



COPING WITH COVID-19: RETHINKING AUSTRALIA

Taking the Pulse of the Nation 2020

5. Help! High Levels of Parents' Mental
Distress



A woman with long blonde hair is shown in profile, talking on a mobile phone. In the background, a young child is sleeping peacefully in a bed. The entire image has a blue tint and a semi-transparent blue circle on the left side.

HELP! HIGH LEVELS OF PARENTS' MENTAL DISTRESS

Barbara Broadway, Susan Méndez, and Julie Moschion

Of the close to 5 million parents with children under 18 in Australia, 24 percent have reported high rates of mental distress since the start of the pandemic. This has persisted well beyond the end of local lockdowns.

Help! High Levels of Parents’ Mental Distress

Almost a quarter of parents are highly distressed

Pre-pandemic, eight percent of parents reported experiencing high levels of mental distress. During the pandemic, this rate has tripled, reaching 24 percent. While mental distress has increased across all populations in Australia in 2020, the rate for Australians without children at home is lower, and has increased much less (from 11 percent to 18 percent). Moreover, the increased level of mental distress is more acute in fathers than in mothers.

The pandemic has generated a new and concerning phenomenon. Having a job used to be a very strong predictor of being in good mental health, but now, employed parents are about as likely to be distressed as parents who are not employed. Especially striking is the increase in mental distress of employed parents who have primary school-aged children. These parents are now more distressed if they are employed, **than if they are not**.

What is more: partner employment has become much more important for one’s mental health. For mothers, the difference in rates of mental distress by partner’s employment has tripled (from 3 to 9 percentage points). For fathers, it has increased from virtually zero to a six to nine percentage point difference.

How do we make sense of those findings?

The impossible trade-off between family and work during COVID-19

Why has one’s own employment become less important, but partner’s employment has become more important for a parent’s mental health? The answer likely lies in the toll the pandemic took on the job market: not only did we see many job losses in 2020, there are also many more job losses looming next year. Worries about the family’s ability to pay for essentials are a great source of mental distress (Paul and Moser, 2009), and even for those who have jobs, greater job insecurity is a threat to mental health (Adam and Flatau, 2006). In that context, being in a dual-earner family provides insurance against financial disaster. As trust in one’s own job security has been eroded, having an employed partner can alleviate the worry. The pandemic has further exposed the fault lines of a model in which a sole breadwinner provides for the family; or, in other words, it supports a dual-earner model that can offer protection against mental distress.

Why does the situation look so particularly bleak for fathers? And why is it worse when the children are young? The likely reason is that the pandemic; amplified work-family conflicts (Hand et al., 2020); but this played out differently for mother and fathers, who had made different choices before the pandemic hit. After having children, mothers tended to move on to more flexible jobs, fewer working hours and less managerial responsibility, that allowed them to better solve family-work-conflicts (Laß,

2019). Fathers were less likely to do that: pre-pandemic, there was less pressure for them to do so. When the pandemic hit, fathers had to deal with increased family demands while being in jobs that do not necessarily allow flexible working arrangements, and without the option to change job given the current job market situation. Family-work conflict may also explain why mental distress is particularly prevalent for parents of young kids: as they require more supervision and care than older children the breakdown of social support systems through social distancing and lockdown measures generated greater work-family-conflict. The negative effects of work-family conflict on mental distress, especially for male parents, demonstrate how important it is for workplaces to make family-friendly policies accessible to men.

What do these patterns mean for Australia in 2021 and beyond?

Now is the time to incentivise dual-earner families and promote the use of family-friendly policies by both parents.

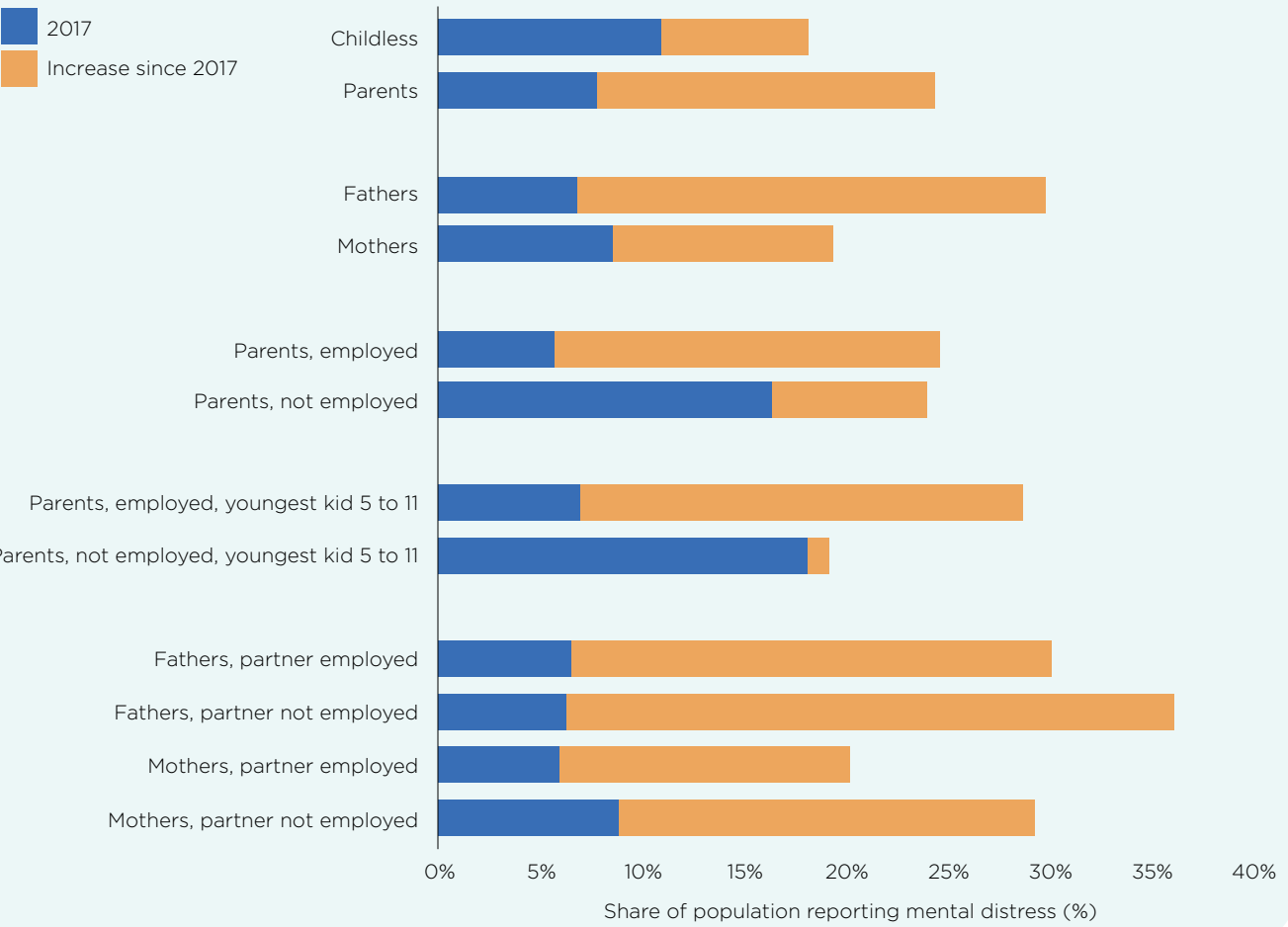
For richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health: Family-work balance in 2021 and beyond

Now is the time to incentivise dual-earner families and promote the use of family friendly policies by both parents. The message is clear: dual-earner family models protect parents’ mental health in times of uncertainty, and parents of both genders benefit from family-friendly policies that allow them to achieve a healthy balance between work and family life.

Harmonising family tax benefits “Part A and Part B” into one payment should be at the top of the policy priority list: the current structure often provides greater financial support to a one-earner-family than to a dual-earner-family with the same total income. This sets all the wrong incentives.

The *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey includes the question, ‘During the past week about how often did you feel depressed or anxious?’, while HILDA includes, ‘In the last four weeks, about how often did you feel nervous?’ as well as, ‘In the last four weeks, about how often did you feel depressed?’ Respondents can answer: all, most, some, a little, or none of the time. We define an individual to experience high mental distress, if they report to be depressed or nervous or both (HILDA)/ depressed or anxious (TTPN) “all of the time” or “most of the time”.

Figure 5.1 Incidence of Mental Distress – Comparison Between 2017 and 2020 for Selected Subgroups



Source. *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey, waves 10-21. The sample size is 6,831 observations on individuals aged 25-64. Only 3,422 observations were available for results by partner’s employment status. The figure also uses 10,395 observations on individuals aged 25-64 from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, Release 18, wave 17, for 2017 values.

Notes for Figure 5.1 Results are weighted to be representative of the Australian population aged 25-64. High mental distress is recorded if respondents report to be depressed or nervous or both (HILDA) / depressed or anxious (TTPN) “all of the time” or “most of the time”

The case for greater childcare subsidies targeted at low - and middle income families is strong. It would increase employment in the childcare sector, as well as employment of parents (typically mothers) for whom employment would not be otherwise economically feasible, thereby providing economic stimulus on two fronts. In the context of our analysis, this would not only provide mothers with an income they might not otherwise have, but also support fathers’ mental health. The introduction of free kindergarten in Victoria is a step in the right direction and an example for the rest of Australia.

There is a risk that fathers’ sustained experience of mental distress leads to even more serious mental health problems for fathers down the track, or to mothers’ leaving their jobs to alleviate their partner’s family-work conflict. This could have even worse consequences for their own financial security and for fathers’ mental health long-term. There

are a host of flexible workplace policies designed to ease family-work conflict, including carer’s leave, flexible access to annual leave, time off in lieu of overtime payments, part-time work, job share arrangements.

Moreover, if the pandemic has proven anything, it is that working from home is, in fact, possible in many workplaces that did not offer the option before March 2020. All this can go a long way in easing family-work-conflict. But more than anything, we are in dire need of a culture change in the workplace. For such policies to have a tangible effect, it is not enough that they exist on paper: it must be genuinely acceptable for men to make use of them.

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Acknowledgments

Coping with COVID-19: Rethinking Australia reflects the endeavour of many Melbourne Institute staff members. Special thanks go to the *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* (TTPN) Steering Committee (A. Abigail Payne, Guay Lim, Mark Wooden, Anthony Scott, Marco Castillo and Ragan Petrie) responsible for the conception and design of the Survey, to Guay Lim for writing the **TTPN Reports**, to Viet Hoang Nguyen for the preparation of the survey data for analysis and to Rajeev Samarage for the **TTPN tracker**. Many academic staff contributed to the *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* Research Insights, ably edited by Barbara Broadway and Nicolás Salamanca. The work was also efficiently supported by the Melbourne Institute Professional Staff (especially Logan Jacobs and Emily Wrethman), the University of Melbourne design team and the Faculty of Business and Economics Media & Communications team.

To draw comparisons with Australian’s economic and social outcomes before COVID-19, this report also uses other survey data collected in the years before the pandemic. This report uses unit record data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey. The HILDA Project was initiated and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services (DSS) and is managed by the Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research (Melbourne Institute). The findings and views reported in this report, however, are those of the authors and should not be attributed to either DSS or the Melbourne Institute.

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ISBN: 978 0 7340 5619 1

© The University of Melbourne, Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, 2020

Suggested citation: Broadway, B, Payne A. A. & Salamanca, N. (Eds.) (2020). *Coping with COVID-19: Rethinking Australia*. Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research, the University of Melbourne.

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Researchers at the Melbourne Institute have been informing and shaping economic and social policy in Australia since its establishment in 1962. The Melbourne Institute's list of longstanding accomplishments includes the creation of such things as: the Henderson Poverty line, the blueprint for Medicare, the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, the Australian Economic Review, and the Consumer Sentiment Index. Melbourne Institute researchers have engaged in analyses on critical issues such as poverty, economic growth and inflation, housing and family structure, healthcare and wellbeing, employment and skill development, and tax and transfer policies.

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The *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey was created for the purpose of being able to track the economic and social wellbeing of Australians and to provide measures of attitudes and willingness to take on risk given the coronavirus pandemic. These data have been used to provide timely insights that track behaviour and inform policy.

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