

## Research Insights

# Are men generally happier if their partner is employed?

The new pandemic environment of unpredictability seems to have uncovered a vulnerability among men not often seen before. It seems men's mental health is now measurably responsive to their partner's employment status, raising the importance of women's participation in the labour market.

# Why would partner's employment matter?

Lack of employment, especially when it is not by choice, can take a toll on one's mental health in many ways: through low income, isolation, social stigma, or a lack of purpose and meaning. It does not stop at one person - the jobless person's partner can also be affected. Stress from joblessness can lead to conflict and deteriorating relationships, with negative impacts on the mental health of partners. Economically, a single-income family's earnings are usually lower *and* less secure than that of a dual-income family. Having to cut back on non-essential spending can create conflict in couples, while concern about the family's ability to make ends meet can cause stress and anxiety. However, having a partner who is not employed may not be all bad: it should reduce the burden of housework and childcare, which could alleviate stress and improve mental health.

Historically, we found that women's mental health was negatively affected by a partner's involuntary job loss, but men's was not (for example Marcus, 2013; Bubonya and Cobb-Clark; 2017). It seemed as though women's lack of employment was either less of a stressor for a family, or men were more resilient in the face of that stressor. This Research Insight shows this to have changed: since the beginning of the pandemic, men's mental health has been very much connected to their partner's job.

Why could that be? The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a change in economic conditions: typically, if one partner lost work, likely the other partner's job was still relatively secure.

The almost economy-wide standstill brought on by sudden, unpredictable lockdowns is different: a household with only one earner is close to the brink of being a jobless household. And this shift in risk seems to have uncovered a vulnerability among men to their partner's employment situation. Men's response to their partner's joblessness might be driven by how much uncertainty there is in the economic world they live in.

To examine if that's the case, our research seeks to answer the following: do men experience distress when their partner does not work? If so, which men? Is their experience more severe when there is greater uncertainty in the world?

We address these by estimating statistical relationships between men's mental health and their partner's employment status, using data from the Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey (TTPN) from August 2020 to November 2021.

To address the third question, we examine if men's response to a partner's joblessness is different in three distinct timeframes that were characterised by different levels of uncertainty: i) before the repeal of JobKeeper in March 2021, when there was a safety net in place protecting most Australians from losing their income; ii) April to June 2021, when JobKeeper had been repealed, but the labour market seemed well on its way to recovery; and iii) after July 2021, when state-wide lockdown in New South Wales and Victoria called that economic recovery into question.

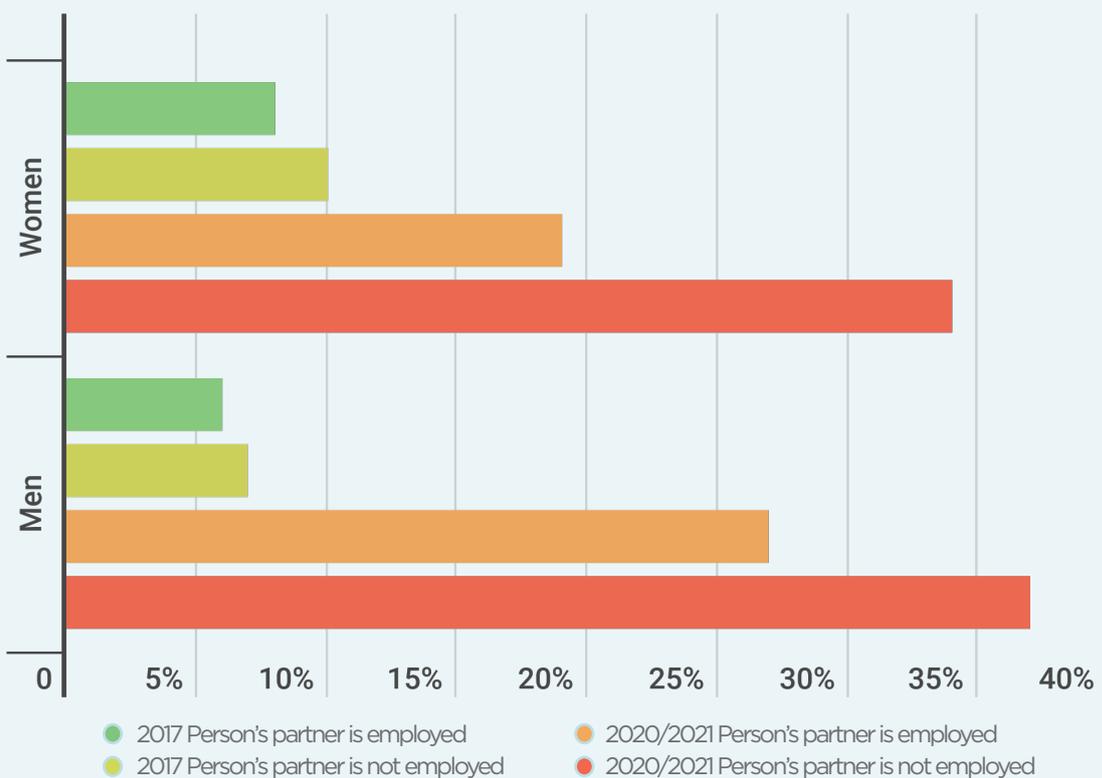
# Key Insights

## 1 Men experience distress if their partner is jobless. That's new.

Figure 1 shows how many men and women reported mental distress, depending on whether their partner is employed. For comparison, equivalent results from the HILDA survey in 2017 are also included. The prevalence of mental distress has increased more for men than for women and, regardless of gender, even more for people whose partner is jobless than for those whose partner is employed.

There is one especially striking new finding: while women's mental health has for a long time depended a great deal on their partner's employment, men's prevalence of mental distress used to be fairly unresponsive to whether their partner (usually a woman<sup>1</sup>) had a job or not. This is no longer the case: 37% of men whose partner is jobless now report mental distress, versus 27% of men whose partner is employed. We conclude that women's employment matters to men's mental health.

Figure 1: Men's and women's mental distress, by their partner's job situation



Source: Figures for 2020/21 are based on 10,491 responding persons who lived in a household with their partner and were between 18 and 54 years old, included in 23 waves of the TTPN survey. Figures for 2017 are based on 6,952 responding persons who lived in a household with their partner and were between 18 and 54 years old included in the HILDA survey, wave 17. All results are weighted to be representative of the Australian population aged 18 to 54 living with a partner at the time of interview. Author's own calculation and illustration.

<sup>1</sup> The TTPN data does not allow us to distinguish between opposite-sex couples and same-sex couples. For simplicity, the remainder of this Research Insight assumes men's partners to be women.

## 2 Their experience depends on their family situation.

Figure 2 shows the degree to which men are *more* likely to be in mental distress when their partner is not employed, compared to when they are<sup>2</sup>. The prevalence of mental distress increases for childless men, and even more so for men with school-aged children. But men with at least one child below school age are less likely to report mental distress if their partner is not employed.

This likely reflects that in couples with very young children, one parent leaving the workforce is often planned, voluntary, and temporary, but that is less likely when all children are school aged. Unplanned and/or involuntary joblessness is typically experienced as much more stressful by the jobless person and, as it appears, also by their partner. At the same time, the family's material needs are higher with school-aged children than is the case for childless couples.

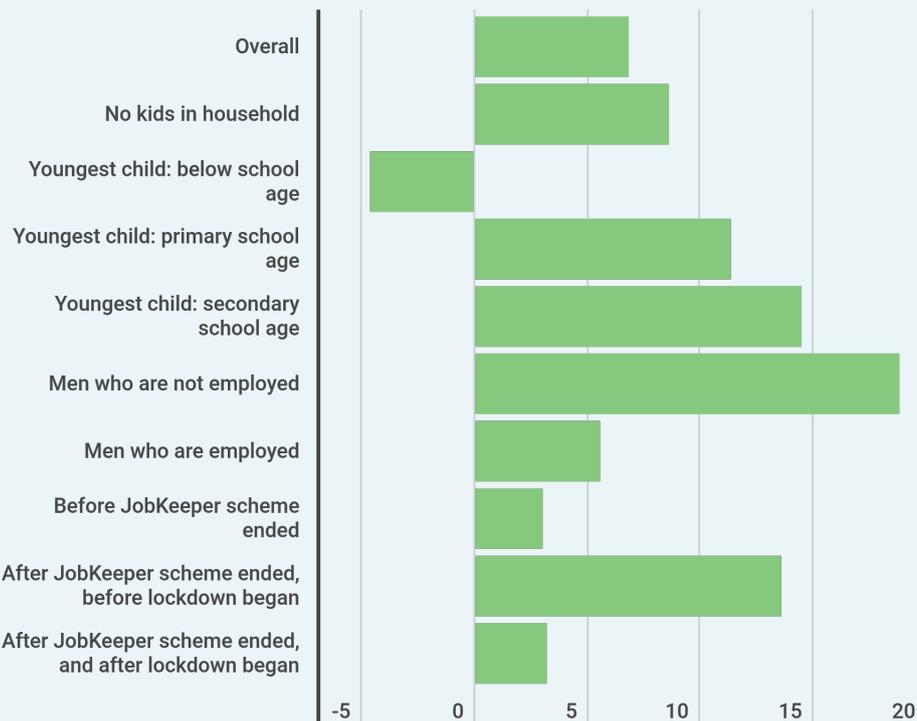
## 3 They feel the heat even when they are themselves (currently) employed.

Figure 2 also shows men's mental distress from their partner's lack of employment, depending on their own employment status. Men are substantially more likely to experience mental distress when their partner is not employed if they are also not employed themselves. Being in a relationship where *both* partners do not earn a living, is — unsurprisingly — a very stressful experience for most Australians.

However, there is also a substantial increase in the prevalence of mental distress (by nearly six percentage points) from partner's joblessness, for men who do themselves have a job. While not as stressful as living in a jobless household, being the sole earner in a couple still appears to be a substantial source of mental distress for men.

<sup>2</sup>. The estimated effects stem from a regression of men's mental distress on their partner's employment status. The coefficient is allowed to vary by presence and age of children, and the man's own employment status, as well as by broad timing of the interview: before and after 28 March (indicating the end of JobKeeper), and before and after 22 July (indicating the beginning of full lockdown in Sydney and one week later Melbourne). In addition, the model accounts for overall differences in mental distress by age group, rural and metro areas, states, and week of interview.

Figure 2: Increased prevalence of men’s mental distress when their partner is jobless, relative to when their partner is employed



Source: Based on 5,121 responding men who lived in a household with their partner and were between 18 and 54 years old, included in 23 waves of the TTPN survey. All results are weighted to be representative of the Australian male population aged 18 to 54 living with a partner at the time of interview. Author’s own calculation and illustration.

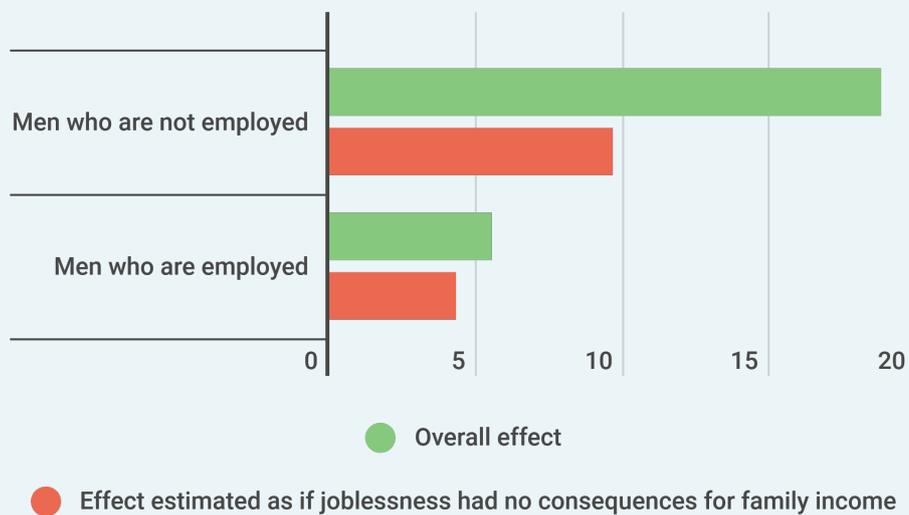
Notes: ‘children’ are all persons living in the household who are less than 18 years old, regardless of biological relationship to the respondent. Age of youngest child is defined as: ‘below school age’ = 0 to less than 5 years, ‘primary school age’ = 5 to less than 12 years, ‘secondary school age’ = 12 to less than 18 years. The period ‘Before JobKeeper scheme ended’ includes 1,591 interviews held between 17 August 2020 and 20 March 2021, ‘After JobKeeper ended and before lockdown began’ includes 1,789 interviews held between 05 April 2021 and 22 July 2021, and ‘After JobKeeper ended and after lockdown began’ includes 1,741 interviews held between 02 August 2021 and 19 November 2021. The presented effects stem from a linear regression of men’s mental distress on their partner’s employment status, which the estimation allows to differ by presence and age of children in the household, own employment status, and broad timing of the interview in three periods. In addition, the estimation controlled for age group (18-24 yrs, 25-34 yrs, 35-44 yrs, 45-54 yrs) location (the rural and metro areas of NSW, VIC, QLD, SA, WA, as well as TAS and ACT) and week of interview.

#### 4 Their fear is likely not because they don't have enough money now...

Having a partner who is not employed reduces the family's income compared to having an employed partner - and this lower income could ultimately be the source of the mental distress we observe. To test this, we estimated a model that can tell us how men's mental health would be affected by their partner's joblessness, if that joblessness had no consequences for family income<sup>3</sup>. Figure 3 compares these results with the overall effect reported in Figure 2. The comparison reveals two things.

First, for men who are not employed, the lack of partner income indeed matters a great deal; if their partner *could* be jobless without reducing family income, their partner's joblessness would affect their mental health only about half as much as it actually does. Second, that is not the case for men who are employed; their mental health suffers from their partner's lack of employment regardless of how much money the family currently has or how financially stressed they currently feel as a result. It's unclear what exactly makes employed men distressed when their partners do not work, but current income does not seem to be behind it.

Figure 3: Increased prevalence of men's mental distress when their partner is jobless, relative to when their partner is employed - the role of family income



Source: based on 5,121 responding men who lived in a household with their partner and were between 18 and 54 years old, included in 23 waves of the TTPN survey. All results are weighted to be representative of the Australian male population aged 18 to 54 living with a partner at the time of interview. Author's own calculation and illustration.

Notes: green bars repeat results shown in Figure 2 for comparison. Orange bars are from a model that additionally includes measures of income and financial stress. As a result, mental distress caused by current financial situation is 'netted out' and removed from the estimated effect of partner's employment status on men's mental health.

<sup>3</sup>. This can be estimated by including measures of the family's financial situation into the model, which calculates the effect of all other characteristics in the model (including the most important one - partner's employment) while 'holding family income constant'. We added total family income, as well as self-reported financial stress to the estimation.

## 5 ... but because they fear an uncertain future.

So what is the reason for employed men's mental distress? It is possible that the pattern we see is the result not of *low income*, but of *income insecurity*.

The TTPN survey does not directly collect information on how worried an employed respondent is about his own job security. But there are two indirect indicators: the end of JobKeeper in March, and the beginning of extended lockdown in NSW and Victoria at the end of July. While it is unclear if either event materially worsened the situation in the labour market, it stands to reason that they made people more worried.

Figure 2 shows that the additional prevalence in mental distress experienced by men whose partners are

jobless, increased from three percentage points in all surveys conducted before March 2021, to 13 percentage points in all surveys conducted between March and July, and then decreased again to three percentage points in August to November. It is not plausible that lockdowns should have improved people's perception of their job security. More likely is that the negative effect of the end of JobKeeper began to wear off, as the negative expectations surrounding it did not materialise.

While these findings are not ironclad proof, they are very much consistent with a story in which men experience mental distress when they are the sole breadwinner in an environment of economic uncertainty.

### MENTAL DISTRESS

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As part of the information collected to construct the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), the HILDA Survey asks respondents the questions: *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 be in high mental distress, if they respond "all of the time" or "most of the time" to one or both questions.

The *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey includes the question *During the past week about how often did you feel depressed or anxious?*, with the same response options as in the HILDA Survey. We define an individual to experience high mental distress, if they respond "all of the time" or "most of the time".

### JOBKEEPER

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On 30 March 2020, the Australian Federal Government announced the introduction of the JobKeeper payment. The payment was a wage subsidy paid by the Government to businesses significantly impacted by the Coronavirus. It paid \$1500 per fortnight for every eligible employee in eligible businesses, whether they were able to work or not. The scheme ended on 29 March 2021.

# A dual-earner family is an ‘insurance policy’ that requires policy support

There is no shortage of reasons to implement policies that support women’s employment: men and women equally participating in the working world is necessary to prevent female poverty in old age, ensures women’s financial independence especially during the child-rearing years, enriches the workplace, boosts family income, increases tax revenues and is simply what is equitable and fair.

But there is another good reason that is often overlooked in the debate: a dual-earner model provides some level of insurance to the whole family unit against shocks such as ill health and unemployment. This is particularly important in Australia, because unlike many industrialised nations, we have no universal, public insurance scheme against those risks except for heavily means-tested income support payments that are only a fifth of the median wage (ACOSS 2021). Ordinary families have limited options to deal with those risks. They can ‘save for a rainy day’, which is not ideal now that our economic recovery hinges on people’s willingness to spend. They can just live with the risk and hope it will never become reality for their family, which is also not ideal as it appears to take a toll on mental health. Or they can adopt a dual-earner model, to ensure that their family income comes from two independent sources rather than just one.

Given that the findings in this Research Insight are quite different from what we used to see pre-pandemic, more research is needed to ascertain the exact pathway by which men’s mental health is connected to their partner’s employment. But the evidence so far supports that income insecurity plays an important role for men’s mental health.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted predominantly in the loss of jobs held by women (Wilkins 2020, Risse and Jackson 2021), and the economic recovery seemed strong at the beginning of the year. But after long lockdowns in NSW and Victoria from July to October and the repeal of JobKeeper at the end of March, it is far from certain that the labour market recovery will continue. If this is the case, job losses among women are likely to continue to affect men’s mental health too - even if they are themselves still in work, and especially if they have children. In the short term, we need to ensure that mental health services are directed to support the whole family unit; in the long term, we should continue to pursue policies that support dual-income family models.

# Further Information

## Datasets:

These results have been drawn from Taking the Pulse of the Nation (TTPN) - Melbourne Institute's survey of the impact of COVID-19. The weekly survey aims to track changes in the economic and social wellbeing of Australians living through the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic whilst adapting to various changes in Federal and State government policies.

The full survey contains responses from 1200 persons every week, aged 18 years and over. The sample is stratified by gender, age, and location to be representative of the Australian population. This Research Insight has used data from all waves that collected information on the presence of a partner and the partner's employment status. (These were waves 17, 19, 21 and 23, each collected during one week of August, September, October and November 2020. It also includes waves 27 to 45, collected fortnightly between 15 February 2021 and 19 November 2021). The analysis is restricted to persons aged 18 to 54 who lived with a partner. In total, the analysis relied on information for 10,491 individuals.

Data for 2017 is based on the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, wave 17. Started in 2001, the HILDA Survey provides policymakers with unique insights about Australia, enabling them to make informed decisions across a range of policy areas, including health, education, and social services. All figures are based on author's calculations, weighted to be representative of the Australian population aged 18 to 54.

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