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Tracking wellbeing outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic (August 2021): Lockdown blues

ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to summarise economic and social wellbeing data from the August 2021 ANUpoll, the eighth in the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods Impact Monitoring Survey program. Since April 2021 there have been declines in life satisfaction, worsening in psychological distress and an increase in loneliness across Australia. The worsening of outcomes has been greater in New South Wales, and particularly Sydney.

At the national level there was little change in average hours worked between April 2021 and August 2021 and there was an increase in average household income. The positive economic outcomes between April and August 2021 measured at the national level were not consistent across Australia with a large decline in hours worked in Sydney, with the rest of Australia having better economic outcomes in August 2021 than they did in April 2021.

Australians are less likely to be satisfied with the direction of the country than at any time during the pandemic. They are also less confident in the Federal government and State/Territory governments. Australians are more likely to think that their life had gotten worse, were more likely to say that they felt more negative about the future than they were in May 2020, were more stressed, and more likely to say that the relationships had become more difficult/strained.

Executive summary

This paper provides a summary of economic and social wellbeing data from the August 2021 ANUpoll, the eighth in the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods Impact Monitoring Survey program. At the time of the data collection New South Wales and Victoria – as well as Canberra, the nation’s capital – were under severe lockdown conditions.

COVID-specific measures

- There has been a large increase in anxiety and worry due to COVID-19 between April and August 2021, from 49.8 per cent to 60.9 per cent. The increase in New South Wales was from 50.7 per cent to 67.9 per cent, the largest increase amongst the states and territories.
- Between April and August 2021 the proportion of Australians who think it is likely that they will be infected by COVID-19 in the next 6-months roughly tripled from 10.7 to 30.8 per cent.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders appear to have experienced a particularly large increase in their fear of infection with the proportion who expected to be infected in the next 6-months increasing from 12.0 per cent to 45.8 per cent. There is a very concerning public health challenge occurring in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban areas

Wellbeing and mental health

- Life satisfaction declined substantially since April 2021, and in August 2021 it had fallen to similar low rates of life satisfaction observed at the peak of the first wave of COVID-19 in Australia in April 2020. Older Australians, and those who live outside of New South Wales and Victoria had far smaller declines in life satisfaction compared to the rest of the country.
 - The drop in life satisfaction from an average of 6.87 to 6.52 between April and August 2021 is equivalent to a drop of income of \$827 per week for the average household.
- The average level of psychological distress (measured using the Kessler-6) increased from 11.06 to 11.29 between April and August 2020.
 - The worsening in psychological distress between April and August was greater for women compared to men.
 - The average level of psychological distress in August 2021 was lower than that experienced from April through to October 2020 (and not statistically different from pre-COVID levels). Psychological distress in August 2021 was still higher for younger Australians than it was in February 2017, but had improved for older Australians compared to pre-COVID levels.
- There was only a small increase in the proportion of Australians who reported they were lonely at least some of the time since April 2021 (from 35.5 per cent to 37.6 per cent).
 - For Sydneysiders the increase was from 35.3 per cent to 44.3 per cent, with the rest of Australia essentially staying constant (at 34.0 per cent in April compared to 34.6 per cent in August).
 - Given Sydney had been experiencing the longest lockdown of all of Australia at the time of the survey, this confirms the effect of lockdown restrictions on loneliness.

Economic outcomes

- Average hours worked in August 2021 was almost exactly the same as it was in April 2021 (20.61 hours). Average household income had actually increased nationally over the period (statistically and substantially), from \$1,635 to \$1,665. At the national level, up until mid-August 2021, the economic impact of the most recent wave of infection has been minimal.
- There were, however, substantial employment impacts for individuals in Sydney. In April 2021, 67.6 per cent of the Sydney sample were employed, declining to 65.2 per cent in August. Hours

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worked declined from 25.14 hours to 23.14 hours in Sydney, with a small increase for the rest of Australia (from 18.79 hours to 19.21 hours).

- While employment and hours worked stayed reasonably stable nationally, between April and August 2021 there was a very large increase in the population who said that in the last week one of their activities was ‘Doing housework, looking after children or other persons.’ This increased from 46.0 per cent in April 2021 to 55.4 per cent in August 2021.
 - Those who reported a caring activity in August 2021 but not April 2021 had a very large increase in psychological distress, particularly for employed women.

Views on government and the direction of the country

- Confidence in government has declined since April 2021, but confidence in other institutions has remained reasonably high, and if anything, has increased. In August 2021, 40.6 per cent of Australians reported that they had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal Government in Canberra. This is a significant decline from the 45.4 per cent who expressed confidence in the Federal Government in April 2021, and well below the peak during the COVID-19 period of 60.6 per cent, observed in May 2020.
- There was a large decline in confidence in State/Territory governments nationally, from 67.2 per cent who expressed confidence in April 2021 to 62.1 per cent in August 2021.
 - Those who did not live in New South Wales had almost exactly the same level of confidence in August 2021 as they did in April 2021 (66.6 and 66.8 per cent respectively expressing confidence). For those in New South Wales, however, the proportion expressing confidence declined from 68.2 per cent to 52.6 per cent.
- There was a significant and substantial decline in satisfaction with the direction of the country between April and August 2021. In August 2021, 64.0 per cent of Australians were either satisfied or very satisfied with the direction of the country. The level of satisfaction is lower than at any time during the COVID-19 pandemic, and has returned to the level observed in October 2019, and is only just above the level observed during the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires (January 2020).
 - The vaccine policy and roll-out seems to be one of the causes of this decline in satisfaction. There has been a significant and substantial decline in this proportion who thought that vaccine roll-out was very fair since April 2021 (from 32.4 per cent to 19.6 per cent).

Views on their own lives

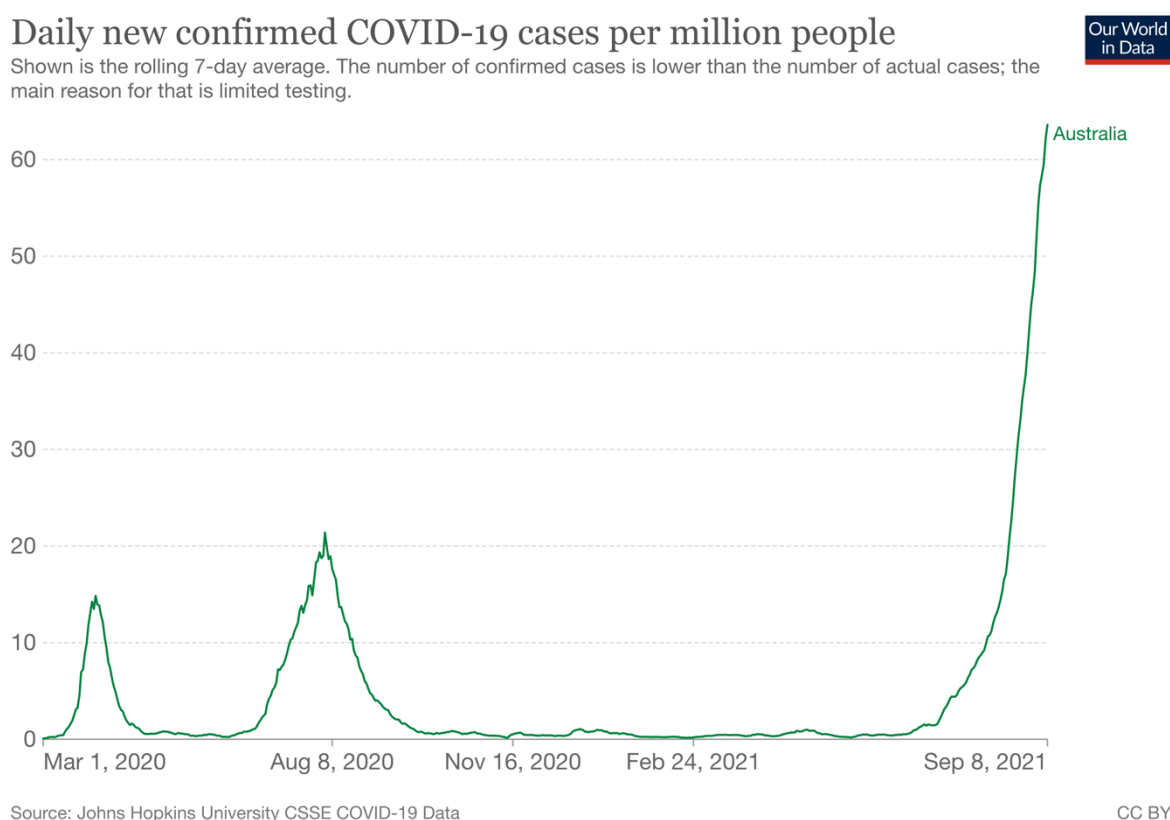
- When respondents were asked to reflect on their own lives, things seem to have worsened since May 2020. In May 2020 roughly half of the Australians thought their life had gotten worse (51.3 per cent), including 6.5 per cent who thought it had gotten much worse. By August 2021, almost two-thirds of Australians thought their life had gotten worse (65.7 per cent) including 17.0 per cent who thought it had gotten much worse.
 - Respondents in August 2021 were also more likely to say that they felt more negative about the future than they were in May 2020 (56.1 per cent in August 2021 compared to 39.9 per cent in May 2020).
 - There was a small but statistically significant increase in the proportion of Australians who felt a little more stressed – from 47.0 per cent in May 2020 to 55.1 per cent in August 2021.
 - In May 2020, there were slightly more people who said that their relationships had gotten closer/stronger (27.9 per cent) than those who said it got more difficult/strained (17.5 per cent). This was reversed in August 2021 with 22.3 per cent of Australians saying that their relationships became closer/stronger and 27.3 per cent saying it got more difficult/strained.

1 Introduction and overview

A lot can change in four months. In the report summarising results from the April 2021 ANUpoll (Biddle and Gray 2021), we concluded that ‘There is a continued recovery in economic, social and health outcomes of the Australian population. It is a story of remarkable resilience.’ At the time of writing that report, a travel bubble had just been opened up between Australia and New Zealand, infection rates were at zero or very close to zero in all states and territories, and the Australian economy (as measured by Gross Domestic Product) was greater than it was pre-COVID.

Now, as we write up the results from the August 2021 ANUpoll, the eighth wave of the ANU’s COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey Program, COVID-19 infection rates are higher than they have ever been, even since the pandemic began (Figure 1), Australia may be in the middle of a double-dip recession, and international borders have effectively been shut.

Figure 1 Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people, March 2020 to September 2021



In order to bring these case numbers under control, Australia’s two largest states – New South Wales and Victoria – as well as Canberra, the nation’s capital, have implemented severe lockdown conditions. Other jurisdictions have closed their borders to these states and territories, making travel across jurisdictions within Australia virtually impossible for a very large proportion of Australians.

The Oxford-Stringency index, a composite measure based on restrictions like school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans (measured on a scale of 0 to 100) was at 71.76, similar to Canada but well above the US, the UK and Japan. An even greater difference has emerged with some parts of continental Europe, with Denmark ascribed a value of 29.63 with virtually no

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internal restrictions. Amongst culturally and economically similar countries, only New Zealand, with a value of 96.30, was well above Australia.

The question considered in this paper is to what extent has this very geographically specific increase in infections (relative to Australia's previous success) and dramatic increase in restrictions impacted on social, health, economic, and other wellbeing outcomes. A secondary question is whether any impacts have been concentrated on particular regions or population groups.

The analysis is based on the August 2021 wave of the ANUpoll series of surveys, which form part of the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods' COVID-19 Impact Monitoring survey program. Respondents are taken from the Life in Australia™ panel, Australia's only probability-based source of online and offline survey participants.

The August 2021 ANU COVID-19 impact monitoring survey collected data from 3,135 Australians aged 18 years and over. The data collection occurred between the 10th and the 23rd of August 2021 with 51.5 per cent of the eventual sample completing the survey on the 11th or 12th of August. The vast majority (95.9 per cent) of interviews were completed online with 4.1 per cent being completed over the phone. More detail on the survey is available in Appendix 1), and the survey data is available for download through the Australian Data Archive (doi:10.80408/H6AQQE).

Surveys had also been conducted with the same group of respondents in January and February 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic started in Australia; as well as in April, May, August, October, and November 2020 after the pandemic started to cause major impacts in Australia as well as during and just after the second wave of infections that were concentrated on Victoria. In 2021, data was collected in January and April, which combined allows us to track how outcomes have changed for the same group of individuals from just prior to COVID-19 impacting Australia, as well as during the most impactful times for the country.

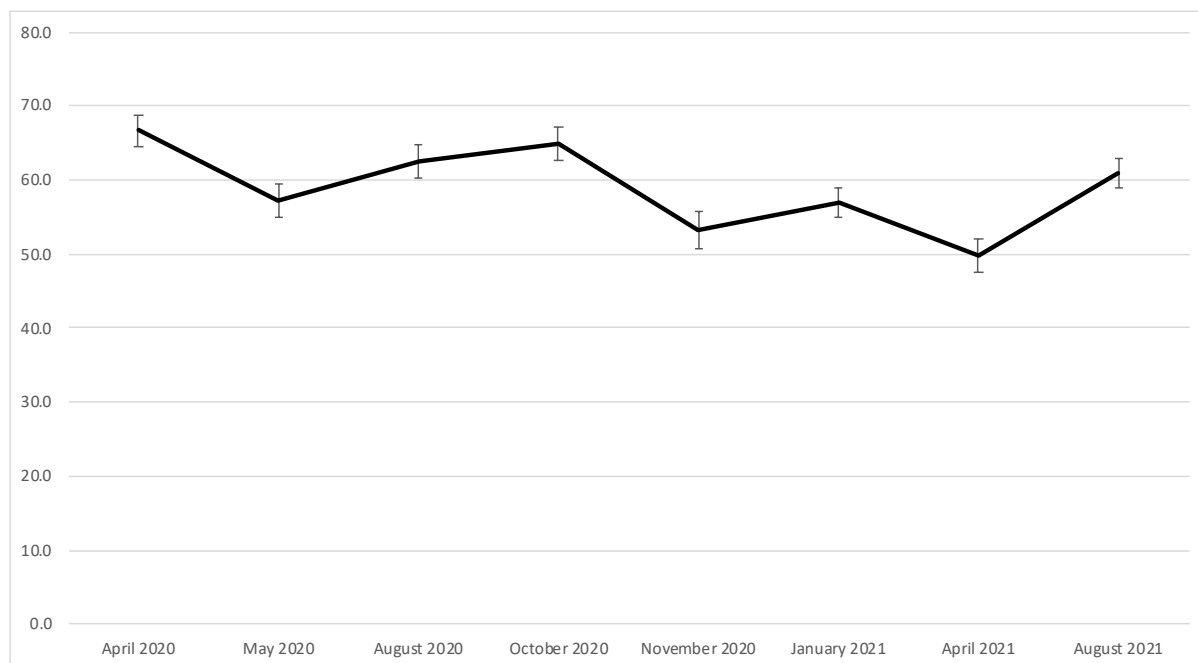
The structure of the remainder of the paper is as follows. In the next section we discuss two COVID-19 specific measures – anxiety and worry, and fear of infections. In Section 3 we focus on wellbeing outcomes, including life satisfaction, psychological distress, and loneliness. In Section 4 we consider measures focused on economic and other activities, whereas in Section 5 we discuss political and other attitudes. In the final section of results (Section 6) we turn to respondents' own views on whether their life has gotten worse or improved (across a range of domains) and in Section 7 we provide some concluding comments.

2 COVID-19 specific measures

2.1 Anxiety and worry about COVID-19 and how likely to become infected with COVID

A key measure of the general experience of the COVID-19 period is people's level of anxiety and worry due to the virus. There has been a very large increase (Figure 2) in the proportion of Australians who report that they were anxious or worried due to COVID-19 between April and August 2021, from 49.8 per cent (the lowest recorded during the pandemic) to 60.9 per cent (the highest recorded since October 2020).

Figure 2 Per cent of Australians reporting anxiety and worry due to COVID-19, April 2020 to August 2021



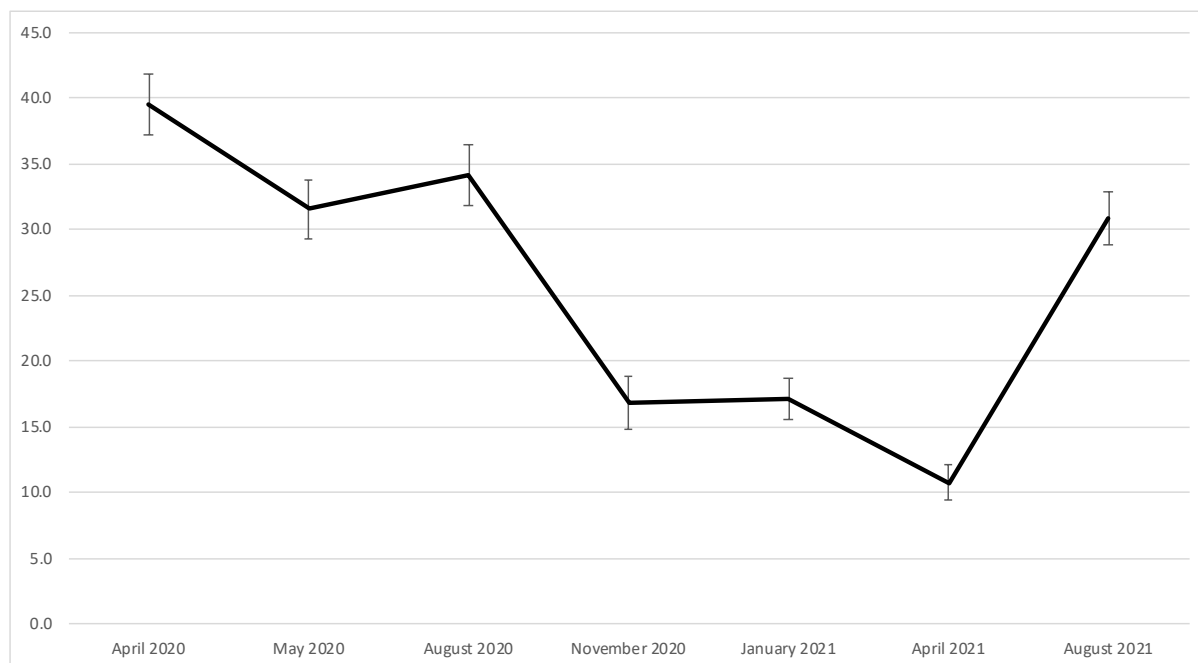
Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: April, May, August, October, and November 2021; and January, April, and August 2021

There were large differences between states and territories in the extent to which anxiety and worry due to COVID-19 changed between April and August 2021. The increase in the proportion of the population reporting anxiety and worry due to COVID-19 increased by the most in New South Wales from 50.7 per cent to 67.9 per cent.¹ This compared to an increase from 48.5 per cent to 56.0 per cent amongst people living in states and territories other than New South Wales.

Not surprisingly, people are becoming more anxious and worried due to an increase in the fear of infection, as Australia’s case numbers continued to increase throughout August. Specifically, there has been an almost tripling in the proportion of Australians who think it is likely that they will be infected by COVID-19 in the next 6 months (Figure 3) – from 10.7 per cent in April to 30.8 per cent in August 2021. While the level of fear of infection was still below the peak observed in April 2020 (39.5 per cent), there is no statistically significant difference in fear of infection between August 2021 and May and August 2020.

Figure 3 Per cent of Australians who thought it was likely or very likely that they would be infected buy COVID-19 in the next six months, April 2020 to August 2021



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: April, May, August, and November 2021; and January, April, and August 2021.

One of the population groups that appear to have experienced a particularly large increase in fear of infection between April and August 2021 is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. One of the relative successes within Australia during the first waves of infection was the protection of Indigenous communities from COVID-19 infection, with a particularly important role played by Aboriginal health services (Finlay and Wenitong 2020). During the most recent and ongoing wave of infections (which coincided with the August 2021 ANUpoll) this has not been the case, with a number of recent deaths of Aboriginal Australians in New South Wales in particular.²

Although the sample of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in ANUpoll is relatively small, the increase in fear of infection for that group was significantly, and substantially higher than for the non-Indigenous population. Specifically, within the linked sample, the per cent who expected to be infected increased from 12.0 per cent to 45.8 per cent between April and August 2021, compared to an increase from 10.5 to 30.7 per cent for the rest of the population. This reflects a very concerning public health challenge occurring in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in urban areas.

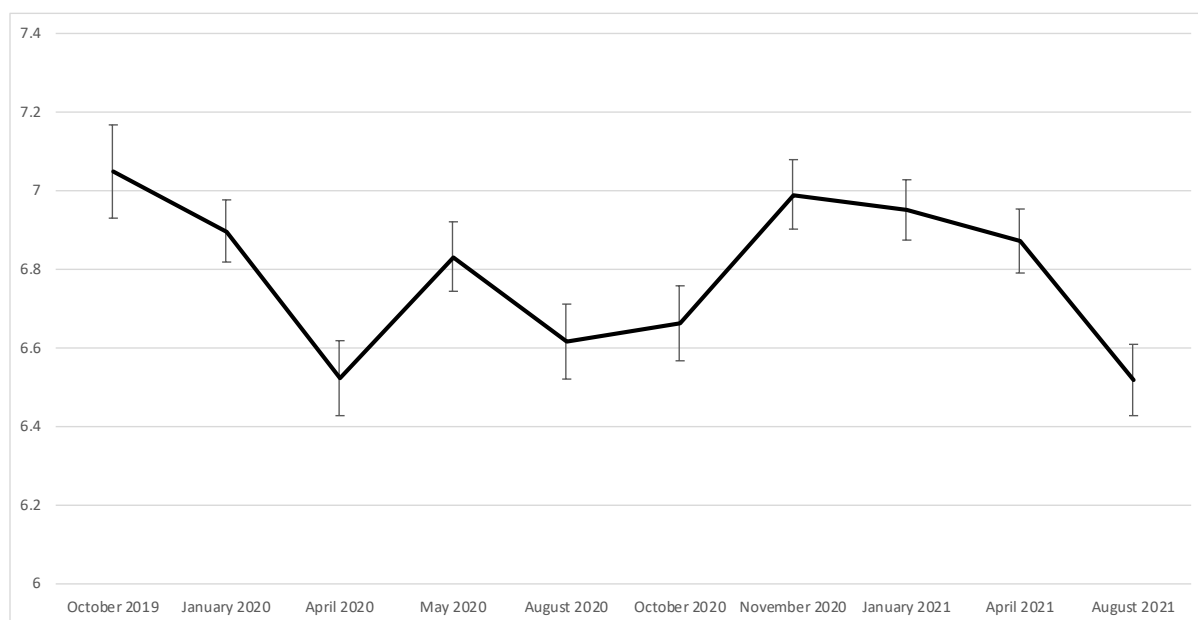
There was also a much larger increase in the fear of infection between April and August 2021 for New South Wales (8.6 to 40.6 per cent) compared to the rest of Australia (11.5 to 26.5 per cent). Around two-in-five residents of Australia’s largest state think it is likely that they will get infected in the next 6 months, despite New South Wales having the highest vaccination rate across Australia at that time (Biddle et al. 2021).

3 Mental health and wellbeing

3.1 Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction in Australia in August 2021 is very similar and not statistically different from life satisfaction at the peak of the first wave of COVID-19 in Australia in April 2020, and is lower than pre-covid levels and all other time points measured by ANUPoll (Figure 4). Each of the eight ANU COVID-19 Impact Monitoring surveys has asked respondents ‘The following question asks how satisfied you feel about life in general, on a scale from 0 to 10. Zero means you feel ‘not at all satisfied’ and 10 means ‘completely satisfied’. Overall, how satisfied are you with life as a whole these days?’ The average value in August 2021 was 6.52, far lower than the pre-COVID peak (in October 2019) of 7.05 (Figure 4). This is approximately one-fifth of a standard deviation lower than the April 2021 average (6.87), with a slight increase as well in the standard deviation or variation in life satisfaction across the population (from 1.80 to 2.08).

Figure 4 Life satisfaction in Australia, October 2019 to August 2021



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: October 2019; January, April, May, August, October, and November 2020; and January, April, and August 2021.

It is very hard to appreciate the scale of such a decline in life satisfaction using such an abstract metric. One way to help understand the scale is to convert the decline into income equivalents. In April 2021, when infection rates were low and life satisfaction was close to pre-pandemic highs, there was a strong relationship between life satisfaction and household income.³ Based on this relationship, a life satisfaction value of 6.87 was equivalent to an income of for a household of \$1,262 per week. A life satisfaction value of 6.52, on the other hand, was equivalent to an income of \$435 per week. That is, the decline in life satisfaction observed between April and August 2021 is equivalent to a drop of income of \$827 per week for the average household.

Not everyone in Australia experienced the same decline in life satisfaction over the period, however. We model the change in life satisfaction using a linear model, controlling for life satisfaction in April 2021 (Table 1). The two strongest determinants were age and location.

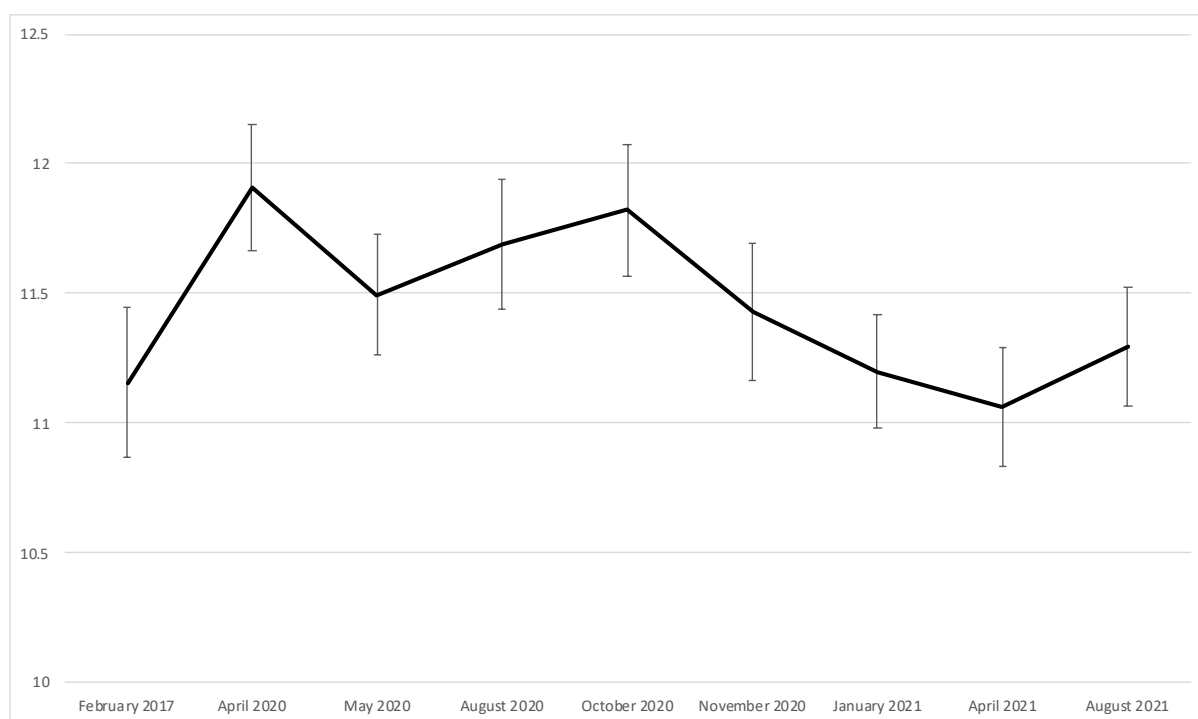
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Holding constant other characteristics (including life satisfaction in April), life satisfaction was 0.25 higher for someone aged 55 to 64 years compared to someone aged 35 to 44 (the base case), whereas for those aged 65 to 74 and 75 plus it was 0.51 and 0.60 higher respectively. Geographically, the differences seem to be between New South Wales and Victoria and the rest of the country. Compared to someone who lives in Sydney (the base case), life satisfaction was 0.46 higher in August for someone who lived in a non-capital city outside of those two states, and 0.50 higher for someone who lived in another capital city apart from Sydney and Melbourne.

3.2 Mental health

The decline in psychological stress in Australia that had been observed from October 2020 to April 2021 appears to have been halted by the most recent outbreak and associated lockdowns. However, despite the worsening in life satisfaction between April and August 2021, the increase in the level of psychological distress has not seen a return to the levels experienced early in the pandemic. Using the Kessler-6 scale, average values increased from 11.06 to 11.29 (a worsening in mental health), with the difference statistically significant at the 5 per cent level of significance (Figure 4). Psychological distress was still lower, however, than that observed from April through to October 2020, and not significantly different from our pre-COVID baseline (February 2017).

Figure 4 Psychological distress in Australia, February 2017 to August 2021



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: Life in Australia, February 2017. ANUpoll: April, May, August, October, and November 2020; and January, April, and August 2021

There was no statistically significant change in the proportion of Australians who had levels of psychological distress that would identify them as being at risk of a serious mental health issue (10.1 per cent in August 2021 compared to 9.7 per cent in April). Levels were, however, significantly and substantially above those observed in February 2017 (8.4 per cent).

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Controlling for psychological distress in April 2021, the worsening in psychological distress was greater for women compared to men (Table 1). Specifically, for a woman with otherwise identical characteristics, including the K-6 measure in April 2021, psychological distress was 0.47 higher than for a man.

Unlike in previous waves, and with life satisfaction, the worsening does not appear to have been any different across the age distribution, with those ages 75 years and over the one potential exception (though the p-value is 0.115, so the difference may be due to random variation). Taking a longer perspective though, psychological distress in August 2021 was still higher for younger Australians (aged 18 to 44 years) than it was in February 2017, but had improved for older Australians (55 years and over) compared to pre-COVID levels.

There were differences in the change in psychological distress by geography. Those who live outside of Sydney and Melbourne tended to have had less of a worsening in mental health outcomes compared to those who live in our two largest cities.

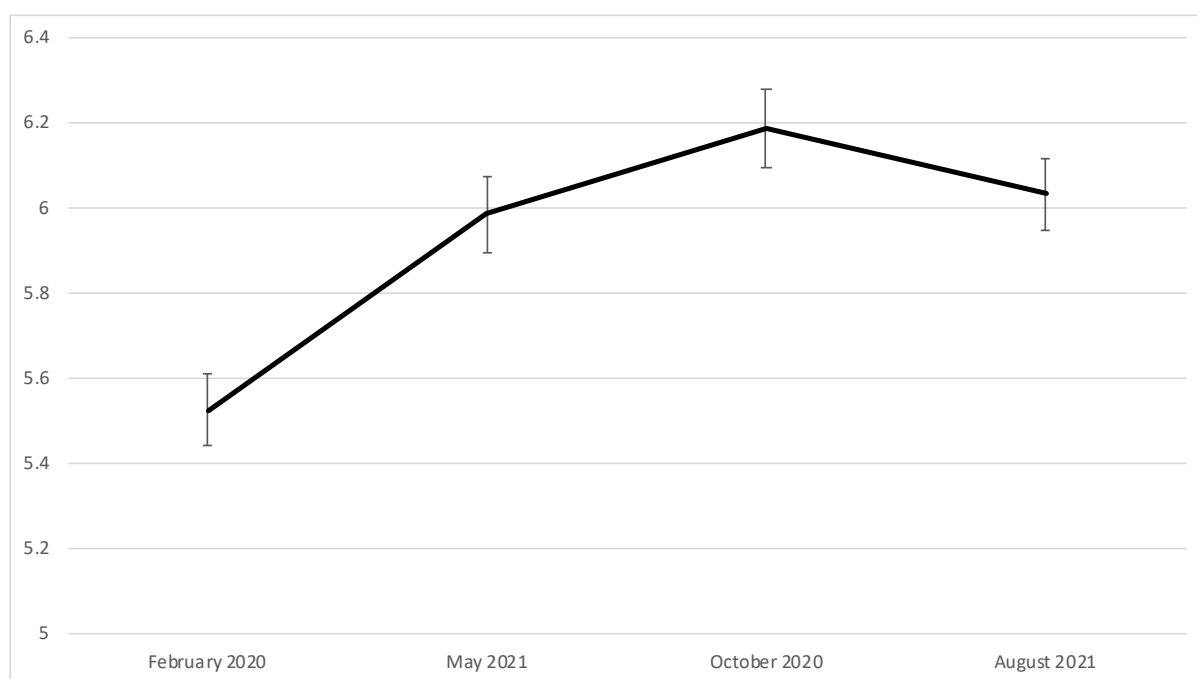
3.3 Loneliness and social cohesion

Although it is not part of the Kessler-6 measure of mental health, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic we have been asking respondents 'In the past week, how often have you felt lonely?' Nationally, there was only a small increase in the proportion of Australians who reported they were lonely at least some of the time since April 2021 (from 35.5 per cent to 37.6 per cent). However, for Sydneysiders the increase was from 35.3 per cent to 44.3 per cent, with the rest of Australia essentially staying constant (at 34.0 per cent in April compared to 34.6 per cent in August). Given Sydney had been experiencing the current lockdown for the longest amount of time at the time of the survey (though not over the entirety of the pandemic), these results confirm the effect of lockdown restrictions on loneliness.

In February (pre-COVID), May and October 2020, respondents were asked three questions related to social cohesion. These were repeated in August 2021 as follows: 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?'; 'Do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?'; and 'Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful or that they are mostly looking out for themselves?'. All three questions were answered on a scale of 0 to 10. As they were on the same scale, they were combined and then averaged to give a perceived social cohesion score on a scale of 0 to 10.

After a significant improvement in social cohesion between February and May 2020, and then another increase between May and October, there was a slight but not statistically significant decline in perceived social cohesion between October 2020 and August 2021 (Figure 5) with perceived social cohesion significantly and substantially above what it was pre-COVID.

Figure 5 Perceived social cohesion in Australia, February 2020 to August 2021



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: Life in Australia, February 2020. ANUpoll: May, and October, 2020; and August 2021.

4 Employment and other activities

One of the more remarkable things about the COVID-19 period in Australia had been the rapid economic recovery since the initial very steep decline in employment and economic activity. Many comparable countries had regained some of the economic activity that had been lost. However, Australia was amongst a much smaller number that had a higher level of economic activity, and a higher level of aggregate employment in early 2021 than in early 2020. There is no doubt that this recovery was supported by extremely large amounts of economic stimulus provided by government. However, in a previous paper in this series (Biddle and Gray 2021) we showed that even after JobKeeper and the JobSeeker supplement had been removed (at the end of March 2021), employment and hours worked in Australia did not decline substantially between January and April 2021.

August 2021 coincided with the first major lockdown in Australia without JobKeeper in place. While there was a range of economic support packages made available for the affected areas, there has and will continue to be considerable uncertainty as to the economic impact of the wave of infections, and the associated public health measures.

Data from the August 2021 ANUpoll suggests that, at the national level, there has been minimal change in average hours worked between April 2021 and August 2021 with average hours worked in August 2021 being almost exactly the same as they were in April 2021 (20.61 hours per week compared to 20.59 hours per week). Average household income had actually increased nationally over the period (statistically and substantially), from \$1,635 to \$1,665. There were fewer Australians who felt that they weren’t able to make ends meet on their current income in August 2021 than there was in April 2021 (22.6 per cent in August 2021 compared to 23.2 per cent in April 2021), though this difference was not statistically significant. It would appear from the April and August ANUpoll data that the lockdown in Sydney had not

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impacted on the national economy by the middle of August.

There were, however, substantial employment impacts for Sydney when examined separately. In April 2021, 67.6 per cent of the (linked) Sydney sample were employed, declining to 65.2 per cent in August. Setting those who were not employed to zero hours, hours worked declined from 25.14 hours to 23.14 hours in Sydney, with a small increase for the rest of Australia (from 18.79 hours to 19.21 hours).

Potentially because of the stimulus payments provided during the lockdown, there does not appear in our data to have been a decline in income in Sydney though. Average income within our linked sample in Sydney increased from \$1,926 per week to \$1,981 per week. The change in income for the rest of Australia was of a similar scale (\$1,557 to \$1,606), albeit from a lower base. The proportion of Sydneysiders who were in financial stress (as measured by not being able to make ends meet on current income) also declined (from 22.6 per cent to 20.6 per cent), potentially because of the reduction in spending requirements during lockdown conditions.

While employment and hours worked stayed reasonably stable nationally, one of the more substantive changes between April and August 2021 was a very large increase in the Australian population who said that in the last week one of their activities was 'Doing housework, looking after children or other persons.' In April 2021, 46.0 per cent said that this was one of their activities, increasing to 55.4 per cent in August. There was an even greater increase in the proportion of people who said that these caring responsibilities was their main activity – 11.4 to 18.8 per cent.

The increase in the proportion reporting a caring role was much greater in Sydney (43.5 to 58.0 per cent) than it was in the rest of Australia (46.5 to 54.3 per cent). However, across all of Australia there was an increase in the proportion of people who reported caring activities. There was also an increase for both men and women, although the former started from a much lower base (from 35.6 per cent for men compared to 56.2 per cent for women) and increased by a slightly a larger amount (to 45.7 per cent for men and 64.1 per cent for women).

This observed increase in the proportion of Australians with a caring role is one of the potential reasons for the increase in psychological distress discussed in the previous section. For those who reported housework or caring either in both periods or in neither period, psychological distress essentially stayed static (an increase by 0.110 and 0.044 respectively). For the small proportion of people who stopped housework or caring the increase in psychological distress was moderate (0.133) and none of these three results were significantly different from zero. However, for those who changed to doing housework or caring over the period, the increase was very large (0.589) and statistically significant. Furthermore, this increase in psychological distress was particularly large for women who went from not caring to caring (1.034 for women compared to 0.232 men).

While the sample is quite small, there was a particularly large increase in psychological distress for those women who were employed in August 2021 and who went from not having caring responsibilities to having caring responsibilities (an increase of 1.44).

5 Confidence in institutions and views on policy

5.1 Confidence in institutions

Confidence in government has declined since August 2021, but confidence in other institutions has remained reasonably high and if anything has increased. In August 2021, 40.6 per cent of

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Australians reported that they had a great deal, or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal Government in Canberra (as opposed to the other two options: not very much confidence, or none at all). This is a significant decline from the 45.4 per cent who expressed confidence in the Federal Government in April 2021, and well below the peak during the COVID-19 period of 60.6 per cent, observed in May 2020 (Figure 6a). Confidence was still higher than the level observed in January 2020, at the height of the Black Summer bushfires.

There was also a large decline in confidence in State/Territory governments nationally, from 67.2 per cent in April 2021 to 62.1 per cent in August. This is the first time during the COVID-19 period where wave-to-wave change in confidence in State/Territory governments was outside the relevant confidence intervals (Figure 6b). Confidence in the public service (Figure 6c) stayed steady over the period though (62.3 per cent in August compared to 60.5 per cent in April 2021), with the most recent value not too far below the May 2021 peak (67.5 per cent). Confidence in the public service is still well above that observed prior to the pandemic.

Figure 6a Per cent of Australians who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the Federal Government in Canberra – January 2020 to August 2021

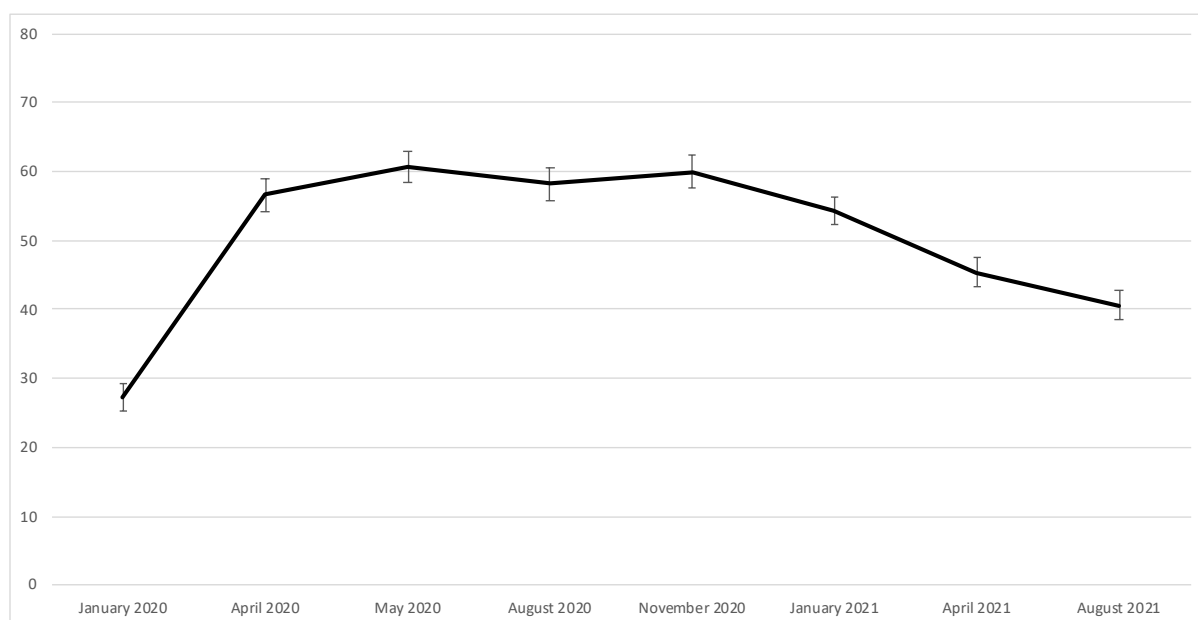


Figure 6b Per cent of Australians who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in State/Territory government in which a person lives – January 2020 to August 2021

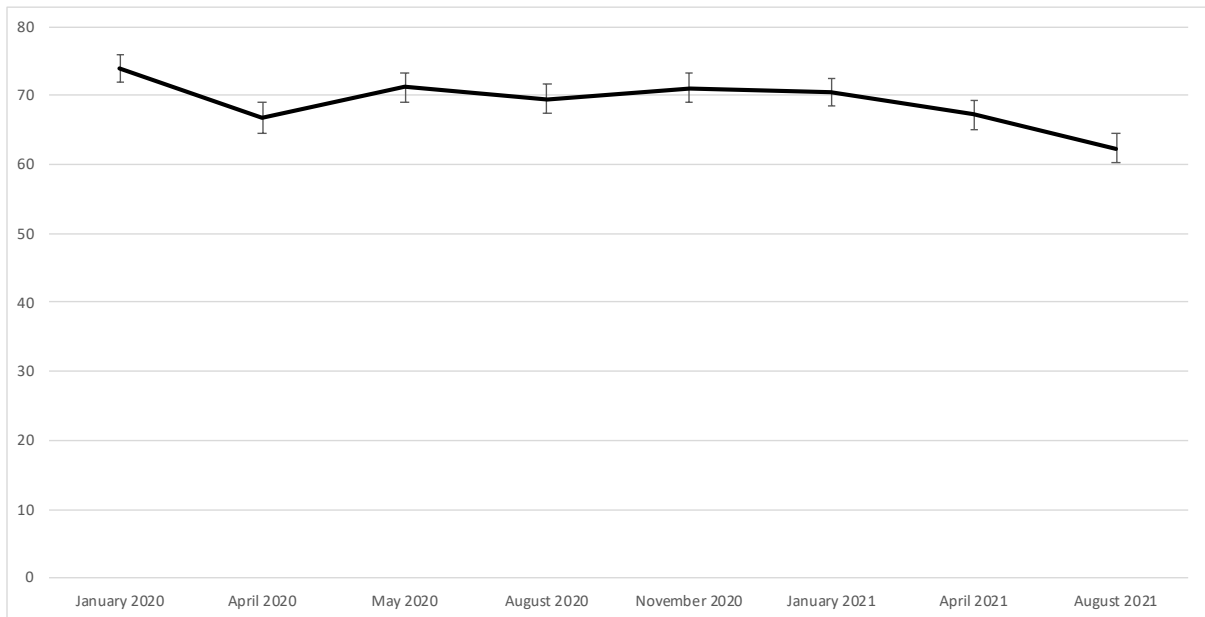
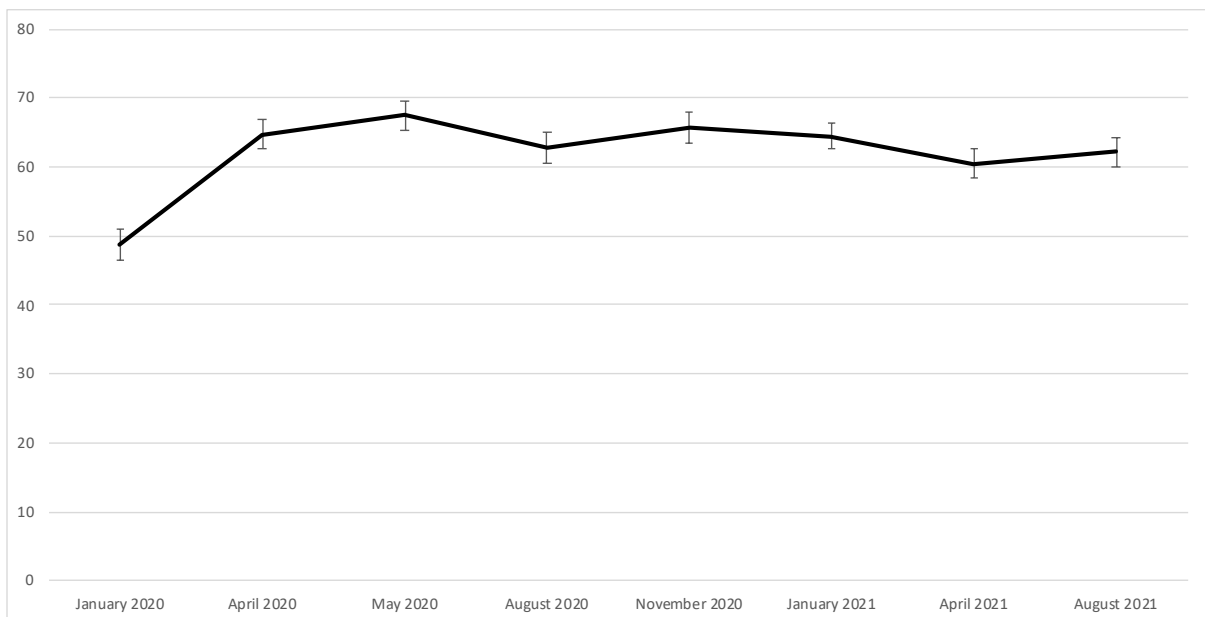


Figure 6c Per cent of Australians who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the public service – January 2020 to August 2021



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: January, April, May, August, October, and November 2020; and January, April, and August 2021.

There were increases in confidence in two other key institutions, particularly hospitals and the health system. In April 2021 77.0 per cent of Australians reported confidence in hospitals and the health system, increasing to 83.5 per cent in August 2021. Over the same period, there was a small, but not statistically significant increase in the proportion of Australians confident in police (from 75.4 per cent to 77.1 per cent).

Tracking wellbeing outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic (August 2021)

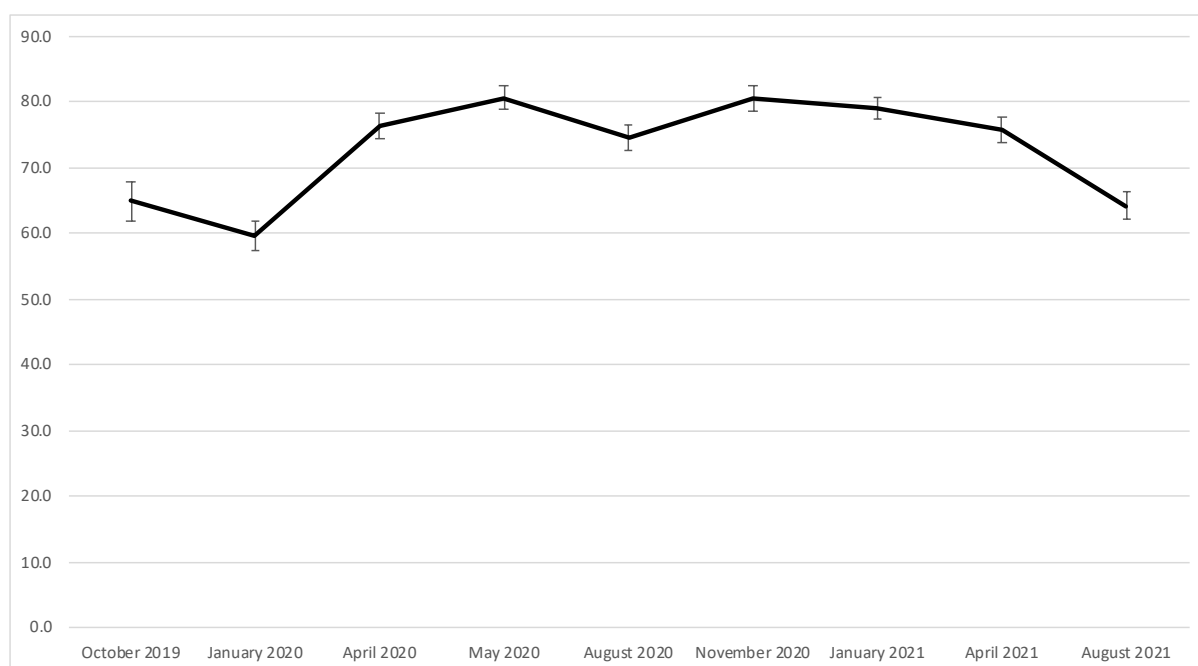
Perhaps not surprisingly, the greatest variation in change in confidence of State/Territory governments was by State/Territory of usual residence. Those who did not live in New South Wales had almost exactly the same level of confidence in August as they did in April 2021 (66.6/66.8 per cent). For those in New South Wales, however, confidence declined from 68.2 per cent to 52.6 per cent of the population.

5.2 Satisfaction with the direction of the country

Respondents were asked at the start of the August 2021 survey (and in every survey since October 2019) ‘Firstly, a general question about your views on living in Australia. All things considered, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way the country is heading?’ Combining those who were satisfied or very satisfied, there was a significant and substantial decline in satisfaction between April and August 2021 (Figure 7).

In August 2021, 64.0 per cent of Australians were either satisfied (51.1 per cent) or very satisfied (12.9 per cent) with the direction of the country. The level of satisfaction is lower than at any time during the COVID-19 pandemic, and has returned to the level observed in October 2019, and is only just above the level observed during the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires (January 2020). The peak level of satisfaction occurred in May 2020 and November 2020 (both a little above 80 per cent), when the first and second waves of infections in Australia appeared to have been brought under control.

Figure 7 Per cent of Australians who were satisfied or very satisfied with the direction of the country – October 2019 to August 2021.



Note: The “whiskers” on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll: January, April, May, August, October, and November 2020; and January, April, and August 2021.

5.3 Views on the vaccine roll-out

In August 2021, like in April, we asked all respondents in the sample ‘Do you think the process for individuals getting COVID-19 vaccines in Australia is going...?’ with half of the sample

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randomly assigned to response options on fairness and the other half assigned to response options related to whether the roll-out was going well.

Those who were asked about whether the roll-out was going well gave very similar results to the sample who was asked the same question in April (Figure 8a). Specifically, only a very small proportion of Australians thought the roll-out was going very well (3.1 per cent in August 2021) and a steady but low percentage of people thought that the rollout was going somewhat well (32.1 per cent). A far higher percentage of people thought the roll-out was going 'not too well' (43.0 per cent) with the remaining 21.9 per cent thinking it was going 'not at all well'.

There was a higher proportion of Australians who thought the roll-out was very fair (19.6 per cent) compared to those who thought it was going very well. However, there has been a significant and substantial decline in this proportion since April 2021 (when 32.4 per cent thought the roll-out was very fair). There has also been a decline in the proportion of Australians who thought the roll-out was somewhat fair (from 53.3 per cent to 47.0 per cent). At the other end of the distribution, there has been a quadrupling in the proportion of Australians who thought the roll out was not at all fair (from 3.2 per cent to 12.9 per cent) and an almost doubling in the proportion of Australians who thought the roll-out was 'not too fair'.

Figure 8a Views on whether vaccine roll-out in Australia is going well, April and August 2021

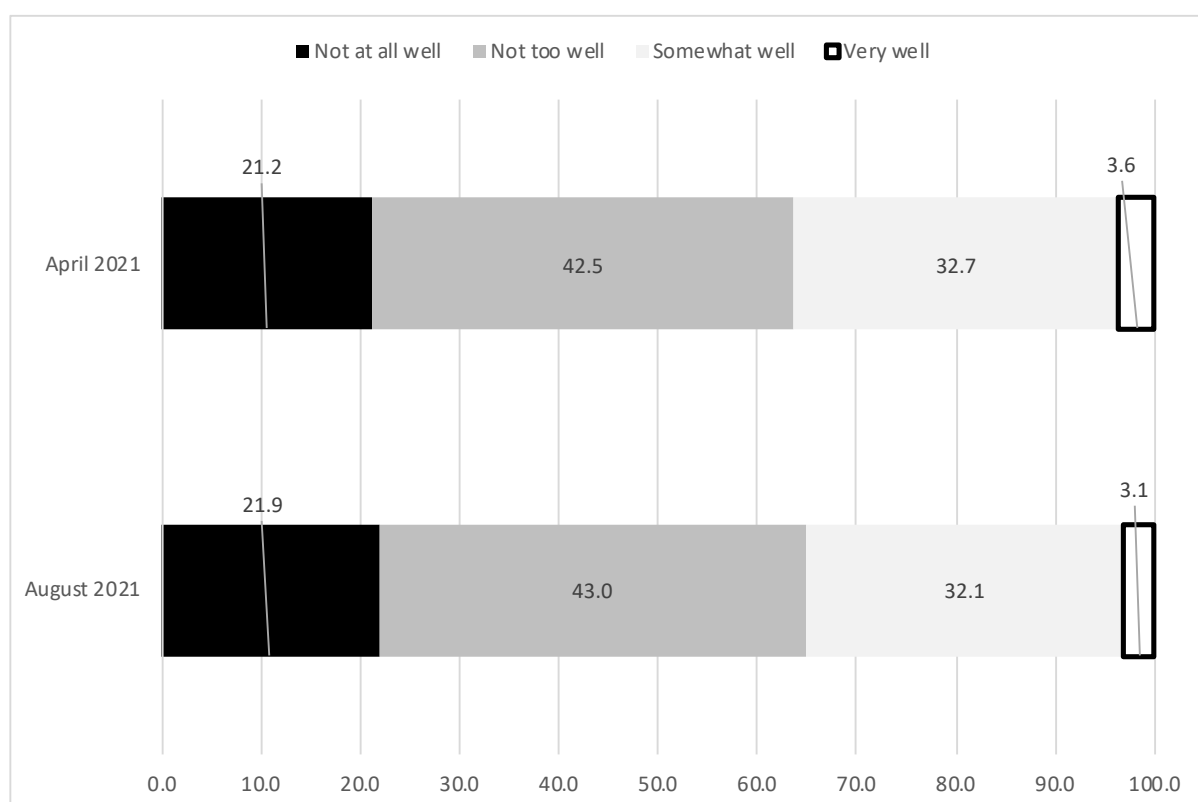
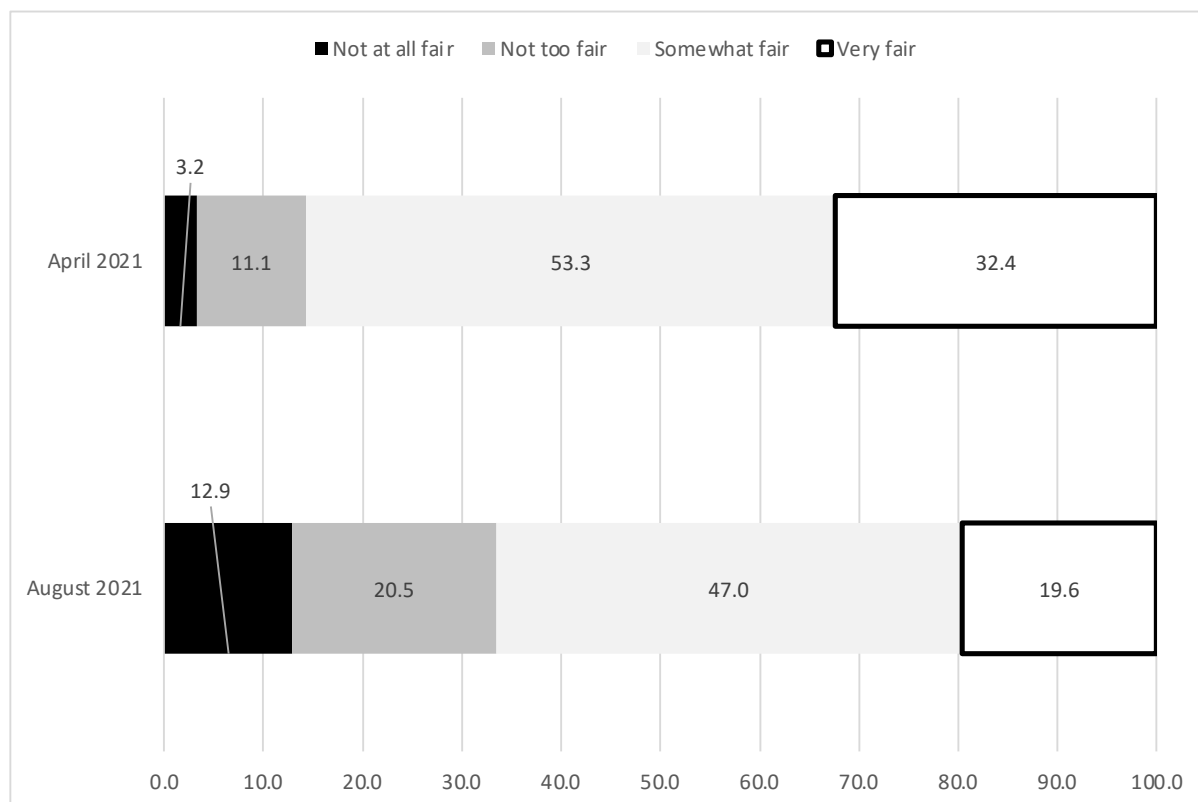


Figure 8b Views on whether vaccine roll-out in Australia is going fairly, April and August 2021



Source: ANUpoll: April and August 2021.

6 Individual reflections on the impact of COVID-19

There are two ways in which we capture the impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing outcomes in the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring surveys. As summarised in previous sections, we can apply econometric models and descriptive analysis to the longitudinal data, analysing change through times in outcomes for individuals, and what predicts that change. The benefit of that approach is that change is estimated without recall bias, as people can have quite distorted reflections about their prior levels of wellbeing (Kruijshaar 2005). The limitation of this approach though is that it requires having asked the right questions prior to the shock occurring. The range of data items in the ANUpoll series is fortunately very rich. However, there are still constructs that were not captured. Furthermore, while a person’s own reflection on the impact of an event may be biased, it can be important for explaining their views of the present situation and current/future behaviour. In August 2021 we therefore repeated a number of questions from the May 2020 survey related to respondent’s reflections on the impact of COVID-19 on their life.

The first question asked was ‘Since the spread of COVID-19 in Australia, do you think that your life is...?’ with respondents asked to indicate whether their life has improved or worsened, and by how much. The second question was forward looking rather than backwards looking. Respondents were asked ‘How has your outlook for your longer-term future, i.e. 5-10 years from now, changed since the spread of COVID-19?’ with information sought on whether their outlook has become more positive or more negative, and by how much.

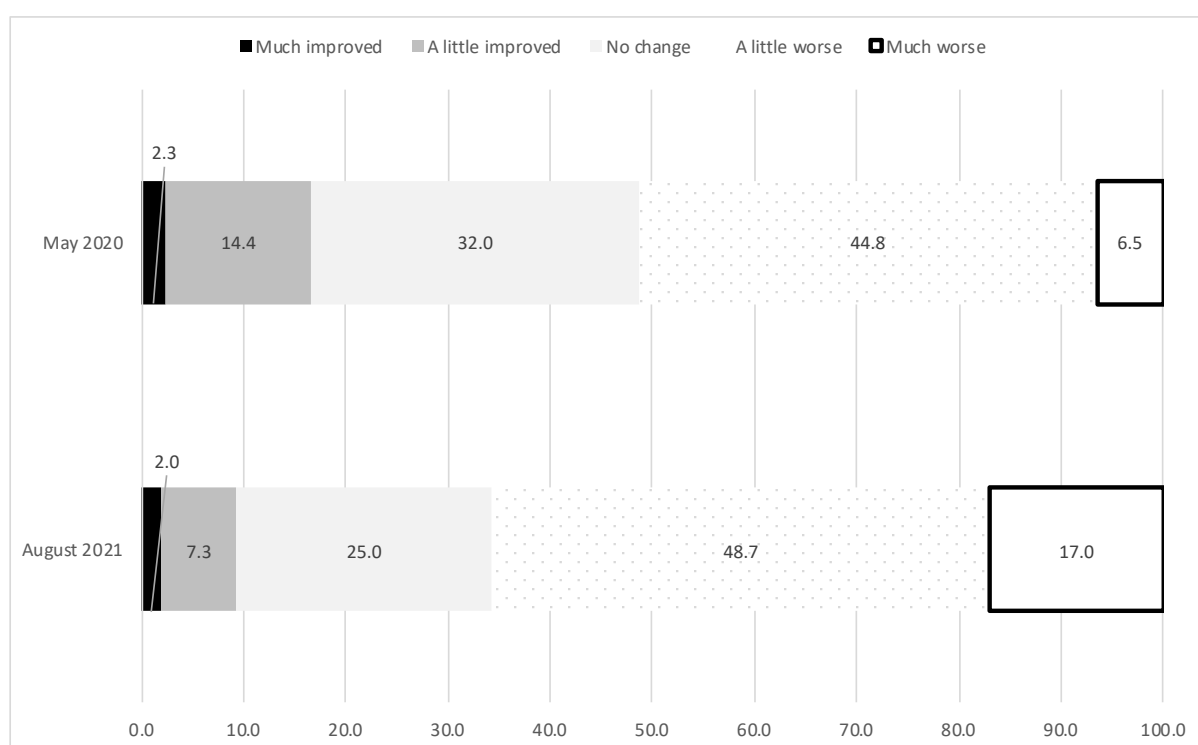
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The third question on change through time related to people's stress levels. Specifically, we asked: 'How has the level of stress you typically feel day-to-day changed since the spread of COVID-19?' The final 'change' variable that we asked about was 'How has the quality of your relationships with other people/family members in your household changed since the spread of COVID-19?'

6.1 Whether respondents life has improved or worsened since the spread of COVID-19

In May 2020, roughly half of Australians thought their life had gotten worse (51.3 per cent), including 6.5 per cent who thought it had gotten much worse (Figure 9). However, since the early days of the pandemic there has been a large increase in the proportion who think their life has gotten worse, with a particularly large increase in the proportion who think it has gotten much worse. By August 2021, almost two-thirds of Australians thought their life had gotten worse (65.7 per cent), including 17.0 per cent who thought it had gotten much worse.

Figure 9 Whether respondent's life has improved or worsened since the spread of COVID-19, May 2020 and August 2021



Source: ANUpoll: May 2020 and August 2021.

A statistical model is used to estimate the associations between various factors and the extent to which a person thought their life had worsened or improved since the spread of COVID-19 as reported in August 2021 (Table 2). Given that the dependent variable takes one of five values (ranging from much improved, to much worse) an ordered probit regression model is appropriate. The explanatory variables included in the model include a range of demographic and socio-economic characteristics and geographic location. The estimates from the regression model are reported in Table 2. Young Australians aged 18 to 34 years are estimated to be less likely to say that their life had changed for the worse than those aged 35 years and over. None of the other standard demographic and socioeconomic variables included in the model were statistically significant.

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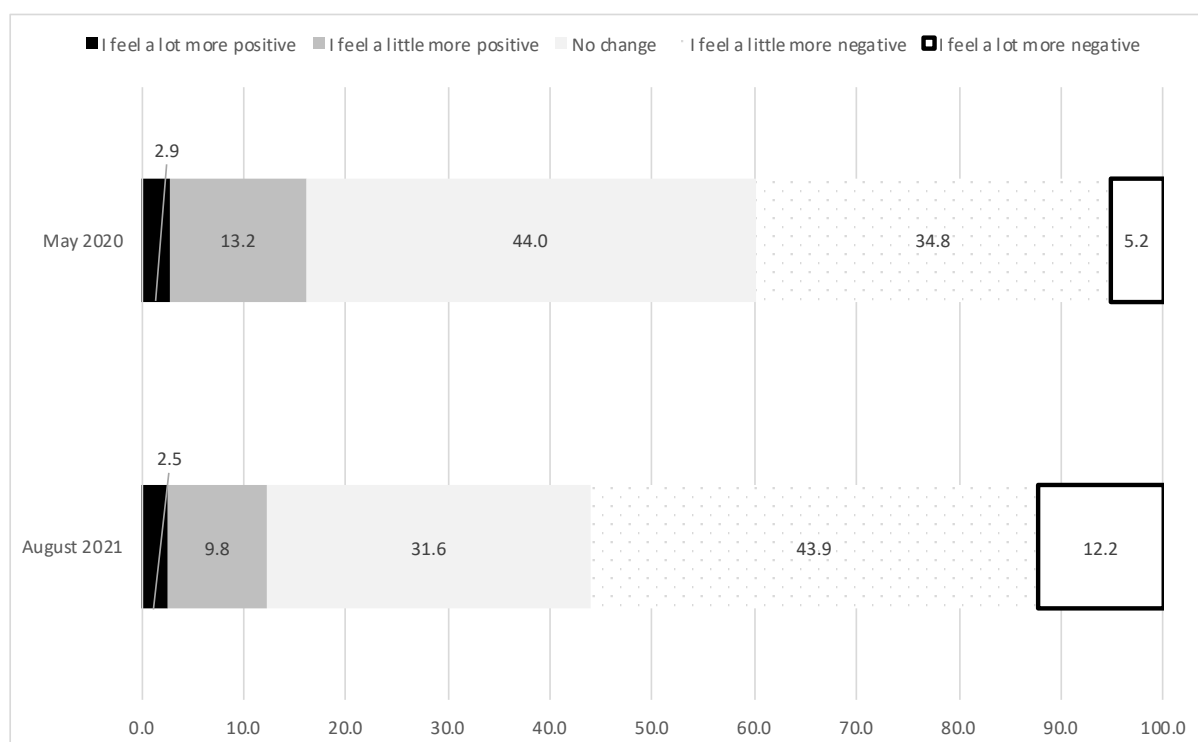
The association between age and whether a person felt their life had improved or worsened in the econometric model is consistent with the descriptive changes between May 2020 and August 2021 for the different age groups. In May 2020, 51.5 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 years and 52.3 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 thought that their life had worsened since the start of COVID, compared to 49.6 per cent for those aged 35 to 44 years. In August 2021, 59.7 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 years and 65.7 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 years said their life had gotten worse. While this was an increase, the increase was much greater for those aged 35 to 44 years, and at a rate of 68.6 per cent had become greater than or the younger cohorts.

There was also significant geographic variation in responses to this question in August 2021. Sydneysiders and Melburnians were more likely to feel that their life had worsened. Those who lived outside of New South Wales and Victoria were the least likely, and those who lived in non-Capital city New South Wales and Victoria were somewhere in between.

6.2 Whether respondent's outlook for the future has become more positive or more negative since the spread of COVID-19

Respondents in August were more likely to say that they felt more negative about the future than they were in May (56.1 per cent in August 2021 compared to 39.9 per cent in May 2020), with the largest increase again for those who said that they felt a lot more negative (from 5.2 per cent to 12.2 per cent) (Figure 10).

Figure 10 Whether respondents thought their outlook for the future had become more positive or more negative since the spread of COVID-19, May 2020 and August 2021



Source: ANUpoll: May 2020 and August 2021.

A similar statistical model estimated self-reported changes in outlook for the future. Women were relatively more likely to feel that their outlook had become more negative, whereas those aged 18 to 24 or those aged 75 years and over were less likely to. Those born overseas in a

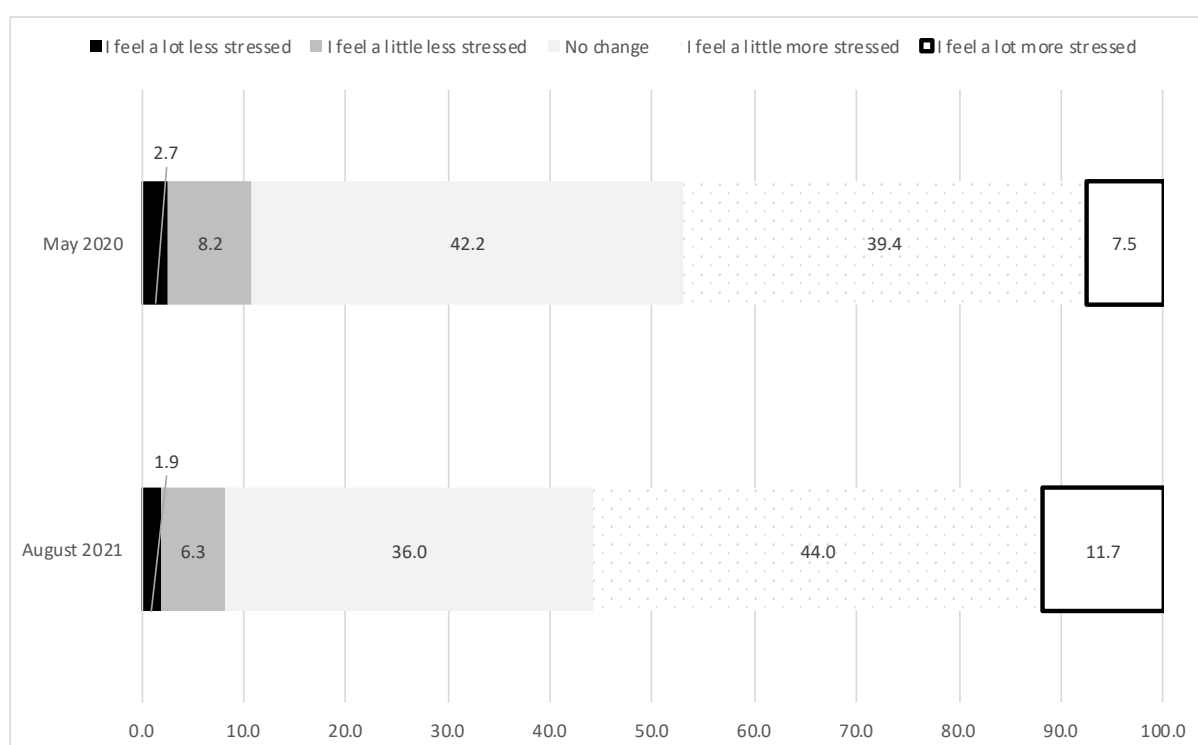
non-English speaking country were also less likely to feel that their outlook for the future had worsened, as were those who had not completed Year 12. Those who lived in neighbourhoods just above the middle quintile were less likely to feel they have become more negative, with broad State/Territory and capital/non-capital city comparisons for the most part not statistically significant. The only exception is those who live in a capital city apart from Sydney and Melbourne, who were less likely to feel they had become more negative.

6.3 Whether respondents experience an increase or decrease in stress levels since the spread of COVID-19

In both May 2020 and August 2021 Australians were far more likely to say that their stress levels had increased than say that they had decreased. However, much of this change appears to have already occurred by May 2020.

There was a statistically significant increase in the proportion of Australians who felt a little more stressed – from 47.0 per cent in May 2020 to 55.1 per cent in August 2021 (Figure 11). This included an increase in the proportion who felt a lot more stressed, from 7.5 per cent to 11.3 per cent.

Figure 11 Whether respondents experienced an increase or decrease in stress levels since the spread of COVID-19, May 2020 and August 2021



Source: ANUpoll: May 2020 and August 2021.

In the econometric model, females were more likely to say that their stress worsened over the period, whereas older Australians (aged 65 years and over) were less likely to. Those who lived outside of New South Wales and Victoria were less likely to say that their stress had worsened.

6.4 Whether respondents experienced an improvement or a worsening in their relationships since the spread of COVID-19

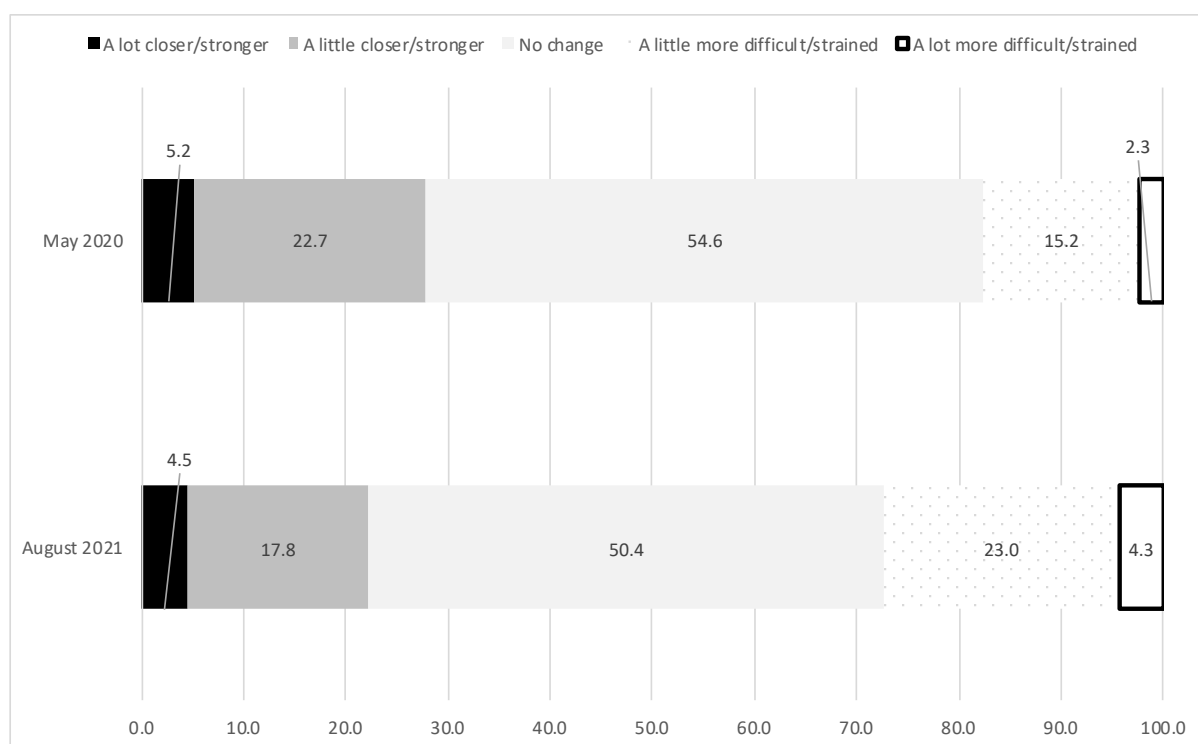
In examining the strength of respondents' relationships with family members and others, in both May 2020 and August 2021, the most common response given was that there was no

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change in the strength of people's relationships. This was given by 54.6 per cent of Australians in May 2020 and 50.4 per cent of Australians in August 2021.

In May, there were slightly more people who said that their relationships got closer/stronger (27.9 per cent) than those who said it got more difficult/strained (17.5 per cent). This was reversed in August 2021 with 22.3 per cent of Australians saying that their relationships got closer/stronger and 27.3 per cent saying it got more difficult/strained.

Figure 12 Whether respondents experienced an improvement or a worsening in their relationships, May 2020 and August 2021



Source: ANUpoll: May 2020 and August 2021.

Older Australians, and particularly those aged 65 years and over, were less likely to say that their relationships had worsened. So too did those born overseas in an English-speaking country, and those who lived in a capital city outside of Sydney and Melbourne. Those who lived in the most disadvantaged quintile of suburbs were more likely to say that their relationship worsened.

7 Concluding comments

More Australians are experiencing lockdown conditions than at any time since the start of the pandemic, with COVID-19 infection rates now higher than they've ever been. This dramatic change in circumstances has led to declines in life satisfaction, worsening in psychological distress and an increase in loneliness across Australia. However, New South Wales in general and Sydney in particular has experienced the worst of the change. This includes a large decline in hours worked, with the rest of Australia having better economic outcomes in August than they did in April. It is unclear whether the rest of the country can continue to remain unimpacted by what is going on in the largest cities in south-eastern Australia.

Australians are less likely to be satisfied with the direction of the country than at any time during the pandemic. They are also less confident in the Federal government and

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State/Territory governments than they were in April 2021, and particularly since the peak in confidence during the COVID-period.

These lockdown effects are impacting on people's reflections on their own lives. Australians are more likely to think that their life has gotten worse, are more likely to say that they feel more negative about the future than they were in May 2020, are more stressed, and more likely to report more difficult/strained relationships.

By many objective measures, outcomes have been worse during the pandemic than they were in August 2021, or at least as bad. But Australians seem to think that, given the successes of the country early in the pandemic, the situation should be far better than it currently is.

Appendix 1 About the survey

The primary source of data for this paper is the August 2021 ANUpoll. Data collection commenced on the 10th of August 2021 with a pilot test of telephone respondents. The main data collection commenced on the 11th of August and concluded on the 23rd of August. The final sample size for the survey is 3,135 respondents. 52.0 per cent of the sample had completed the survey by the 12th of August and the average interview duration was 15.4 minutes. Of those who had completed the August 2021 survey, 86.7 per cent (N=2,717) had completed the April 2021 survey.

The Social Research Centre collected data online and through Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) in order to ensure representation from the offline Australian population. Around 4.1 per cent of interviews were collected via CATI. The contact methodology adopted for the online Life in Australia™ members is an initial survey invitation via email and SMS (where available), followed by multiple email reminders and a reminder SMS. Telephone non-response of panel members who have not yet completed the survey commenced in the second week of fieldwork and consisted of reminder calls encouraging completion of the online survey.

The contact methodology for offline Life in Australia™ members was an initial SMS (where available), followed by an extended call-cycle over a two-week period. A reminder SMS was also sent in the second week of fieldwork.

A total of 3,481 respondents were invited to take part in the survey, leading to a wave-specific completion rate of 90.1 per cent. Taking into account recruitment to the panel, the cumulative response rate for this survey is around 5.8 per cent.

Unless otherwise stated, data in the paper is weighted to population benchmarks. For Life in Australia™, the approach for deriving weights generally consists of the following steps:

1. Compute a base weight for each respondent as the product of two weights:
 - a. Their enrolment weight, accounting for the initial chances of selection and subsequent post-stratification to key demographic benchmarks
 - b. Their response propensity weight, estimated from enrolment information available for both respondents and non-respondents to the present wave.
2. Adjust the base weights so that they satisfy the latest population benchmarks for several demographic characteristics.

The ethical aspects of this research have been approved by the ANU Human Research Ethics Committee (2021/430).

Appendix 2 Regression tables

Table 1 Factors associated with life satisfaction and psychological distress, August 2021

Explanatory variables	Life satisfaction		Psychological distress	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Life satisfaction in April 2021	-0.284	***		
Psychological distress in April 2021			-0.051	**
Female	-0.067		0.468	***
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.026		-0.097	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.116		-0.195	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.161		-0.314	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.252	*	-0.020	
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.507	***	-0.154	
Aged 75 years plus	0.595	***	-0.512	
Indigenous	-0.451		0.589	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	0.171	*	0.037	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.281	*	-0.405	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.068		0.053	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.076		-0.216	
Has a post graduate degree	-0.044		0.201	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.013		0.590	**
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	-0.030		0.478	*
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.035		0.082	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	0.107		-0.103	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	0.186		-0.489	**
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	-0.011		-0.281	
Lives in non-capital city NSW	0.188		-0.580	*
Lives in Melbourne	0.119		0.094	
Lives in non-capital city Victoria	0.030		-0.560	
Lives in another non-capital city	0.462	***	-0.449	
Lives in another capital city	0.501	***	-0.501	*
Constant	1.090		0.891	
Sample size	2,605		2,514	

Source: ANUpoll, April 2021

Notes: OLS Regression Models. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); and lives in Sydney. Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***, those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *.

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Table 2 Factors associated with views on changes in circumstances since the spread of COVID-19, August 2021

Explanatory variables	Life		Hope		Stress		Relationship quality	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Female	0.027		0.176	***	0.237	***	-0.021	
Aged 18 to 24 years	-0.206		-0.342	***	-0.196		-0.093	
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.165	*	-0.139		0.018		-0.008	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.011		-0.093		-0.107		-0.139	*
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.067		0.000		-0.097		-0.068	
Aged 65 to 74 years	-0.012		-0.132	*	-0.292	***	-0.202	***
Aged 75 years plus	-0.062		-0.293	***	-0.408	***	-0.321	***
Indigenous	0.089		0.162		0.064		-0.174	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	-0.105		-0.041		-0.068		-0.199	***
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	-0.094		-0.335	***	-0.072		-0.107	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.059		-0.042		-0.032		0.027	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.060		-0.204	**	-0.086		0.008	
Has a post graduate degree	-0.042		-0.041		-0.010		-0.098	
Has an undergraduate degree	-0.074		-0.049		-0.070		-0.045	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	0.057		-0.042		-0.056		0.028	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.034		-0.082		-0.095		0.182	**
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	-0.107		-0.115		-0.063		0.115	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	-0.034		-0.140	*	0.019		0.013	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	0.006		0.051		0.056		0.013	
Lives in non-capital city NSW	-0.267	***	-0.009		-0.059		-0.202	**
Lives in Melbourne	-0.054		0.011		0.047		-0.051	
Lives in non-capital city Victoria	-0.121		0.110		0.012		-0.130	
Lives in another non-capital city	-0.542	***	-0.128		-0.256	***	-0.082	
Lives in another capital city	-0.493	***	-0.163	**	-0.203	***	-0.258	***
Cut-point 1	-2.461		-2.281		-2.249		-1.933	
Cut-point 2	-1.715		-1.449		-1.573		-0.995	
Cut-point 3	-0.780		-0.423		-0.325		0.386	
Cut-point 4	0.623		0.929		1.059		1.528	
Sample size	3,011		3,006		3,012		2,998	

Source: ANUpoll, April and August 2021 and Life in Australia™, February 2020.

Notes: Ordered Probit Regression Model. The base case individual is male; aged 35 to 44 years; non-Indigenous; born in Australia; does not speak a language other than English at home; has completed Year 12 but does not have a post-graduate degree; lives in neither an advantaged or disadvantaged suburb (third quintile); and lives in a capital city. Coefficients that are statistically significant at the 1 per cent level of significance are labelled ***; those significant at the 5 per cent level of significance are labelled **, and those significant at the 10 per cent level of significance are labelled *.

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Endnotes

¹ This change in the proportion of the population worried or anxious due to COVID-19 is based on the respondent who completed both the April and August 2021 surveys.

² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-08/third-indigenous-covid-death-in-western-nsw/100443170>

³ Using the natural log of income, in April 2021 the model estimates that Life Satisfaction = $4.969 + 0.3326832 * \ln(\text{household income})$