



Wellbeing outcomes in Australia as lockdowns ease and cases increase – August 2022

ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods

Professor Nicholas Biddle, Associate Professor Ben Edwards, Professor Matthew Gray, Patrick Rehill

ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods

Australian National University

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Abstract

On the 8th of August 2022, data collection began for the 12th wave the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring series, with a total of 3,510 responses collected between the 8th and 22nd of August. The aim of this paper is to examine the trends and determinants of wellbeing over the COVID-19 period, making use of the 12 waves of the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey data and with a particular focus on the 12 months since August 2021. Compared to earlier in 2022, Australians have a higher level of life satisfaction, a lower level of psychological distress, lower levels of loneliness, and a greater level of satisfaction with the direction of the country. Australians are also more confident in the Federal Government. Taking a slightly longer-term perspective, compared to August 2021, Australians are more likely to think that their life is improving, more optimistic about the future, less stressed, and more likely to think that their relationship quality is improving. Importantly, much of this improvement has been amongst young Australians, who from a mental health and wellbeing perspective were hit hardest by the pandemic.

1 Introduction and overview

As of August 2022, there remained very few COVID-19 restrictions in place in Australia. The main remaining requirement being a mandatory period of isolation for people with a positive COVID-19 test. Some restrictions apply to close household contacts, which vary between states and territories but typically include not visiting high-risk settings such as healthcare or aged care facilities and taking steps to minimise the risk of spreading the virus.

While day-to-day life has largely returned to normal, COVID-19 cases remain high and there continues to be COVID-19 related morbidity and mortality. The economic after-effects of the pandemic and related restrictions and international events including the war in Ukraine are also impacting Australia. Unemployment is very low and there are labour shortages across a number of industries, partly due to reduced migration. However, prices are rising as are interest rates which is putting many households under significant financial pressure.

This paper describes the trends and determinants of wellbeing over the tumultuous period since COVID-19 first reached Australia using data from the ANU COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Surveys, with a particular focus on changes since August 2021.

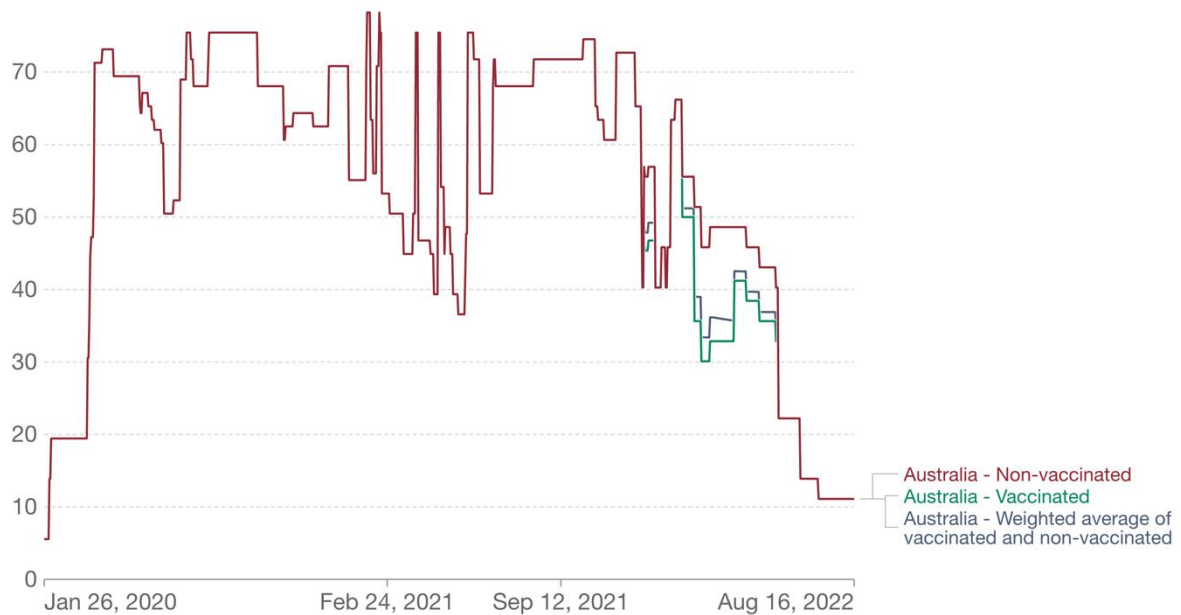
The first wave of the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey series was collected in the second half of April 2020. During this initial data collection, international borders were closed to almost all arrivals and departures, as were many interstate borders. Other restrictions varied across states and territories, with closures of many schools, universities, businesses, and public transport. There was a high degree of uncertainty and fear about the pandemic at that time. On the 8th of August 2022, data collection began for the 12th wave the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring series, with a total of 3,510 responses collected between the 8th and 22nd of August.

Government responses to the pandemic have been tracked using a range of measures and methodologies. The most commonly used is the Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT).¹ At the start of our April 2020 data collection (Wave 1 in the Impact Monitoring series), the Stringency Index from the OxCGRT was 73 on a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 is the strictest value possible (Figure 1). By the start of this latest wave of data collection, however, the Stringency Index for Australia had declined to 11, lower even than in February 2020, and lower than for Canada, New Zealand, and the US. Only the UK and Ireland had similarly low Stringency Index values to Australia amongst high-income, predominantly English-speaking countries.

Figure 1 COVID-19 Stringency Index, January 2020 to August 2022

COVID-19: Stringency Index

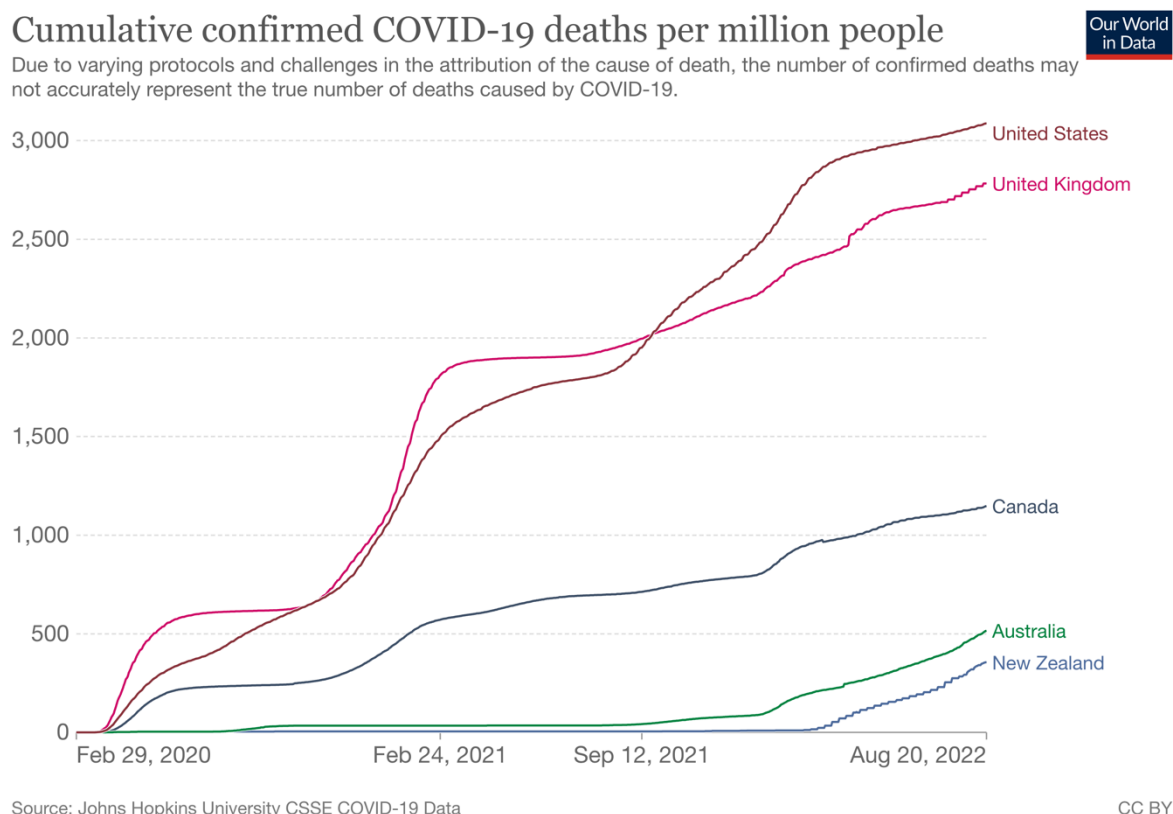
The stringency index is a composite measure based on nine response indicators including school closures, workplace closures, and travel bans, rescaled to a value from 0 to 100 (100 = strictest).



Source: Hale, T., Angrist, N., Goldszmidt, R. et al. A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker). Nat Hum Behav 5, 529–538 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01079-8>
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During the period covered by Figure 1 and the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring series, COVID-19 policies have varied quite substantially, but so too has the incidence and direct health impacts of the virus. There were quite low death rates up until February 2022 (per million Australians, Figure 2), but a substantial increase since then. Like New Zealand, Australia has had far fewer deaths from COVID-19 than Canada, and much lower deaths still compared to the US and the UK.

Figure 2 Cumulative confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people, February 2020 to August 2022, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, UK, and US



In addition to substantial variation in COVID-19 policy responses and rapidly increasing mortality rates (although still very low compared to many other countries in cumulative terms), much else has happened in Australia since early 2020

In May 2022, there was a change in government at the Commonwealth level, with current Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s Labor Party replacing the former Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s Liberal/National Party Coalition. There have also been a number of elections at the state/territory level.

Over the same period, Australia has also faced a number of natural disasters. At the start of the COVID-19 period, Australia was still recovering from the nation-wide 2019/20 Black summer bushfires. With the shift to La Niña weather conditions, Australia and particularly the east coast of Australia has experienced a number of devastating flood events. This includes floods in NSW, Queensland and Victoria in March, June, and November 2021, as well as February, March, and July 2022, with many of these flood events leading to fatalities and substantial loss of property and livelihoods.

Australia has also not been immune to international events. Partly due to the war in Ukraine disrupting food and energy supplies, but also because of the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and associated policy responses on supply-chains, Australia has experienced significant price inflation. In the 12-months up until the June 2021 Quarter, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased by 3.8 per cent, outside of the Reserve Bank of Australia’s (RBA’s) target band of 2-3 per cent and higher than at any other times in the decades leading up to the pandemic (when inflation was more likely to be below the RBA band). In the 12-months to the June 2022

quarter, however, inflation had continued to rise with a 6.1 per cent increase in the CPI over the period and significant action by the RBA and the rest of government to rein in prices, including through a series of interest rate increases.

The policy-response to COVID-19 as well as the outcomes and impacts of these political, natural, and international shocks have not been consistent across Australia. As mentioned previously, some states/territories have experienced a change in government over the period, whereas others have seen the return of incumbents. The impact of floods has been greatest in New South Wales and Queensland, and prices have not risen consistently across Australia with Phillips (2022) estimating that the top five capital-city regions in Australia with the largest increase in Annual Living Costs between 2021 and 2022 (between 6.2 and 6.4 per cent and mainly in Perth) had almost double the rate of increase compared to the five regions with the smallest increase (between 3.2 and 3.3 per cent and exclusively in Sydney).

The aim of this paper is to examine the trends and determinants of wellbeing over this tumultuous period, making use of the 12 waves of the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey data. This dataset is described in the next section of the paper, with the remainder of the paper structured as follows. In Section 3 we document changes in mental health and wellbeing over the COVID-19 period, with Section 4 documenting changes in views on the country and key institutions. In Section 5 we document the reflections of individuals themselves on how their life has changed over the period, with Section 6 providing concluding comments.

2 Overview of the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey

In April 2020, the Social Research Centre on behalf of the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods collected the first wave of data as part of the centre's COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Series.² Since that first wave of data collection, surveys have been undertaken a further 11 times, with the most recent wave of data collection undertaken in August 2022.

Between the 1st and 12th wave of data collection for the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring series, there have been 6,524 adult Australians that have answered at least one of the surveys, with 1,373 answering all surveys.

Surveys have also been conducted with the same group of respondents in January and February 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic started in Australia, as part of the ANUpoll and Australian Social Survey International-ESS (AUSSI-ESS) surveys respectively.³ This allows us to track outcomes for the same group of individuals from just prior to COVID-19 impacting Australia through to two-and-a-bit years since COVID-19 first reached Australia.

The August 2022 survey collected data from 3,510 Australians aged 18 years and over.⁴ Data collection for this most recent ANUpoll commenced on the 8th of August 2022 with a pilot test of telephone respondents. The main data collection commenced on the 9th and concluded on the 22nd of August. 57.6 per cent of the sample had completed the survey by the 11th of August and the average interview duration was 23.9 minutes.

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 3.5 per cent of interviews were collected via CATI.⁵ A total of 4,294 panel members were invited to take part in the April 2022 survey, leading to a wave-specific completion rate of 81.7 per cent.⁶

Data in the paper is weighted to population benchmarks. For Life in Australia™, the approach

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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.

Across all twelve surveys undertaken during the COVID-19 period, there were 6,524 respondents that completed at least one of the waves of data collection. 19.1 per cent of these completed one wave of data collection only, with a further 13.1 per cent having completed two waves. At the other end of the distribution, 21.1 per cent of the cumulative respondents completed all twelve waves of data collection and a further 6.4 per cent completed eleven of the twelve waves. This leaves 40.4 per cent of the pool of respondents who completed between three and ten waves.

Table 1 gives the number of respondents for each of the eleven waves of data collection during the COVID-19 period, as well as the two pre-COVID waves. The table also gives the survey window for the data collection, and the per cent of January 2020 respondents who completed that particular wave. In between the April and August 2022 surveys, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) survey was undertaken on the Life in Australia™ panel, with a limited range of data items available for analysis in this paper.

Table 1 Survey participation – January 2020 to April 2022

| Wave | Survey window | Sample size | Per cent of January 2020 survey that completed wave |
|-------------------|--|-------------|---|
| January 2020 | 20 th January to 3 rd February, 2020 | 3,249 | 100 |
| February 2020 | 17 th February to 2 nd March, 2020 | 3,228 | 91.4 |
| 1 – April 2020 | 14 th to 27 th April, 2020 | 3,155 | 88.8 |
| 2 – May 2020 | 11 th to 25 th May, 2020 | 3,249 | 91.0 |
| 3 – August 2020 | 10 th to 24 th August, 2020 | 3,061 | 85.9 |
| 4 – October 2020 | 12 th to 26 th October, 2020 | 3,043 | 85.5 |
| 5 – November 2020 | 9 th to 23 rd November, 2020 | 3,029 | 84.9 |
| 6 – January 2021 | 18 th January to 1 st February, 2021 | 3,459 | 83.8 |
| 7 – April 2021 | 12 th to 26 th April, 2021 | 3,286 | 80.8 |
| 8 – August 2021 | 10 th to 23 rd August, 2021 | 3,135 | 71.1 |
| 9 – October 2021 | 12 th to 26 th October, 2021 | 3,474 | 68.6 |
| 10 – January 2022 | 17 th to 30 th January, 2022 | 3,472 | 63.4 |
| 11 – April 2022 | 11 th to the 24 th of April, 2022 | 3,587 | 64.0 |
| CSES | 23 rd May to 5 th June, 2022 | 3,556 | 63.5 |
| 12 – August 2022 | 8 th to 22 nd August, 2022 | 3,510 | 62.7 |

3 Changes in mental health and wellbeing

3.1 Life satisfaction

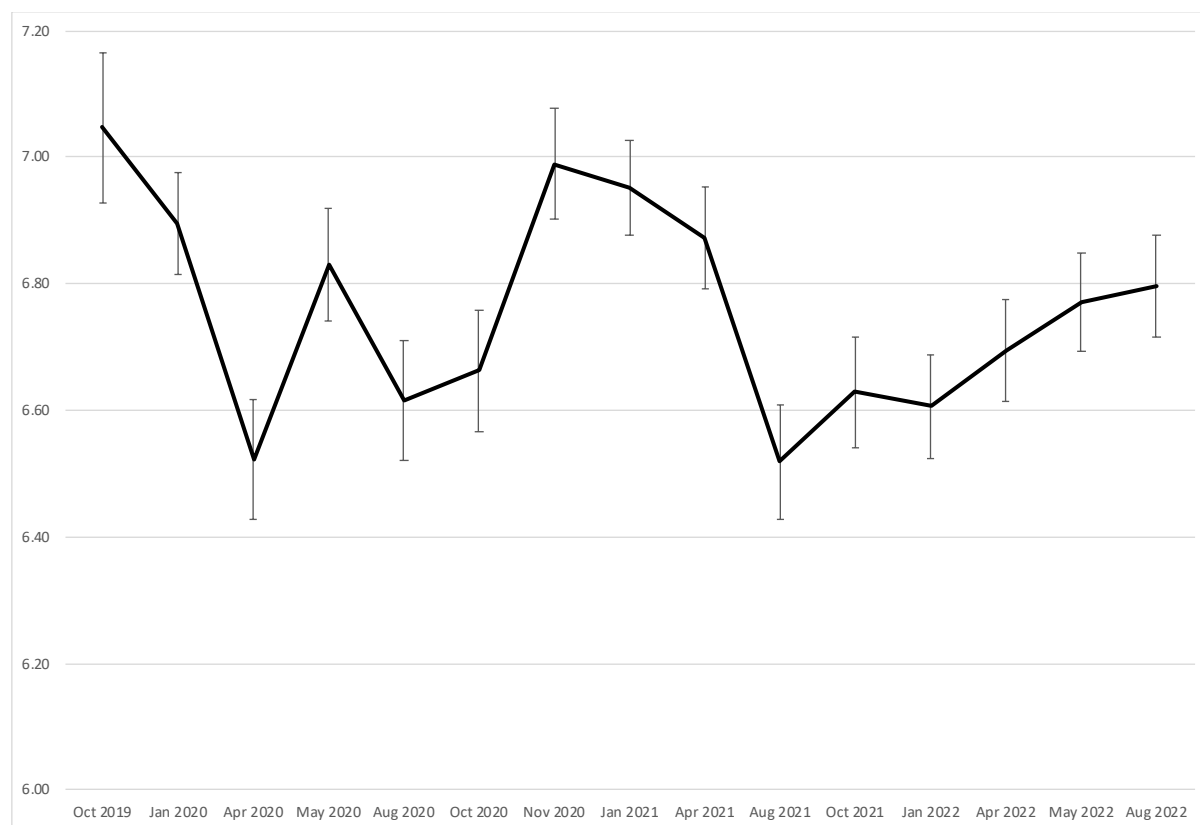
In each of the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Surveys, respondents have been asked:

'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?'

This question has usually been asked early in the survey, just after a question on satisfaction with the direction of the country and for some waves voting intentions. Because the life satisfaction question was asked as part of the CSES, we have 13 waves of data during the COVID-19 period. We are also able to compare this data to life satisfaction in January 2020, when the average level of life satisfaction in Australia was 6.90 out of a possible 10.0. Keeping in mind that the January 2020 survey was undertaken around the height of the Black Summer bushfire crisis when many fires were still out of control and many cities on the east and south of the countries had experienced intolerable smoke hazes, this was a slightly lower level of life satisfaction than October 2019 (7.05) (Figure 3).

Over the COVID-19 period, life satisfaction varied quite substantially with the highest level of life satisfaction reported in November 2020, and the lowest levels in April 2020 and August 2021. Since this August 2021 minimum of 6.52, life satisfaction has shown a steady increase with it being 6.76 in August 2022, significantly higher than it was in April 2022.⁷

Figure 3 Life satisfaction, Australia, October 2019 to August 2022



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

Source: ANUpoll, Oct 2019; January, April, May, August, October, and November 2020; January, April, August, October 2021; and January, April, May, and August 2022

3.2 Psychological distress

All of the waves of the COVID-19 Impact Monitoring surveys (i.e., since April 2020) have measured mental health using the Kessler (K6) module (Kessler et al. 2002). Although the K6 module was not asked just prior to the pandemic in the January and February surveys, comparable data is available from the Life in Australia™ panel for February 2017.

The K6 questions ask the respondent how often in the last four weeks they felt: ‘nervous’; ‘hopeless’; ‘restless or fidgety’; ‘so depressed that nothing could cheer you up’; ‘that everything was an effort’; and ‘worthless’. There were five response categories, from “none of the time” to “all the time”, with values ranging from 1 through 5. Respondents who score highly on this measure are considered to be at risk of a serious mental illness (other than a substance use disorder). It is important to recognise that while the K6 screens for the risk of serious mental illness, it is not a clinical diagnostic measure.

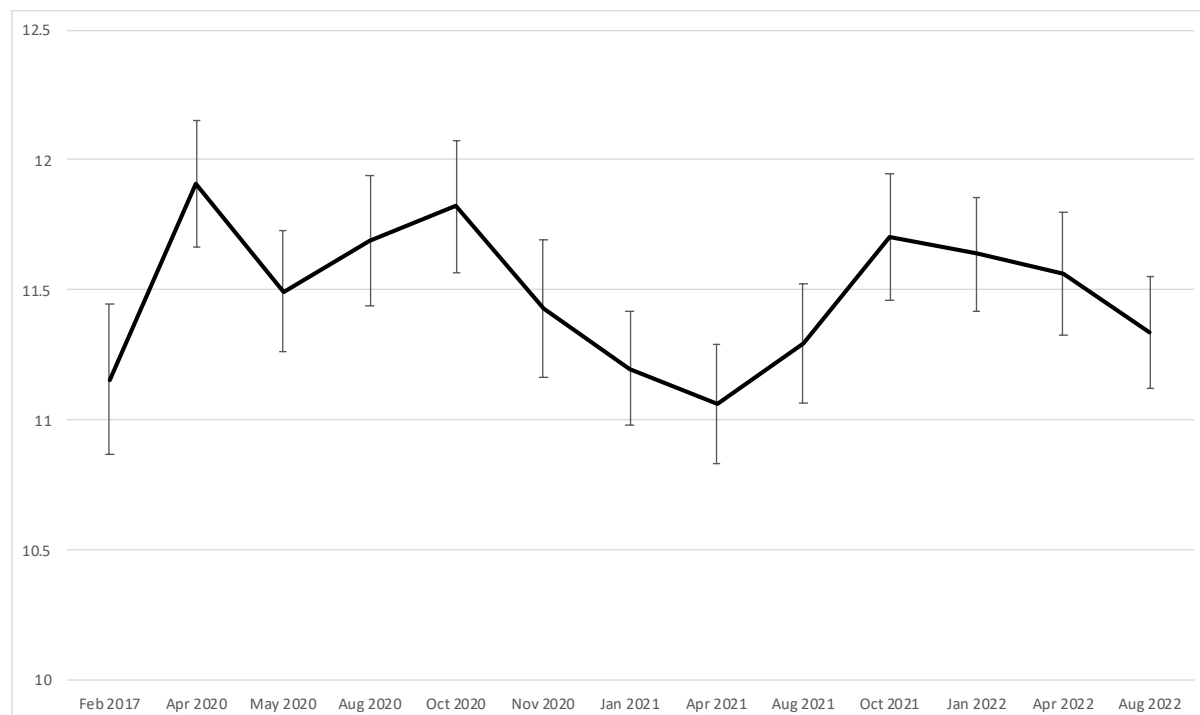
The K6 items can be summed to produce an index, with potential values ranging from 6 to 30. People with a sum of 11 to 18 out of a possible maximum of 30 are categorized as experiencing *moderate* psychological distress. This group can be considered to be struggling with mental distress worthy of mental health support but are not at risk of clinical levels of mental health problems like those in the serious category (Prochaska et al. 2012). Those with a K6 sum of 19 or higher out of a possible maximum of 30 are categorised as experiencing *severe* psychological distress consistent with having a ‘probable serious mental illness’.

Figure 4 plots the continuous K6 measure across the pandemic period (including a pre-COVID

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baseline from February 2017). Based on the continuous measure, there was a large increase in psychological distress between February 2017 and April 2020, improvements in May 2020, a worsening during the second half of 2020, and then gradual but substantial improvement to early 2021. After April 2021, there was a worsening in mental health outcomes again, with psychological distress starting to decline again in January 2022, but only slightly and with little change between January 2022 and April 2022. Over the last survey window, however, there was a much larger decline in psychological distress – from 11.56 in April to 11.33 in August 2022 with psychological distress no longer significantly higher than in February 2017.

Figure 4 Psychological distress (K6), Australia, February 2017 to August 2022

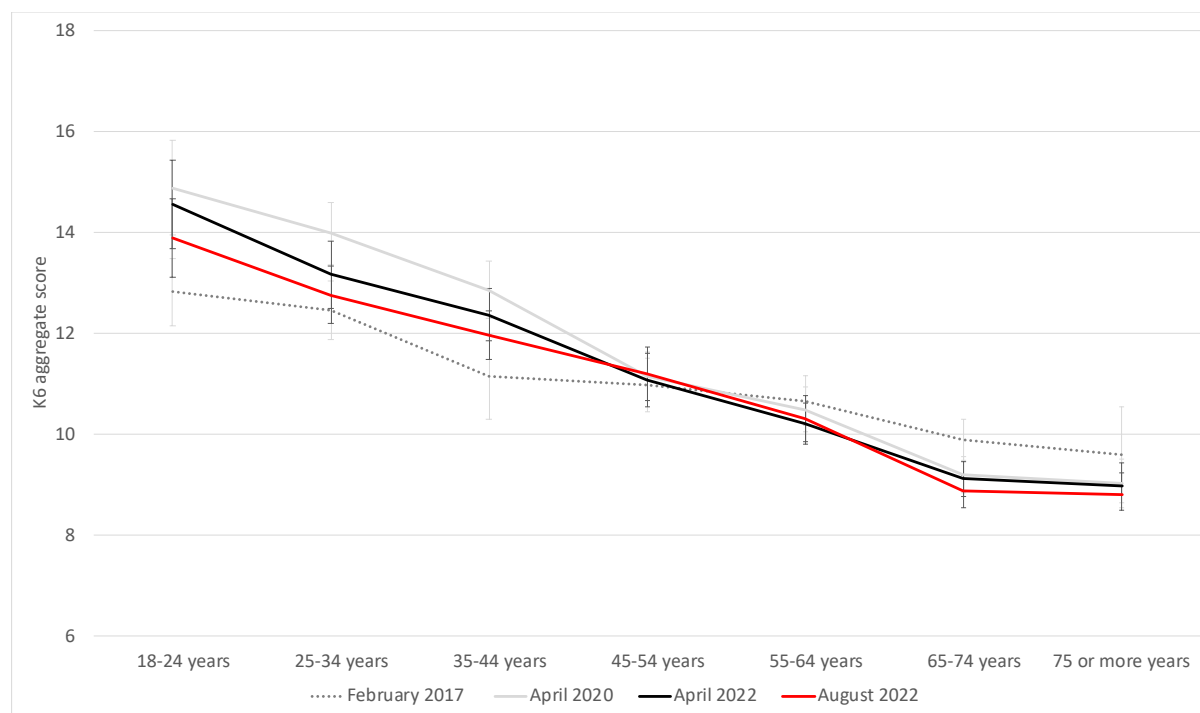


Note: The “whiskers” on the lines indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: Life in Australia, February 2017; ANUpoll: April, May, August, October, and November 2020; January, April, August, October 2021; and January, April, and August 2022

Reductions in psychological distress since April 2022 have not been consistent across the age distribution (Figure 5). There was an almost 5 per cent decline in psychological distress for those aged 18 to 24, and 3-3.5 per cent declines for those aged 25 to 44. Psychological distress was similar or slightly higher for those aged 45 years and over in August 2022 compared to April 2022. Young Australians still, however, have the most elevated level of psychological distress compared to pre-COVID.

Figure 5 Psychological distress (K6) by age, Australia, February 2017 to August 2022

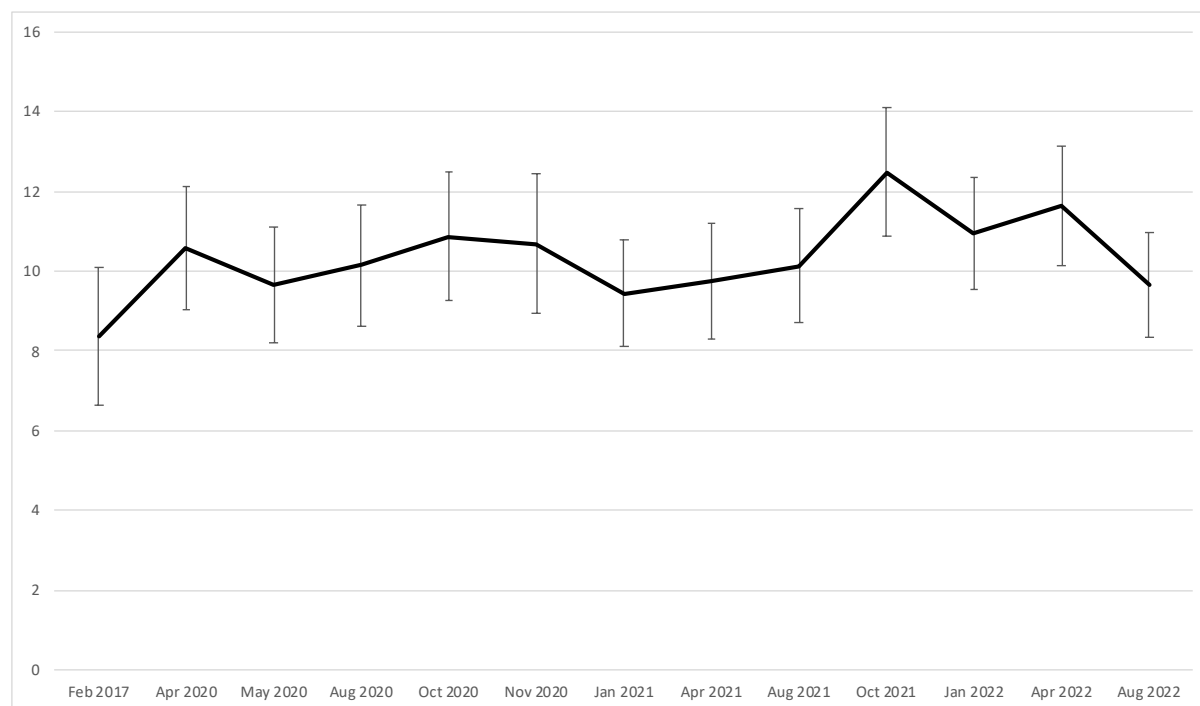


Note: The “whiskers” on the lines indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: Life in Australia, February 2017; ANUpoll: April 2020; April 2021; and April, and August 2022

There were even larger declines over the last survey period in the percentage of adult Australians who are estimated to be experiencing severe psychological distress consistent with having a probable serious mental illness (Figure 6). From a peak of 12.5 per cent of Australians in October 2021, severe psychological distress declined to 11.6 per cent in April 2021, with an even greater decline to 9.7 per cent in August 2022. This equates to a 570,000 decrease in the proportion of the population experiencing severe psychological distress (based on the estimated adult population of 20.03 million in June 2021). While it is not possible to identify exactly why psychological distress has fallen, in October 2021 the Australian Stringency Index value was 75.5 and much of the east coast of Australia was in some form of lockdown and Australia’s international borders were effectively closed.

Figure 6 Per cent of Australians with severe psychological distress, February 2017 to April 2022



Note: The “whiskers” on the lines indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate. People who had a K6 score of 19 or above are classified as experiencing severe psychological distress.

Source: Life in Australia, February 2017; ANUpoll: April, May, August, October, and November 2020; January, April, August, October 2021; and January, April, and August 2022

The individual component of the K6-index of psychological distress for which there was the biggest relative decline from the October 2021 peak was for the per cent of Australians who said that they felt hopeless at least some of the time. In October 2021, 27.2 per cent of adult Australians reported feeling hopeless at least some of the time. By August 2022, this had declined to 22.3 per cent, or a drop of about 981,000 Australia adults. This is also noteworthy given that hopelessness is a risk factor for suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Wolfe et al. 2019). Declines in the other components of the K6 were smaller, but not insubstantial, with around 647,000 fewer adults feeling restless or fidgety, 522,000 less adults feeling so sad that nothing could cheer them up, 517,000 fewer adults feeling worthless, 266,000 fewer adults feeling nervous, and 180,000 fewer adults feeling that everything was an effort.

3.3 Social isolation

One of the ways in which mental health and wellbeing may have been impacted by the pandemic (in addition to the direct impacts of infection) is through the social isolation that resulted from lockdown and other restrictions. While these restrictions had public health benefits through a reduction in infection rates and mortality, there were undoubtedly wellbeing costs associated.

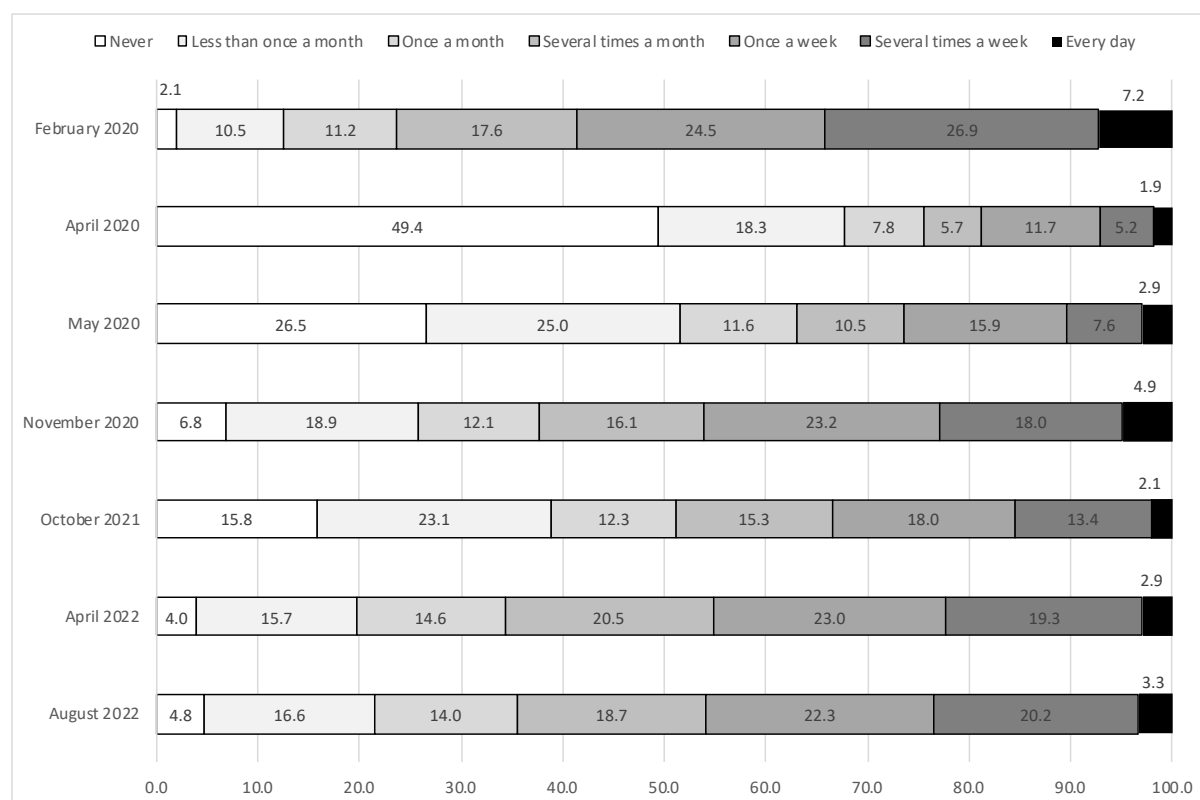
In February 2020, respondents were asked ‘Thinking about your life now, how often do you meet socially with friends, relatives, or work colleagues?’ with seven response options: Never; Less than once a month; Once a month; Several times a month; Once a week; Several times a week; and Every day. This question was repeated in five waves of data collection during the COVID-19 period, with Figure 7 giving the per cent of Australians who reported each of the

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seven categories.

The initial COVID-19 “lock-down in early 2020 resulted in a dramatic decrease in social interaction between February and April 2020, with 2.1 per cent of Australians saying they never meet socially just prior to the pandemic compared to 49.4 per cent in April 2020. Two-and-a-half years into the pandemic, however, social interaction had not returned to pre-pandemic levels. There were more than twice as many people who never met socially (4.8 per cent in August 2022 compared to 2.1 per cent in February 2020), and combined, there were 54.2 per cent of Australians who met socially less than once a week in August 2022 compared to 41.4 per cent in February 2020.

Figure 7 Social interaction, Australia, February 2020 to August 2022



Source: Life in Australia, February 2020; ANUpoll: April, May, and November 2020; October 2021; and April and August 2022

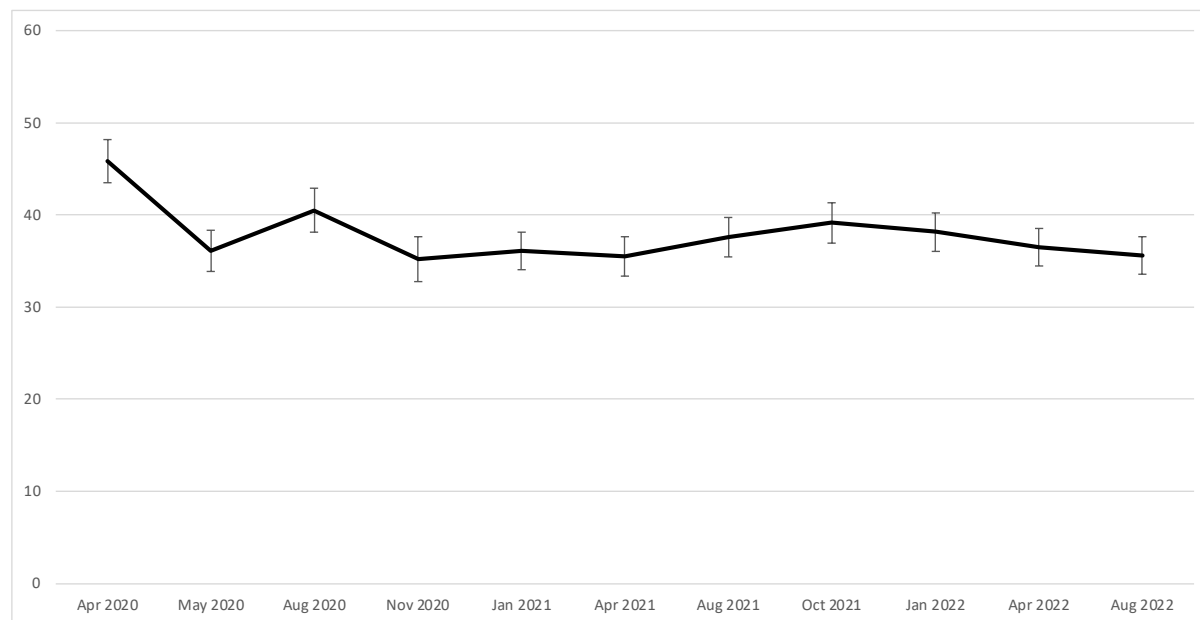
Loneliness has been described as a discrepancy between someone’s preferred and actual social relations and can lead to a negative feeling of social isolation and extended periods of loneliness has been found to be associated with increased mortality (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018). This does not necessarily mean that people need to be alone to feel lonely, people can be lonely in a crowd or in a marriage. On the other hand, people can be alone, but not lonely, especially if that situation is a choice made with true agency.

Since the start of the pandemic, respondents have been asked ‘In the past week, how often have you felt lonely?’ with four response options: rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day); some or a little of the time (1 to 2 days); occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3 to 4 days); most or all of the time (5 to 7 days).

There was a very high level of loneliness in April 2020, with 45.8 per cent of Australians saying that they were lonely at least some of the time (Figure 8) (data on loneliness was not collected

prior to the pandemic). Loneliness declined after that first month of country-wide lockdowns, and then fluctuated slightly throughout the next two years. However, even in August 2022 more than one-third of Australians (35.6 per cent) reported having experienced loneliness at least some of the time in the week prior to the survey.

Figure 8 Per cent of Australians reporting that they had experienced loneliness, April 2020 to April 2022



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

Source: ANUpoll: April, May, August, and November 2020; January, April, August, October 2021; and January, April, and August 2022

4 Views on Australia and its institutions

Confidence in key institutions are important measures in a country or jurisdiction for two main reasons. First, they tell us something about the performance of these institutions through time. Secondly, the level of public confidence in institutions is an important factor in determining behaviour that is required by or mediated through interaction with those institutions. For example, throughout the pandemic people have been shown to be more likely to get vaccinated if they have trust or confidence in the institutions that are administering the vaccine, or encouraging people to get vaccinated (Edwards et al. 2021). In this section, we consider views on satisfaction with the direction of the country, and confidence in key institutions.

4.1 Confidence in institutions

There has been a substantial increase in confidence in the Federal Government following the change of government at the May 2022 Federal Election (Figure 9a). The proportion of Australians who had quite a lot or a great deal of confidence in the Federal Government increased from 35.6 per cent in April 2022 just prior to the election to 52.9 per cent in August 2022. While this was still below the peak confidence achieved by the then Morrison government in the early months of the pandemic (60.6 per cent in May 2020), the increase between April and August 2022 is the first significant reversal after more-or-less continuous declines since November 2020.

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Confidence in the public service increased substantially in the early months of the pandemic (from 48.7 per cent in January 2020 to 67.5 per cent in May 2020). It has declined substantially since November 2020, however, with a low of 54.5 per cent in April 2022. Since then, confidence in the public services has increased slightly to be 57.9 per cent in August 2022 (Figure 9b). Confidence in the state/territory government in the jurisdiction in which a person lives, however, was quite steady over the period between the last two waves of data collection (54.8 per cent in April compared to 53.9 per cent in August 2022), though it is still well above what it was pre-pandemic (40.4 per cent in January 2020).

Figure 9a 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 2022

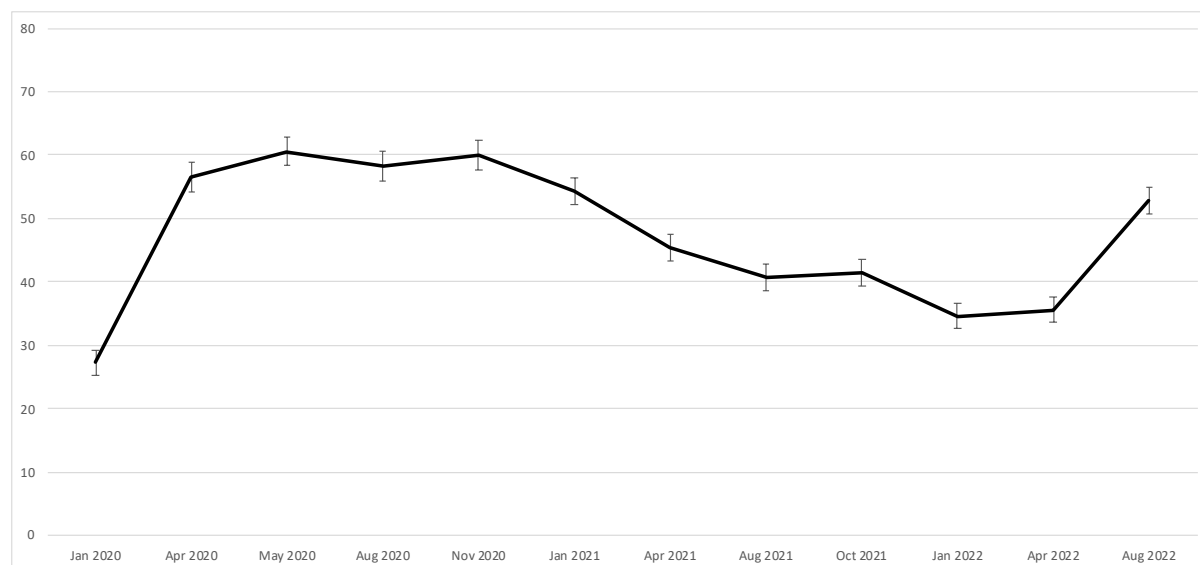


Figure 9b Per cent of Australians who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in State/Territory government in which a person lives – January 2020 to August 2022

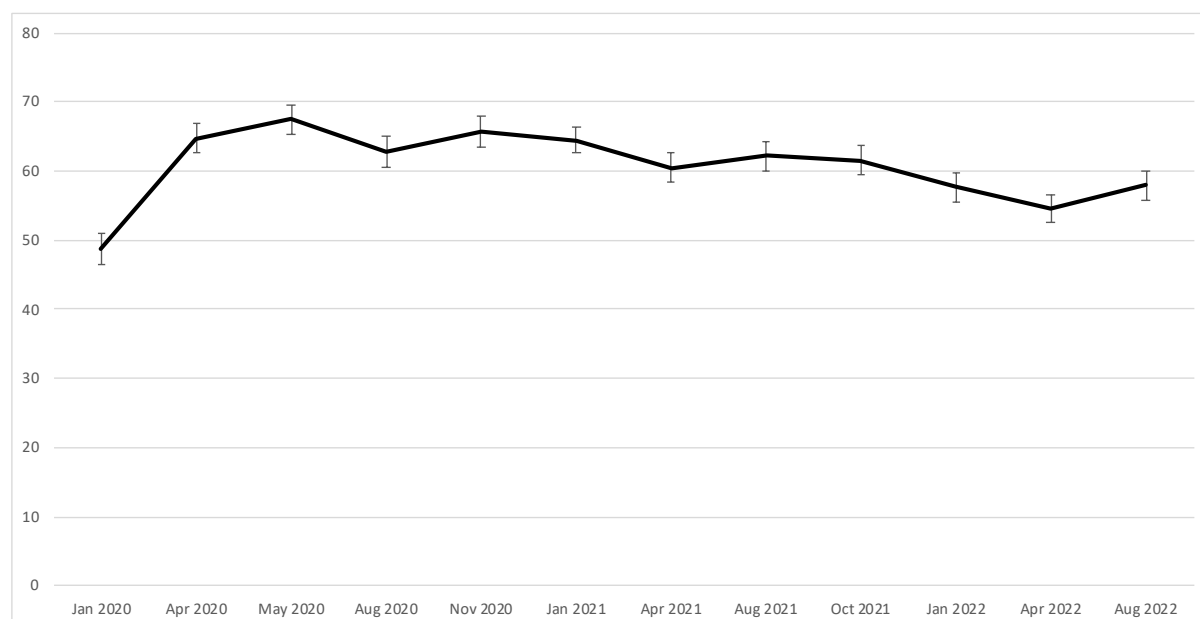
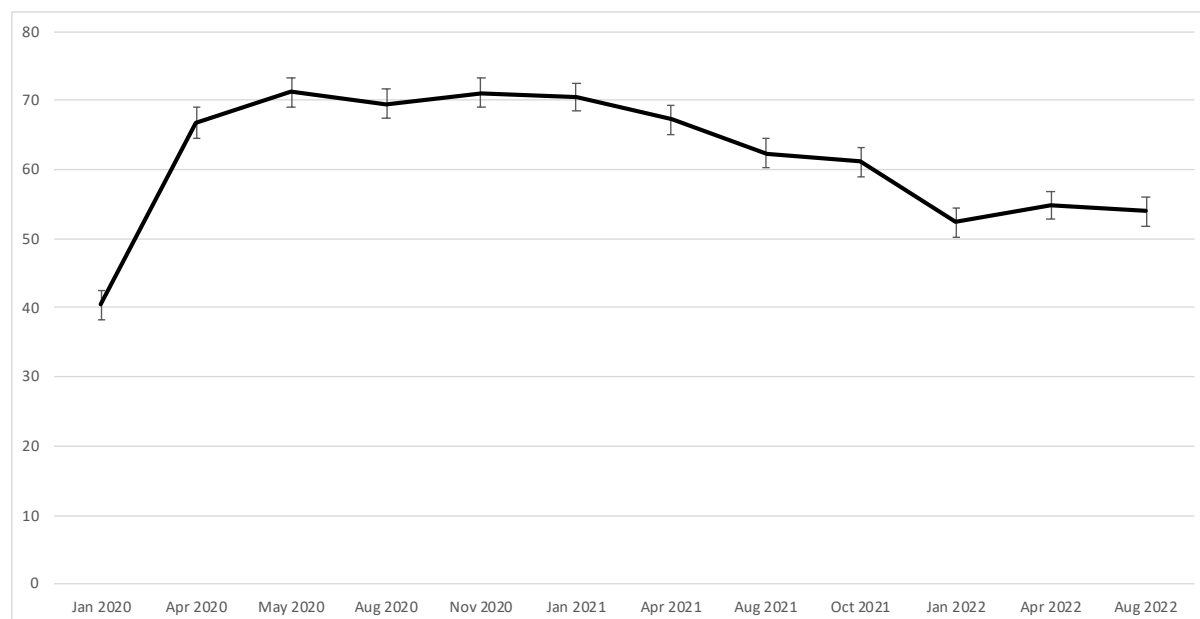


Figure 9c Per cent of Australians who had a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in the public service – January 2020 to August 2022



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; January, April, August, October 2021; and January, April, and August 2022

Changes in confidence in the Federal government are, not surprisingly, strongly related to voter support. We can show this using our longitudinal dataset, with 3,134 observations where we have data on confidence in April 2022 (when it was a Coalition Federal Government led by former Prime Minister Scott Morrison) as well as August 2022 (the current Labor Government led by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese).

The increase in confidence was greatest for those who would have voted Labor in April 2022, increasing from 18.6 per cent confident to 66.6 per cent confident. There was also quite a large increase amongst those who would have voted for a party other than Labor or the Coalition (or did not know who they would vote for), with their confidence increasing from 16.6 per cent to 42.8 per cent. There was quite a high level of confidence in the Federal Government in April 2022 amongst Coalition voters (72.9 per cent). While there was a decline in confidence for this group between April and August 2022 (to 47.6 per cent), the fact that confidence in the Labor government amongst former Coalition voters is so much higher than the confidence in the Coalition government amongst non-Coalition voters prior to the election explains why overall confidence has increased by so much.

Controlling for confidence in the Federal Government in April 2022, as well as voting intentions in the same survey, there are still a number of demographic and socioeconomic factors that predict confidence in the Federal Government in August 2022. Given the availability of longitudinal data, we can interpret the results as the factors associated with change in confidence. Estimated using an ordered probit model (Appendix Table 1), it is not surprising that Labor voters have had a more positive change in confidence compared to Coalition voters. Greens voters also had a more positive change (though less positive than Labor voters); however it is interesting to note that those who would have voted for a party other than the

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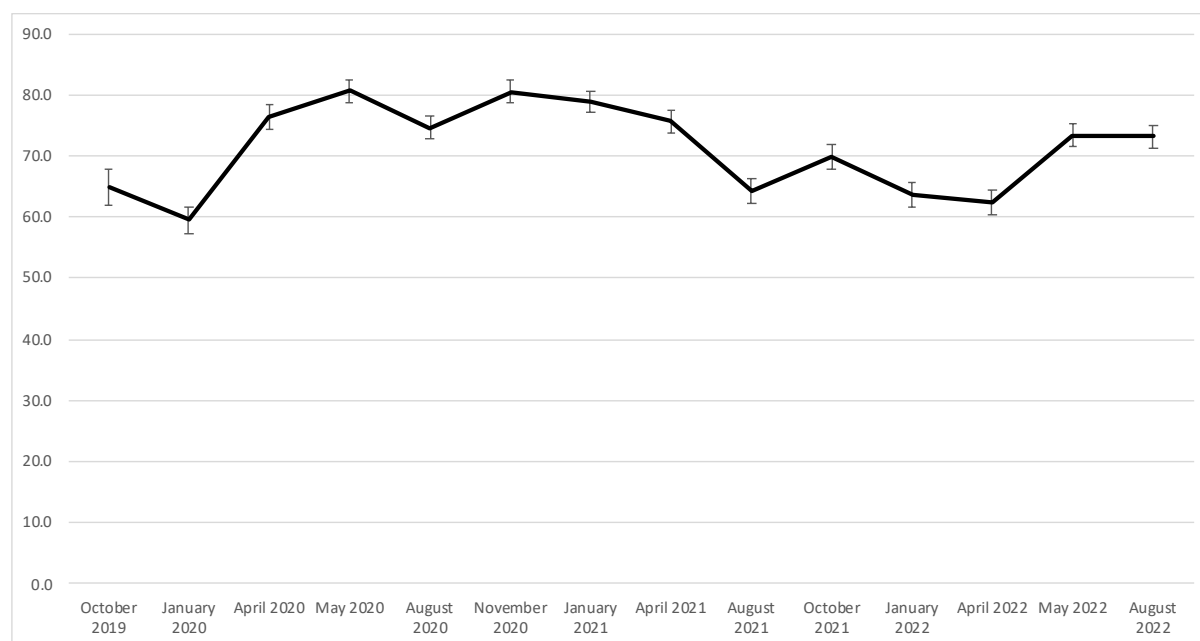
Coalition, Labor or the Greens have had a less positive change in voting intentions compared to Coalition voters.

Younger Australians had less confidence than older Australians (controlling for confidence in April 2022), whereas those born overseas in a non-English speaking country had a more positive change in confidence compared to those born in Australia. People who speak a language other than English at home had a less positive change compared to those who speak English only, whereas those who had not completed Year 12 had a less positive change than those who had completed Year 12. Finally, those whose household income places in the top quintile of the distribution had a more positive change than the middle and lower part of the income distribution.

4.2 Satisfaction with the direction of the country

In every ANUpoll survey since October 2019 respondents have been asked ‘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 increase in satisfaction between April and August 2022 (Figure 10), with all of the change occurring between April and May 2022.

Figure 10 Per cent of Australians who were satisfied or very satisfied with the direction of the country – October 2019 to August 2022.



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; January, April, August, October 2021; and January, April, May, and August 2022

5 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. The first is to track individual level changes in wellbeing using questions that were asked before COVID-19 and a number of times since the pandemic reached Australia using the longitudinal nature of the data. This allows analysis both of change in wellbeing and what predicts change in wellbeing at the individual level. The strength of this

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 COVID-19 reaching Australia. While the ANUpoll series includes measures that cover quite a wide range of individual level outcomes, there are a number of aspects of wellbeing for which data pre COVID-19 is not available. An alternative is to ask respondents about what the impact of COVID-19 has been on them. In August 2022 we therefore repeated a number of questions from the May 2020 and August 2021 surveys with the previous surveys asking about change since COVID-19 and the August 2022 survey asking about the last 12-months (that is, since August 2021).

While a person's perception of the impact of an event may not always be accurate, research has shown that this approach can provide valuable insights.

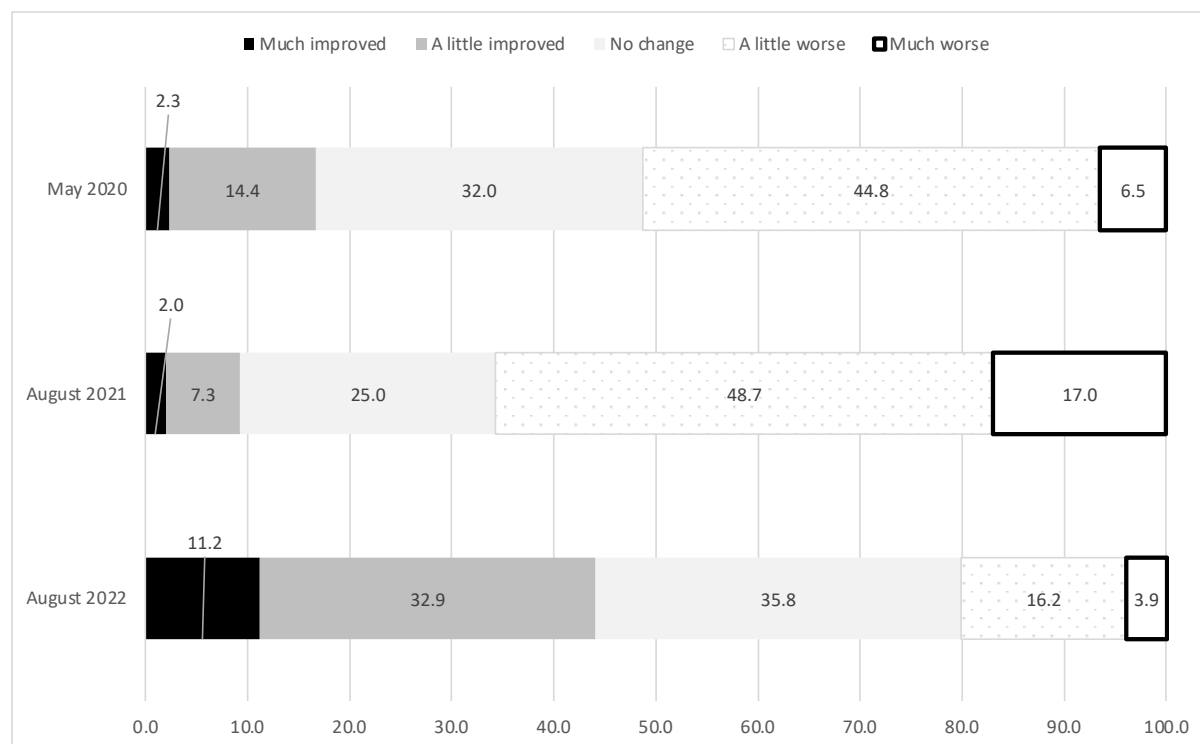
5.1 Whether life has worsened/improved

The first question asked in May 2020/August 2021 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. In August 2022, respondents were asked a similar question – 'Since August 2021, that is in the last 12 months, do you think that your life is...?', with the same response options.

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 11). By August 2021 two-thirds (65.7 per cent) of Australians thought that their life had gotten worse with 17.0 per cent thinking it had gotten much worse.

By August 2022, only about one-in-five Australians thought that their life had gotten worse in the 12-months since August since August 2021), with only 3.9 per cent thinking that their life had got much worse and 16.2 per cent that it had gotten a little worse. Compared to the peak of the Delta-wave of infections in Australia (mid-2021) when much of the east coast of Australia were commencing their second or (in the case of Victoria) third wave of prolonged lockdown conditions, 11.2 per cent of Australians think their life has much improved with 32.9 per cent thinking it is a little improved.

Figure 11 Whether respondent’s life has improved or worsened in the last 12-months – May 2020, August 2021, and August 2022



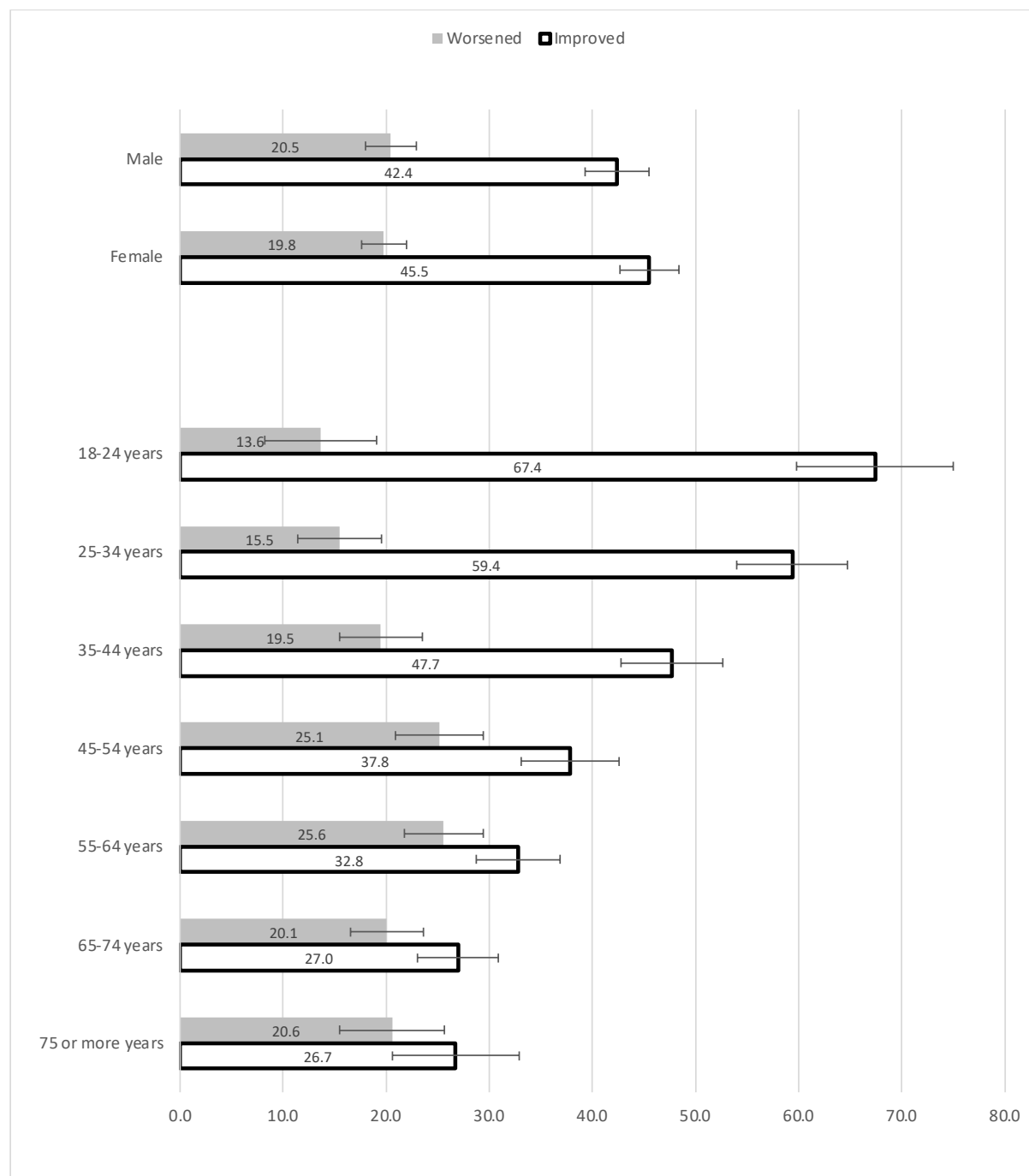
Source: ANUpoll: May 2020, August 2021, and August 2022.

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 in the last 12-months. 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 A2.

Females were more positive about their life now compared to 12-months previously. While there is no difference in the proportion of males and females who thought that their life had worsened in the last 12-months (20.5 per cent compared to 19.8 per cent), Figure 12 shows that females were more likely to say that their life had improved (45.5 per cent) compared to males (42.4 per cent).

Young Australians (aged 18 to 34) were also more positive about the previous 12-months, particularly compared to those aged 45 to 64 (Figure 15). Specifically, only 13.6 per cent of those aged 18 to 24 and 15.5 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 thought their life had gotten worse over the previous 12-months compared to 25.1 and 25.6 per cent of those aged 45 to 54 and 55 to 64 respectively. On the other hand, more than two-thirds of those aged 18 to 24 thought that their life had improved (67.4 per cent) and 59.4 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 thought their life had improved. There was a mostly linear decline across the rest of the age distribution with only 26.7 per cent of those aged 75 years and over thinking their life had improved.

Figure 12 Whether respondent’s life has improved or worsened in the last 12-months, by age and sex, August 2022



Source: ANUpoll: August 2022.

In addition to age and sex, there were large differences by whether or not a person lived in a capital city (those outside of capital cities being more positive about the last 12 months) and household income (those with higher incomes being more positive about the last 12 months).

5.2 Outlook for the future

The May 2020, August 2021 and August 2022 survey waves also include a question about whether respondents thought that their longer-term outlook has more positive or more negative. The May 2020 and August 2021 surveys included the question ‘How has your outlook

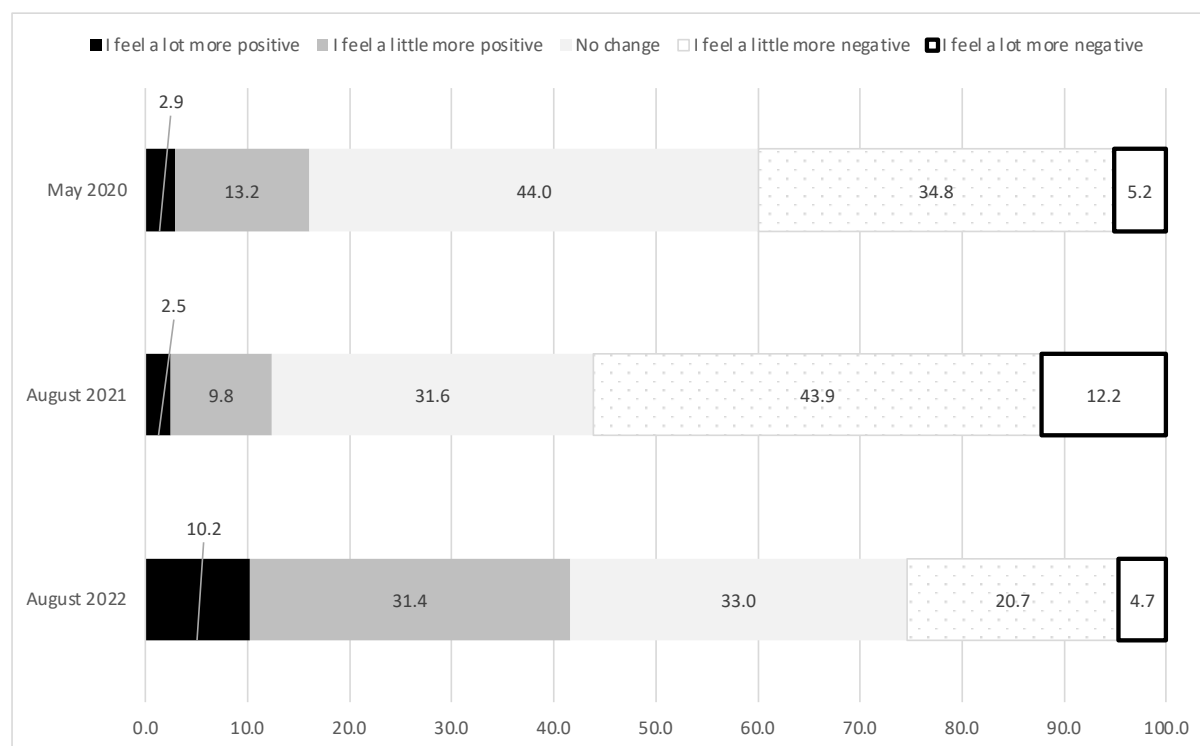
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for your longer-term future, i.e., 5-10 years from now, changed since the spread of COVID-19?’ with information sought on whether their outlook has become more positive or more negative, and by how much. The August 2022 survey included the question ‘How has your outlook for your longer-term future, i.e., 5-10 years from now, changed since August 2021, that is in the last 12 months?’

Respondents in August 2021 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 13). In the 12 months since August 2021 however, there has been a quadrupling in the per cent of Australians who feel a lot more positive about the future (2.5 to 10.2 per cent), and a tripling in the per cent who feel a little more positive about the future (9.8 to 31.4 per cent).

A similar statistical model was estimated to understand the factors associated with self-reported changes in outlook for the future. Younger Australians were more likely to report that their hope for the future had improved in the last 12 months, as were those with relatively high incomes.

Figure 13 Whether respondents thought their outlook for the future had become more positive or more negative – May 2020, August 2021, and August 2022



Source: ANUpoll: May 2020 and August 2021.

5.3 Changes in stress levels

The third question on change through time related to people’s stress levels. Specifically, the May 2020 and August 2021 surveys included the question ‘How has the level of stress you typically feel day-to-day changed since the spread of COVID-19?’. The August 2022 survey included the question ‘How has the level of stress you typically feel day-to-day changed since August 2021, that is in the last 12 months?’ Respondents could answer that they felt a lot or a

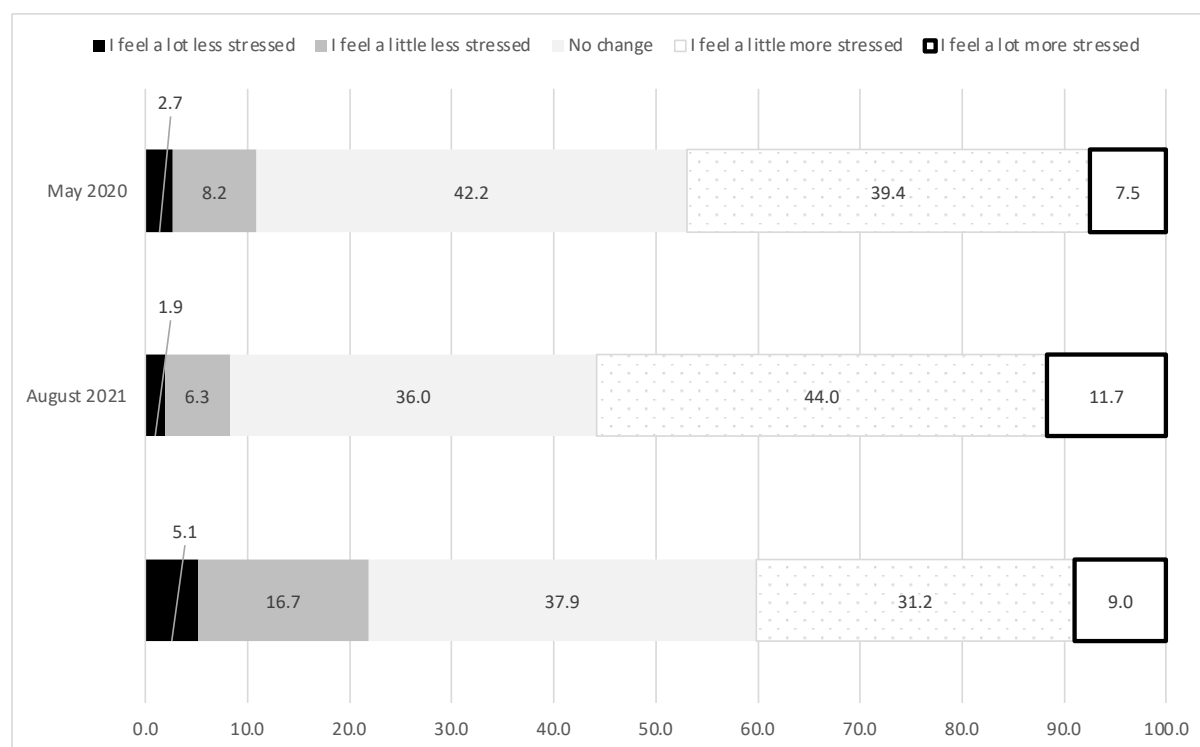
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little more stressed, no change, or a lot or a little less stressed (that is, five response options in total).

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 more stressed (a little and a lot more stressed) – from 47.0 per cent in May 2020 to 55.1 per cent in August 2021 (Figure 14). This included an increase in the proportion who felt a lot more stressed, from 7.5 per cent to 11.3 per cent.

In the August 2022 survey, there were still more people who thought that their stress levels had gone up in the last 12 months (40.2 per cent) compared to people who thought their stress levels had gone down (21.8 per cent). However, the magnitude of that difference was far less than in previous waves of data collection.

Figure 14 Whether respondents experienced an increase or decrease in stress levels – May 2020, August 2021, and August 2022



Source: ANUpoll: May 2020, August 2021, and August 2022.

In the econometric model (where higher values indicate feeling more less stressed rather than more stressed), the biggest difference was by age. Specifically, older Australians and particularly those 65 years and over experienced a relative improvement in their stress levels over the last 12 months. In particular, those aged 65 years and over were less likely to say that their stress worsened (28.2 per cent) compared to those aged less than 65 years (43.5 per cent).

5.4 Changes in relationship quality

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?' (May 2020/August 2021) or 'How has the quality of your relationships with other people/family

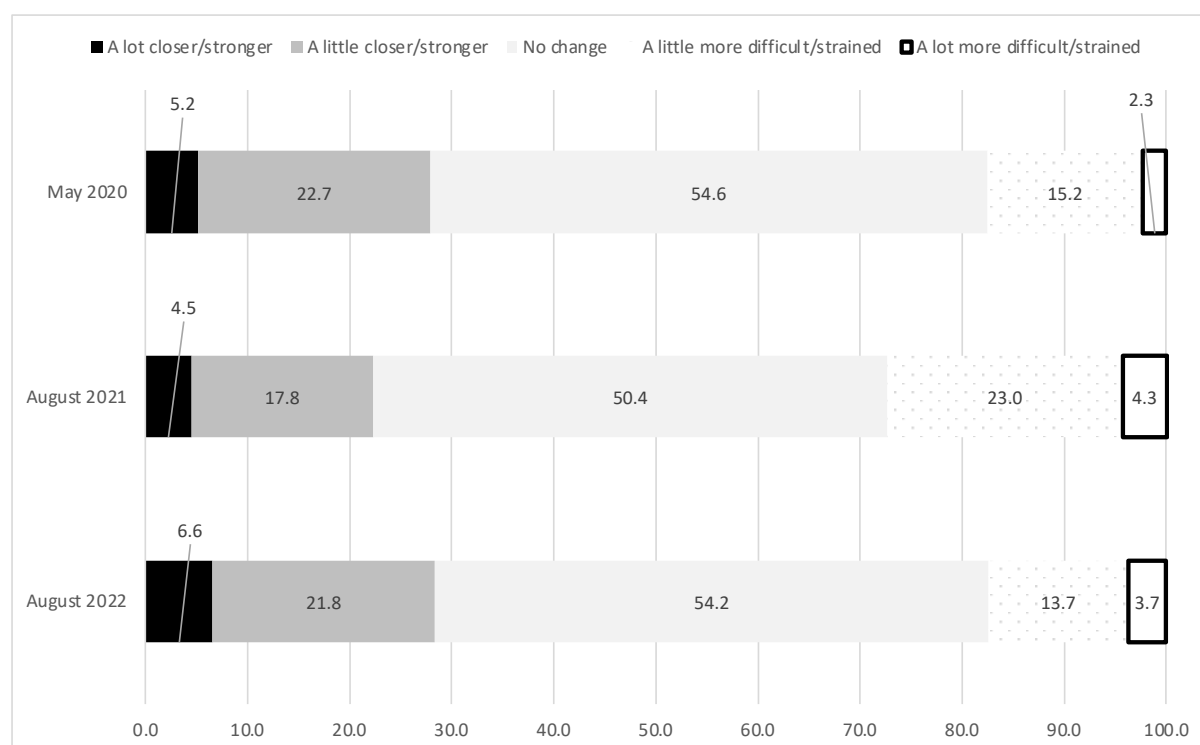
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members in your household changed since August 2021, that is in the last 12 months?’ (August 2022). Response options for this last question were A lot closer/stronger; A little closer/stronger; No change; A little more difficult/strained; and A lot more difficult/strained.

In examining the self-reported change in strength of respondents’ relationships with family members and others, in May 2020, August 2021, and August 2022, the most common response given was that there was no change in the strength of people’s relationships (Figure 15). This was given by 54.6 per cent of Australians in May 2020, 50.4 per cent of Australians in August 2021, and 54.2 per cent in August 2022.

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. By August 2022, on the other hand, the distribution was quite similar to May 2022, with 28.4 per cent of Australians saying that their relationship was stronger compared to 17.5 per cent saying that their relationship had gotten more difficult/strained.

Figure 15 Whether respondents experienced an improvement or a worsening in their relationships – May 2020, August 2021, and August 2022



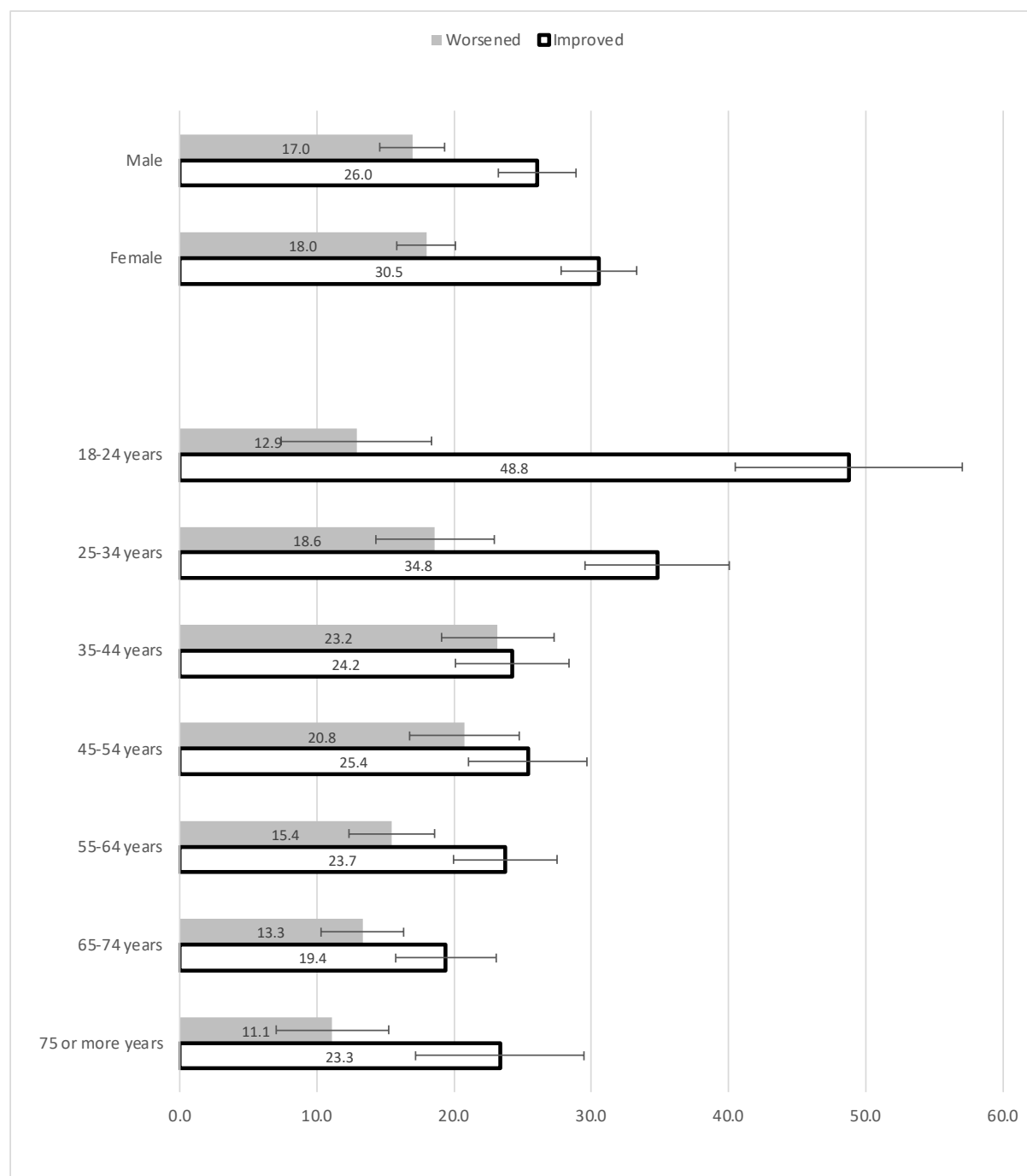
Source: ANUpoll: May 2020, August 2021, and August 2022.

In our final econometric model in this section (with higher values representing an improvement in relationship quality over the last 12 months), we find a non-linear relationship with age in that younger Australians (aged 18 to 24) and older Australians (aged 55 years and over) experienced a relative improvement in their relationship quality compared to those in the middle part of the age distribution (aged 35 to 44).

We can observe this pattern in the raw data (Figure 16) with the per cent of Australians who reported that their relationship got stronger/closer as well as the per cent who reported that

their relationship became more difficult/strained, by age and sex. There were not major differences by sex, though females are slightly more likely to report that their relationship had improved in the last 12 months. There were major differences by age though. Compared to those aged 35 to 44, those aged 18 to 24 and those aged 75 years and over were about half as likely to say that their relationships had got worse. While there were no major differences in the proportion of older Australians who said their relationship improved compared to those in the middle part of the age distribution, younger Australians and particularly those aged 18 to 24 were far more likely to say that their relationship quality had improved, with almost half of that age group (48.8 per cent) reporting an improvement.

Figure 16 Whether respondent’s relationship quality has improved or worsened, by age and sex, August 2022



Source: ANUpoll: August 2022.

6 Concluding comments

Since the start of 2022, there has been a substantial increase in the level of subjective wellbeing in Australia. Compared to April 2022, Australians have a higher level of life satisfaction, a lower level of psychological distress, lower levels of loneliness, and a greater level of satisfaction with the direction of the country. Australians are also more confident in the Federal Government, even when voting intentions are taken into account. Taking a slightly longer-term perspective, compared to August 2021, Australians are more likely to think that their life is improving, more optimistic about the future, less stressed, and more likely to think that their relationship quality is improving.

That does not mean that Australia has returned to pre-pandemic levels of wellbeing and mental health. Life satisfaction was lower in August 2022 than it was in October 2019. There are also still more Australians who have high levels of psychological distress. However, wellbeing and mental health outcomes have improved over recent months as lockdown conditions have substantially eased, but despite high case numbers. Importantly, much of this improvement has been amongst young Australians, who from a mental health and wellbeing perspective were hit hardest by the pandemic.

On the one hand, this is not surprising as many of the COVID-19 restrictions that were still in place in April 2022 have been lifted, not to mention the even stricter policy environment that was in place across much of Australia in August 2021. However, at the same time there has been a dramatic increase in the number of people who have been infected by COVID-19, and a substantial increase in the number of hospitalisations and deaths due to COVID-19. It is not clear whether the effect of rising COVID-19 case numbers on wellbeing and related measures would have outweighed the effect of the easing of restrictions. Data presented in this paper suggest that they have not.

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Appendix Tables

Table A1 Factors associated with confidence in the Federal Government, August 2022

| Explanatory variables | Coeff. | Signif. |
|--|--------|---------|
| Confidence in April 2022 – None at all | -1.116 | *** |
| Confidence in April 2022 – Not very much | -0.740 | *** |
| Confidence in April 2022 – Quite a lot | -0.253 | |
| Would have voted Labor in April 2022 | 0.877 | *** |
| Would have voted Greens in April 2022 | 0.567 | *** |
| Would have voted 'other' party in April 2022 | -0.240 | ** |
| Did not know who would have voted for in April 2022 | 0.041 | |
| Female | 0.075 | |
| Aged 18 to 24 years | -0.139 | |
| Aged 25 to 34 years | -0.152 | * |
| Aged 45 to 54 years | 0.147 | * |
| Aged 55 to 64 years | 0.229 | *** |
| Aged 65 to 74 years | 0.432 | *** |
| Aged 75 years plus | 0.550 | *** |
| Indigenous | 0.143 | |
| Born overseas in a main English-speaking country | 0.071 | |
| Born overseas in a non-English speaking country | 0.262 | *** |
| Speaks a language other than English at home | -0.209 | ** |
| Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification | -0.331 | *** |
| Has a post graduate degree | 0.056 | |
| Has an undergraduate degree | 0.123 | |
| Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree | -0.084 | |
| Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile) | -0.017 | |
| Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile) | 0.147 | * |
| Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile) | 0.109 | |
| Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile) | 0.041 | |
| Lives outside of a capital city | -0.016 | |
| Lives in lowest income household (1st quintile) | -0.091 | |
| Lives in next lowest income household (2nd quintile) | -0.137 | |
| Lives in next highest income household (4th quintile) | -0.031 | |
| Lives in highest income household (5th quintile) | 0.165 | ** |
| Cut-point 1 | -1.683 | |
| Cut-point 2 | -0.167 | |
| Cut-point 3 | 1.811 | |
| Sample size | 2,854 | |

Notes: Ordered Probit Regression Model. The base case individual had a great deal of confidence in the federal government in April 2022, and would have voted for the Coalition. In addition, 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); lives in a capital city; lives in neither a high-income or low-income household (third quintile).

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 *

Source: ANUpoll: April and August 2022

Wellbeing outcomes in Australia as lockdowns ease and cases increase – August 2022

Table A2 Factors associated with views on life changes in the previous 12 months, August 2022

| Explanatory variables | Life overall | | Hope for the future | | Stress levels | | Relationship quality | |
|--|--------------|---------|---------------------|---------|---------------|---------|----------------------|---------|
| | Coeff. | Signif. | Coeff. | Signif. | Coeff. | Signif. | Coeff. | Signif. |
| Female | 0.112 | ** | 0.070 | | -0.004 | | 0.055 | |
| Aged 18 to 24 years | 0.516 | *** | 0.385 | *** | 0.090 | | 0.594 | *** |
| Aged 25 to 34 years | 0.256 | *** | 0.161 | * | 0.074 | | 0.218 | ** |
| Aged 45 to 54 years | -0.161 | ** | -0.141 | * | 0.173 | ** | 0.126 | |
| Aged 55 to 64 years | -0.222 | *** | -0.206 | *** | 0.112 | | 0.137 | * |
| Aged 65 to 74 years | -0.016 | | -0.146 | * | 0.359 | *** | 0.199 | ** |
| Aged 75 years plus | -0.061 | | -0.155 | | 0.270 | *** | 0.270 | *** |
| Indigenous | -0.206 | | 0.034 | | -0.185 | | -0.196 | |
| Born overseas in a main English-speaking country | -0.014 | | 0.061 | | -0.143 | ** | 0.067 | |
| Born overseas in a non-English speaking country | -0.009 | | 0.100 | | 0.259 | *** | -0.080 | |
| Speaks a language other than English at home | 0.052 | | 0.115 | | -0.070 | | 0.223 | ** |
| Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification | -0.021 | | -0.150 | | -0.096 | | 0.107 | |
| Has a post graduate degree | 0.083 | | -0.037 | | -0.119 | | 0.162 | * |
| Has an undergraduate degree | 0.135 | * | 0.045 | | -0.055 | | 0.068 | |
| Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree | -0.005 | | -0.063 | | -0.124 | * | 0.095 | |
| Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile) | -0.041 | | 0.000 | | -0.040 | | -0.013 | |
| Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile) | 0.063 | | 0.152 | ** | 0.082 | | 0.123 | |
| Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile) | 0.074 | | 0.198 | *** | 0.113 | | 0.090 | |
| Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile) | 0.080 | | 0.104 | | 0.107 | | 0.058 | |
| Lives outside of a capital city | 0.179 | *** | 0.103 | * | 0.119 | ** | 0.011 | |
| Lives in lowest income household (1st quintile) | -0.295 | *** | -0.160 | * | -0.079 | | -0.032 | |
| Lives in next lowest income household (2nd quintile) | -0.185 | ** | -0.111 | | -0.110 | | -0.122 | |
| Lives in next highest income household (4th quintile) | 0.116 | | 0.116 | | 0.031 | | 0.072 | |
| Lives in highest income household (5th quintile) | 0.305 | *** | 0.199 | *** | 0.046 | | 0.046 | |
| Cut-point 1 | -1.626 | | -1.563 | | -1.231 | | -1.414 | |
| Cut-point 2 | -0.669 | | -0.518 | | -0.106 | | -0.554 | |
| Cut-point 4 | 0.360 | | 0.398 | | 0.912 | | 0.970 | |
| Cut-point 4 | 0.112 | ** | 0.070 | | -0.004 | | 0.055 | |
| Sample size | 3,189 | | 3,184 | | 3,188 | | 3,080 | |

Notes: Ordered Probit Regression Model. The base case 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); lives in a capital city; lives in neither a high-income or low-income household (third quintile).

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 *

Source: ANUpoll: August 2022

Endnotes

- 1 According to Hale et al. (2021) 'From 1 January 2020, the data capture government policies related to closure and containment, health and economic policy for more than 180 countries, plus several countries' subnational jurisdictions. Policy responses are recorded on ordinal or continuous scales for 19 policy areas, capturing variation in degree of response.' At the start of the data collection period, the Stringency Index was 73 on a scale of 0 to 100, where 100 is the strictest value possible.
- 2 <https://csrcm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/covid-19>
- 3 The ANUpoll series of surveys is collected on a probability-based, longitudinal panel (Life in Australia™). By using probability-based recruiting (predominantly telephone-based) the unknown and unquantifiable biases inherent in opt-in (non-probability) panels are minimised and it is also possible to quantify the uncertainty around the estimates due to sampling error using standard statistical techniques. This is not possible with non-probability surveys.
- 4 The unit record survey data is available for download through the Australian Data Archive (<http://dx.doi.org/10.26193/FCZGOK>).
- 5 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 follow up 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.
- 6 Taking into account recruitment to the panel, the cumulative response rate for this survey is around 6.8 per cent.
- 7 The difference between life satisfaction in April and August 2022 is statistically significant at the 1 per cent level for the sample of respondents who completed both survey waves.