of home ownership is evaporating as they try to build some sort of economic security.

Furthermore, having early access to superannuation or drawing on savings helped to make ends meet in the short term, but undermined future economic security—especially for women, who on average have much lower superannuation balances than men.

Temporary social security measures have helped, but in the absence of a longer-term plan they exacerbate uncertainty. Pervasive insecurity undermines the ability to plan and invest—and this not only affects individuals but exacerbates community inequalities which, in turn, affect all of us.

Next steps

The widespread anxiety about the future highlights the need for longer term plans, beyond the temporary measures that were introduced as part of the response to the pandemic.

The lockdowns and restrictions associated with COVID 19 have created setbacks for many people. The long-term economic impacts are unclear, with a risk that they will exacerbate pre-existing trends, including the rise of insecure work and the loosening of the link between education and work. And this is why we need a bold and ambitious plan for the future.

Investment is needed in social infrastructure, including:

- decent flexible work that enables women and men to balance work with other aspects of life
- job creation and more equitable employment arrangements in the sectors—often feminised—that require strengthening or stimulus – hospitality, aged care, child care, disability services, the arts
- affordable quality education to enable women and men to learn new skills and adapt to changing circumstances
- a fair social security system based on the principles of adequacy, dignity and autonomy, equity, accountability and solidarity, to support anyone who falls on hard times, and all of us as we move in and out of work across the life course
- affordable mental health support.

Investment is also needed to address climate change and increase our ability to adapt and respond to future crises.

References

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2020a, *Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey: insights into the prevalence and nature of impacts from COVID-19 on households in Australia*, Cat. no. 4940.0, viewed 16 November 2020, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

—2020b, *Labour force, Australia, September 2020*, Cat. no. 6202.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

Allan, M, Bowman, D & Levin, I 2019, *Getting to work? Insights about the transition from education to employment from the Life Chances study, Stage 11*, Brotherhood of St. Laurence, Fitzroy, Vic.

Botha, F, de New, JP, de New, SC, Ribar, DC & Salamanca, N 2020, *COVID-19 Labour market shocks and their inequality implications for financial wellbeing*, Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, 2020-20, Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, [Indooroopilly, Qld].

Braun, V, Clarke, V, Boulton, C, Davey, L & McEvoy, C 2020, 'The online survey as a qualitative research tool', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*. Published online 16 August. DOI: 10.1080/13645579.2020.1805550.

Burke, T, Nygaard, C & Ralston, L 2020, *Australian home ownership: past reflections, future directions*, Final report 328, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne.

Edwards, R 2017, 'Are you having a mid-life crisis? How the stress kicks in when you turn 30', *Metro*, 3 April.

Hall, A 2017, 'Trends in home ownership in Australia: a quick guide', Research paper series 2016–17, Parliamentary Library, Canberra.

Hand, K, Baxter, J, Carroll, M & Budinski, M 2020, *Families in Australia Survey Life During COVID-19 Report No. 1: early findings*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Panchal, S & Jackson, E 2007, 'Turning 30' transitions: generation Y hits quarter-life', *The Coaching Psychologist*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp.46-51.

Productivity Commission 2020, *Why did young people's incomes decline?*, Research paper, Productivity Commission, Canberra.

Victorian Health Promotion Foundation 2020, *VicHealth Coronavirus Victorian Wellbeing Impact Study*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne.

Whiteford, P 2017, 'Note to Centrelink: Australian workers' lives have changed', *The Conversation*, 11 January.

Acknowledgements

Our deep appreciation to the Life Chances Study participants who generously shared their experiences on the impacts of COVID-19 on their lives.

Funding for the Life Chances Study has been received from diverse government and charitable sources over its 3- year duration. Recent stages have received funding through the Prue Myer Fund.

This Insight Report forms part of a larger Stage 12 study of the young adults' economic security, to be published in 2021.

Published in December 2020
by Brotherhood of St. Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065
Australia
ABN 24 603 467 024
ARBN 100 042 822
Phone: (03) 9483 1183
Web: www.bsl.org.au



**Brotherhood
of St. Laurence**

Working for an Australia free of poverty