Tracking wellbeing outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2021): Continued social and economic recovery and resilience

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 April 2021 ANUpoll, the seventh in the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods Impact Monitoring Survey program. We find remarkable levels of resilience in Australian society and the economy, with life satisfaction back to what it was prior to the pandemic, and psychological distress at lower levels. Employment rates and average hours worked are not quite back to what they were pre-pandemic, but appear to have not been overly impacted by the removal of JobSeeker and JobKeeper at the end of March. There are still some ongoing areas of policy concern, with a number of Australians fearful of losing their job in the next 12 months, average household income is still well below the pre-COVID levels (and below those observed in November 2020), there are high rates of housing stress and key population groups remaining particularly impacted. Specifically, young Australians continue to have worse mental health outcomes than they did prior to the pandemic, and also are more likely to feel that they are struggling with housing expenses. Nonetheless, as long as infection rates and community transition remains low, Australia seems to be weathering the COVID-19 storm far better than most comparable countries.

Executive summary

- The aim of this paper is to summarise economic and social wellbeing data from the April 2021 ANUpoll, the seventh in the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods Impact Monitoring Survey program.
- Australians are becoming **less anxious and worried** about the COVID-19 pandemic, and are also **far less likely to think they will be infected** in the next six months.
    - Women in Australia continue to report higher levels of anxiety and worry, as well as fears of infection
- The level of **life satisfaction** (measured on a scale of 0 to 10) was very similar in April 2021 as in January 2021 (6.95 and 6.87 respectively).
- There was a continued **decline in psychological distress** (i.e. an improvement in mental health outcomes) as measured by the Kessler-6 measure between January 2021 and April 2021. **Average psychological distress is now lower than it was pre-pandemic.**
    - There is still a greater per cent of Australians identified as having severe psychological distress. In April 2021, 9.7 per cent of respondents were above this threshold still above the rate observed in February 2017 (7.7 per cent).
    - **Young Australians continue to have worse mental health outcomes** than prior to the pandemic, and compared to older Australians.
- Employment does not appear to have continued its upwards increase in April 2021 as Australia continues to emerge from the COVID-recession of 2020. Importantly though **there does not appear to have been a decline in employment** in the immediate period following the cessation of JobKeeper/JobSeeker supplement
    - Average hours worked are very similar in April 2021 as in November 2020 (20.6 hours per week in both months). Average hours work is still, however, well below what they were in February 2020 (21.9 hours).
- In January 2021, 13.7 per cent of respondents said that in the last 3 months they have 'not been able to pay the mortgage or rent on time because of a shortage of money.' There had been a very slight increase in the per cent of people who were unable to pay either rent or mortgage on time in the previous 3 months between November 2020 (13.4 per cent), but both months were lower than August 2020 (14.2 per cent) and the peak experienced in May 2020 (15.1 per cent).
- There has been an increase since 2017 in the per cent of respondents over the period who said that they were 'keeping up without any difficulty' with regards to their rent and mortgage, from 39.3 per cent to 46.1 per cent. That is, **a long term reduction in housing stress**
    - The per cent of Australians who say that it is a constant struggle, or who are falling behind with payments has also declined over the period – 20.7 per cent in March 2017 and 17.8 per cent in April 2021
- The groups that Australians think have been **most impacted** by the pandemic are middle income Australians compared to high income Australians, those living in major cities compared to those in regional rural areas, low income compared to middle income Australians, females compared to males, older Australians impacted compared to younger Australians, and those born overseas compared to those born in Australia.
- The only comparison for which there was no difference was between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians.

1 Introduction and overview

On the 19th of April 2021, Australia and New Zealand opened a two-way travel bubble between the countries.[1] This meant that people were able to travel between Australian and New Zealand without quarantining, and without having to demonstrate that they are COVID-negative. New Zealand is currently planning to open up a second travel bubble, with the Cook Islands,[2] and Australia is in discussions with Singapore to set up a similar arrangement between the two countries.[3]

These arrangements have been able to be put in place because COVID-19 infection and mortality rates are very low in Australia, and have been since towards the end of 2020 as the second wave of infections (concentrated mainly in Melbourne) were suppressed. According to the Bloomberg Resilience Score of the 'The Best and Worst Places to Be'[4] during the time of COVID-19, there are very few countries in the world ranked higher than Australia. Only Singapore (with a higher current vaccination rate) and New Zealand (with a lower cumulative death rate) is ranked higher than Australia.

In late March, two of the key government economic supports for the economy ceased. JobKeeper, which had been paid to employers to maintain the labour market attachment of workers at risk of losing their jobs, as well as the JobSeeker supplement (paid to those without employment at a higher than pre-COVID rate) were removed on the 28th of March, 2021.

Australia is far from having returned to a pre-COVID policy setting. International travel is still restricted from and to most countries.[5] In the budget to be announced on the 11th of May 2021, it is also expected that the Federal Government will still have a very large deficit, with a large proportion of the additional spending targeted towards mitigating the ongoing impact of COVID-19.

Between the 12th and the 26th of April, the Social Research Centre on behalf of the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods undertook the seventh wave of the ANU's COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey Program. The survey was undertaken on a representative sample of 3,286 adult Australians using the Life in Australia™ nationally representative online panel. Of those who had completed the April 2021 survey, a very high proportion (94.6 per cent) had completed the January 2021 survey.

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 and 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. This 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. Full details of the survey are given in Appendix 1, with the survey itself soon to be available through the Australian Data Archive.

This paper provides data on the wellbeing of the Australian adult population in April 2021 and how this compares to wellbeing prior to COVID-19 and during the first year of COVID-19 impacting Australia. Section 2 provides data on Australian's level of anxiety and worry due to COVID-19 and how likely they think it is that they will become infected with COVID-19. Data on who Australians think has been impacted by COVID-19 are also reported in this section. Life satisfaction and mental health over the COVID period are reported in Section 3 and employment and income change are reported in Section 4. Section 5 focusses on housing

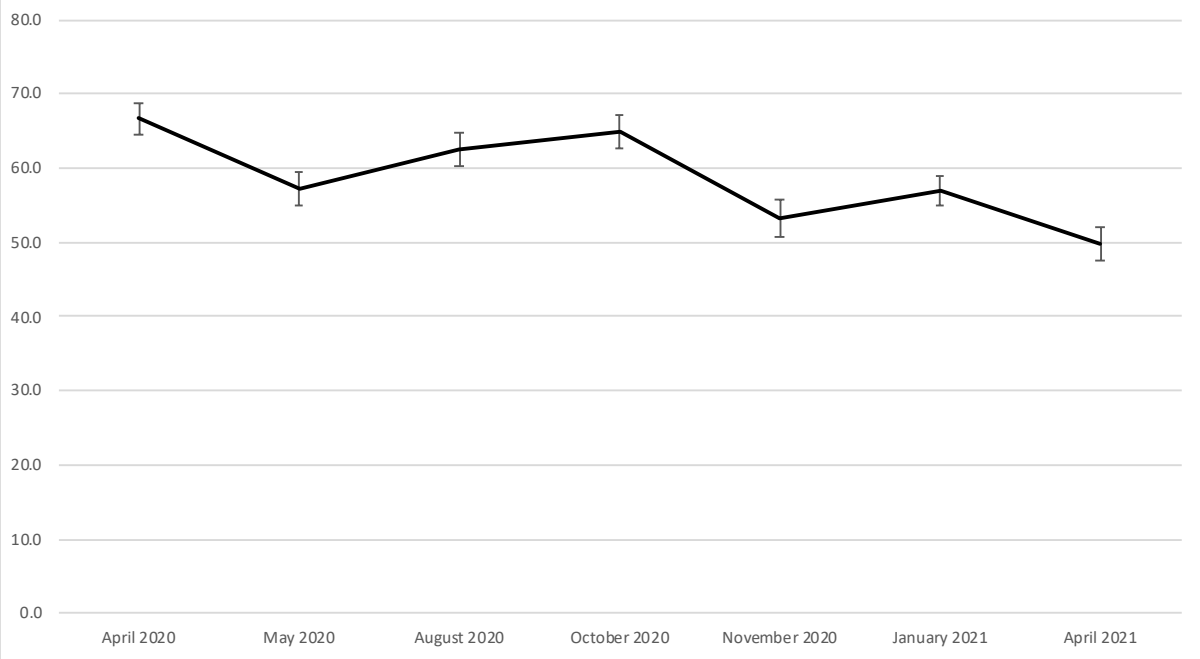
circumstances and changes in levels of housing stress in April 2021 compared to March 2017 prior to COVID. The final section concludes.

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 was a decline in the proportion of Australians who reported anxiety and worry due to COVID-19 from 56.9 per cent in January 2021 to 49.8 per cent in April 2021 (Figure 1). This is significantly and substantially lower than the previous low for this question, observed in November 2020 (53.2 per cent), and substantially lower than the peak of 66.7 per cent observed in April 2020 during the first wave of infections in Australia.

Figure 1 Per cent of Australian who reported anxiety and worry due to COVID-19 in Australia, April 2020 to April 2021



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

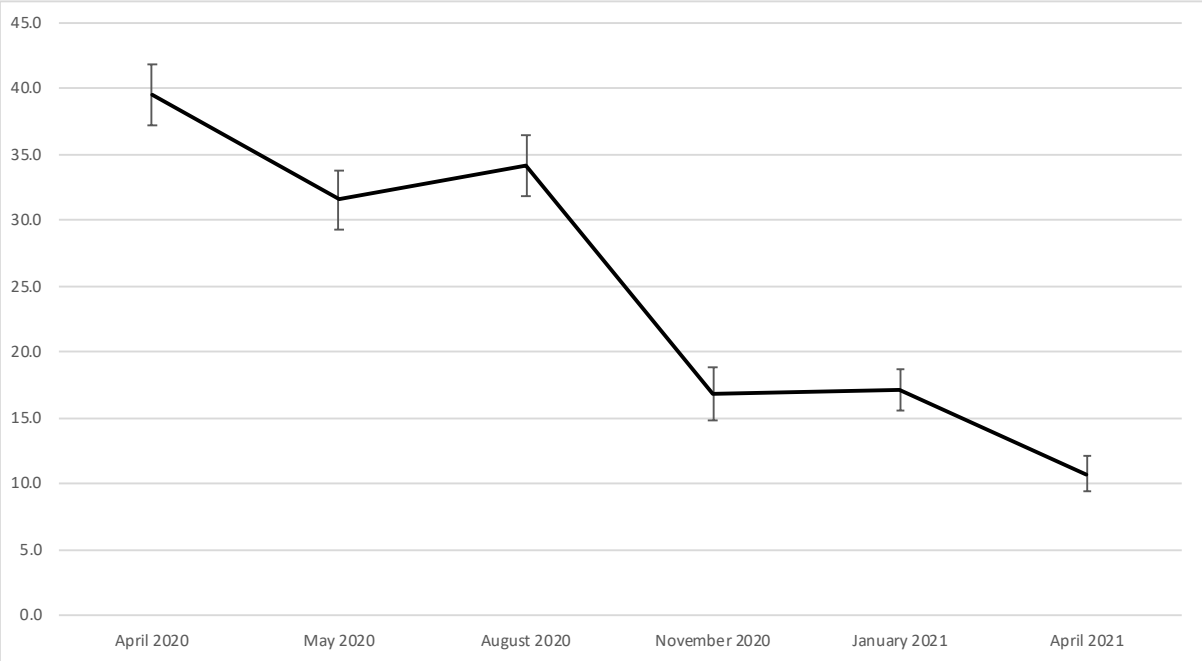
Source: ANUpoll, April, May, August, October and November 2020; January and April 2021.

In order to identify the factors associated with reporting being anxious and worried due to COVID-19, a probit regression model is estimated. Demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic variables are included as explanatory variables. The regression model shows that women, younger Australians (particularly those aged 18 to 24 years), Indigenous Australians, and those with a post-graduate degree were more likely to report anxiety and worry (Table 1). However, older Australians and those who live outside of a capital city were less likely to report anxiety and worry.

There has also been a very large decline in the per cent of Australians who think it is somewhat likely or very likely that they will be infected by COVID-19 in the next 6 months from 17.1 per cent in January 2021 to 10.7 per cent in April 2021 (Figure 2). This is a very important measure, at it has been shown in a number of papers in this COVID-19 impact tracking series to be highly correlated with a range of behaviours and attitudes (including vaccine willingness in the April 2021 survey). Taking a longer-term view, the proportion thinking it somewhat or very likely

that they will contract COVID in April 2021 is far below the peak fear of infection from April 2020, when 39.5 per cent of Australians thought it was likely or very likely that they would be infected. While this is a very positive reflection of the views of Australians regarding the present risk of infection and the next six months, it does mean that people could become less willing to take the preventative actions (e.g., social distance, COVID testing, vaccination) that lead to lower rates of infection into the future.

Figure 2 Per cent of Australians who think it is somewhat or very likely that they will be infected by COVID-19 in the next six months – April 2020 to April 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 2020; January and April 2021.

Using an ordered probit model of fear of infection, and controlling for demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic variables, there were only two characteristics that were associated with fear of infection (Table 1), with females and those born overseas in a non-English speaking country having a greater expected likelihood of being infected.

2.2 Who do Australians think have been impacted by COVID-19

For the first time in the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey program, respondents were asked who they thought had been impacted most by COVID-19 in Australia. An understanding of the views of Australians regarding COVID-19 impacts are important for a number of reasons. First, it may reveal groups who have been impacted that are not captured in the tracking fata used in this paper or other similar surveys. Om the flipside, it may highlight disparities between the perceptions of Australians and the reality as revealed by quantitative data. Finally, such data can be used to identify groups that the Australian public may support policy interventions for.

As an example, the first question asked was as follows:

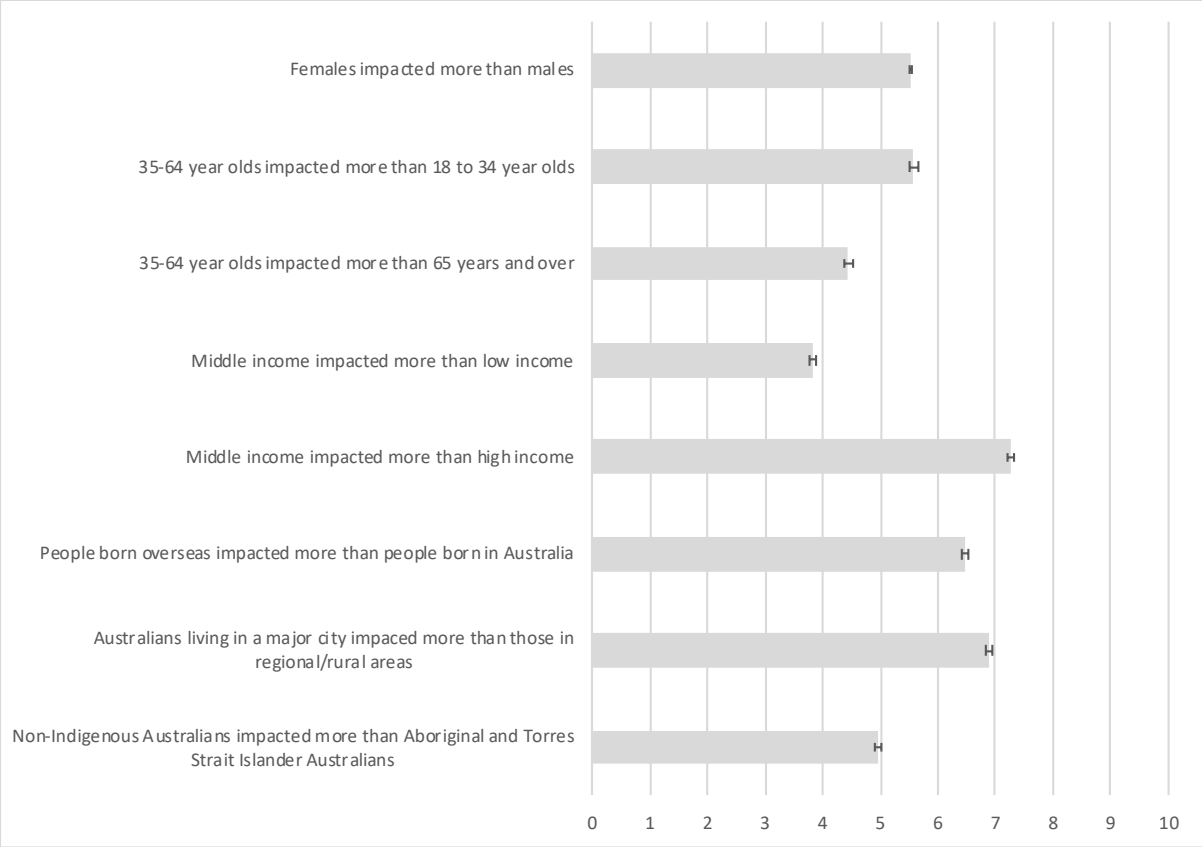
Thinking back to March 2020 and the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia, since then, would you say **males** or **females** have been most affected by the pandemic?

*Please take into account all the potential effects of COVID-19 (economic, social, health, etc.) and choose a number from 0 to 10, where 0 means **males** were most affected, 5 means that **both groups** were equally affected, and 10 means **females** were most affected.*

Respondents were asked to make eight comparisons with a separate question for each of the comparisons. The comparison which was the furthest away from 5 (which would represent neither group impacted more than the other) was middle income Australians compared to high income Australians, with an average value of 7.26. Respondents were also particularly likely to think that Australians living in major cities were impacted more than those in regional rural areas (average value of 6.95) and that middle income Australians were impacted less than low income Australians (average value of 3.72).

Although the differences weren't as large, Australians were also more likely to think that females were more impacted than males, older Australians impacted more than those in the middle part of the age distribution, younger Australians less impacted than those in the middle part of the age distribution, and those born overseas more impacted than those born in Australia. The only comparison for which the average value is not significantly different from 5 (that is, respondents do not think one group was impacted more than another) is between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians.

Figure 3 Views on who was most impacted by COVID-19, April 2021



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

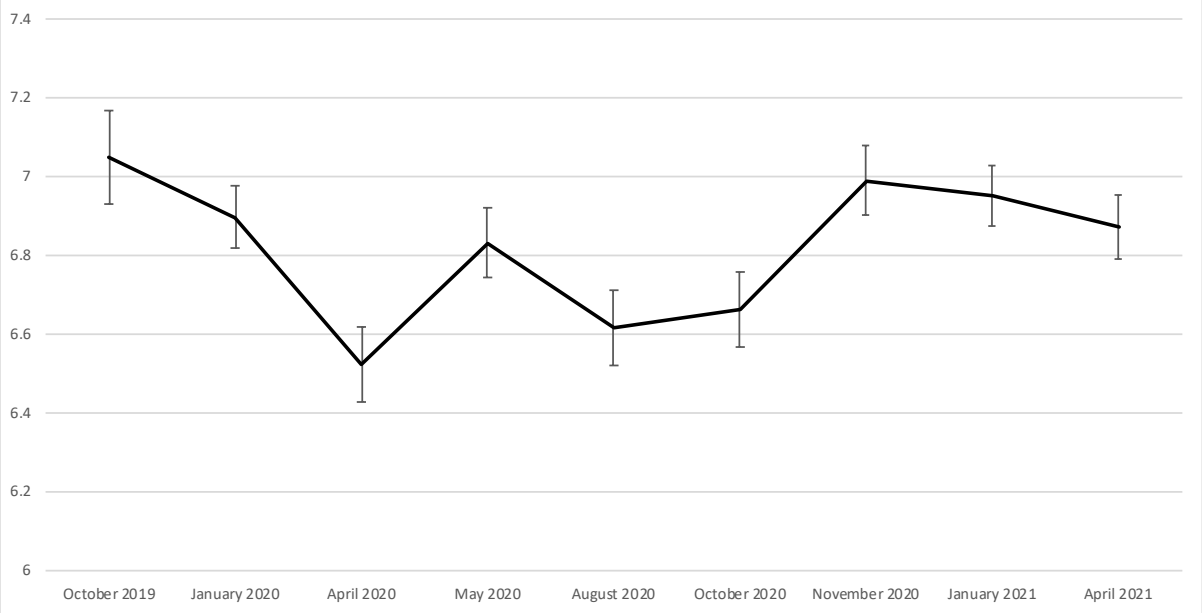
Source: ANUpoll, April 2021

3 Mental health and wellbeing

3.1 Life satisfaction

The level of life satisfaction (measured on a scale of 0 to 10) was very similar in April 2021 as in January 2021 (6.95 and 6.87 respectively). The small difference in life satisfaction between January and April 2021 is not statistically significant (p-value = 0.165). Indeed, since November 2020, life satisfaction in Australia has stayed somewhere in between life satisfaction in October 2019 (a time of relative stability in Australia) and January 2020 which was during the height of the Black Summer bushfires.

Figure 4 Life satisfaction – October 2019 to April 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; January and April 2021.

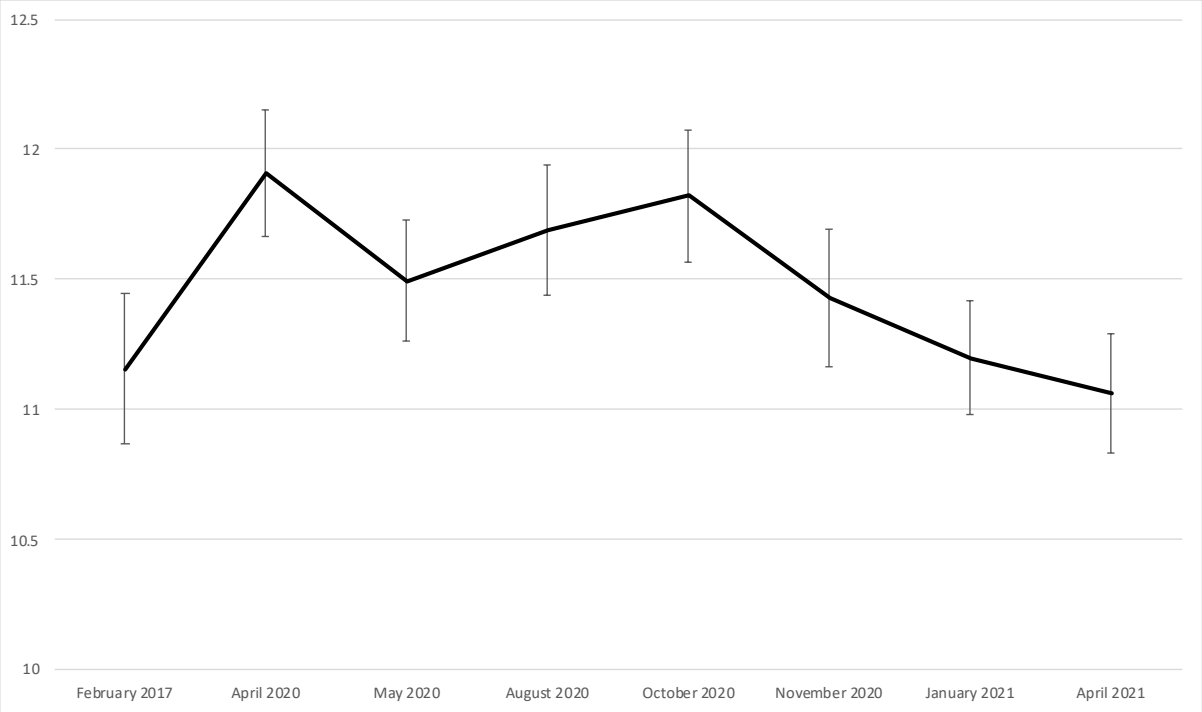
Using a linear regression model of change in life satisfaction between January and April 2021, and controlling for life satisfaction in January 2021 as well as demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic variables (Table 2), the main characteristic that was associated with life satisfaction change was age. Those aged 45 years and over, and particularly those aged 65 years and over, had a more positive change in life satisfaction than younger Australians. Females and those with an undergraduate degree also had a more positive change in life satisfaction than males and those without any post-school qualifications (respectively)

3.2 Mental health

There was a continued decline in psychological distress (i.e. an improvement in mental health outcomes) as measured by the Kessler-6 measure between January 2021 and April 2021 (Figure 5), though once again the difference was not statistically significant. On a scale of 5-30, the average value of 11.06 observed in April 2021 is not only lower than the observed value in January 2021 (11.20) but is also slightly lower than the pre-COVID value of 11.16 observed in February 2017 (though this difference is not statistically significant).

While the continuous measure of psychological distress is lower in April 2021 than it was in February 2017 (albeit not significantly so) that is still not the case for the per cent of Australians identified as having a 'probable serious mental illness' (based on the standard K-6 thresholds). In April 2021, 9.7 per cent of respondents were above this threshold, still above that observed in February 2017 (7.7 per cent). Both the linear K-6 and the per cent with probable serious mental illness are well below the peak observed during the Wave 1 and 2 infection periods in Australia though, with 10.9 per cent of Australians in October 2020 identified as having a 'probable serious mental illness'.

Figure 5 K-6 measure of psychological distress, February 2017 to April 2021

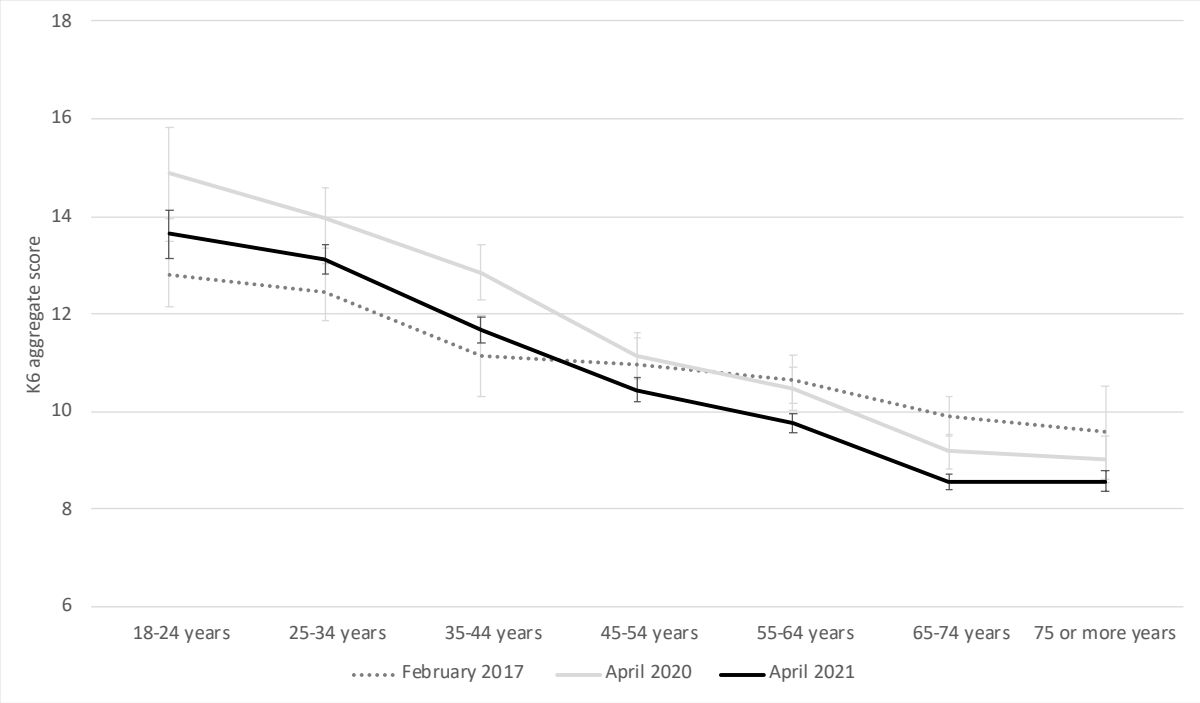


Note: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

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

Young Australians still continue to have worse mental health outcomes than older Australians as measured by the K-6 index (Figure 6). The average value for Australians 65 year and over in April 2021 is at least 1 unit lower than for those in the same age groups in February 2017. For younger Australians, the measure of psychological distress is significantly below what it was at the peak of the first wave of infections (April 2020), but is still higher than that observed in February 2017.

Figure 6 K-6 measure of psychological distress, by age, February 2017, April 2020 and April 2021



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

Source: Life in Australia, February 2017, and ANUpoll April 2020 and April 2021.

4 Employment and income change

Australia has had a remarkable recovery from many of the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. While unemployment increased substantially and GDP declined during the early months of the pandemic in Australia, much of the losses in employment and economic production had been recovered by early 2021. This recovery has been aided by the ability of many businesses to return to relatively normal trading patterns, albeit with a number of short-term setbacks as local lockdowns have been enforced in various cities at different points in time. A key component of the economic recovery, however, has also been the very large level of government support provided through fiscal policy, predominantly in the form of JobKeeper and JobSeeker.

As of the end of March 2021, much of this economic stimulus had been removed. The JobKeeper scheme was ended, as was the JobSeeker supplement. In place of the latter there was a small increase in the base rate, meaning the current payment of $620.80 per fortnight for a single person with no children is above what it was pre-COVID, but well below the peak in the early stages of the pandemic when the government introduced a $550 per fortnight Coronavirus supplement (essentially a doubling of the payment) and also below the $715.70 per fortnight that recipients were receiving up until March 2021.

It is very difficult to measure what the employment and income situation in Australia would have been in April if there were no change. There is no counterfactual Australia in which all other external and internal factors were the same as they are now, but JobSeeker/JobKeeper stayed as they were. We can, however, compare employment and income in Australia in April 2021 with what it was in January 2021 and prior as a measure of the net effect of any changes

in policy and other circumstances.

4.1 Employment post-JobSeeker

In January 2021, our most recent data prior to the removal of JobKeeper and the JobKeeper supplement, 59.5 per cent of adults reported that they were employed in the previous 7 days.[6] In a normal year, employment tends to drop a little in January as many businesses slow down over the summer break and casual staff stop working temporarily. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) applied an implied seasonal adjustment factor of 1.013 to their employment estimates for January 2021[7], meaning that seasonally adjusted employment may have been around 60.3 per cent using the ANUpoll measure. In April, when there is usually very little seasonal adjustment,[8] our ANUpoll estimate of employment was 60.3 per cent.

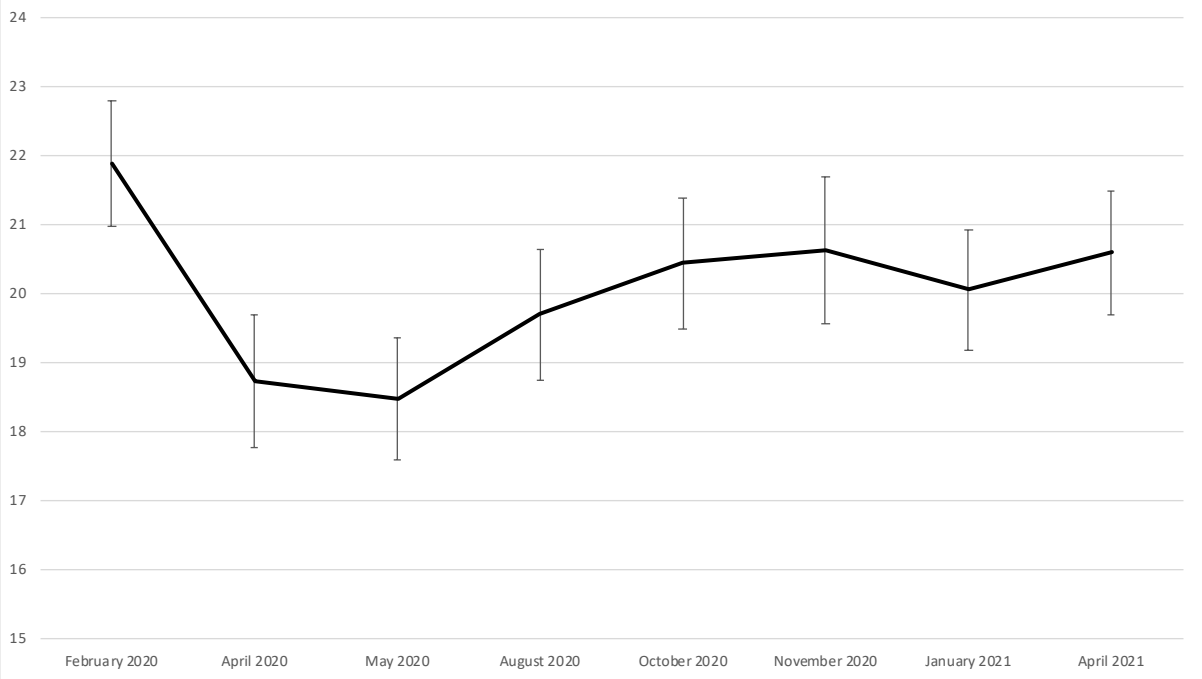
So, while employment does not appear to have continued its upwards increase into April as Australia emerges from the COVID-recession of 2020, there does not appear to have been a dramatic decline in employment in the immediate period following the cessation of JobKeeper/JobSeeker supplement. It may be the case that the effects emerge over a longer period of time, or that the employment rate in Australia would have been much higher were it not for the positive change. However, by mid-April 2021, there does not appear to have been a dramatic effect.

Employment in Australia is still slightly (but not significantly from a statistical sense) below the 62.0 per cent of Australians employed when asked in February 2020, but it is well above the 57.1 per cent observed in May 2020.

The proportion of Australians employed at a particular point in time is an important estimate of the level of economic activity, as well as the interaction between labour supply and demand. However, for the measure used in the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods COVID-19 Impact Monitoring Survey program, as well as the ABS' Labour Force Survey, someone only needs to be employed for one hour per week to be classified as employed. A supplementary measure therefore is the average hours worked by the population, which captures not only changes in employment, but also changes in hours worked if employed.

The ABS does not publish the original (non-seasonally adjusted) hours worked figures. It is likely that the fall in hours worked during the holiday period is at least as large as the fall in employment, as many people who remain employed cut back on their hours worked. The estimate of the number of hours worked in January 2021 (reported in Figure 7) should therefore be treated with caution. Nonetheless, the fact that average hours worked are very similar in April 2021 as in November 2020 (20.6 hours per week in both months; those who were not employed had their hours set to zero) suggests there has been very little change in hours worked in the immediate period after the cessation of JobKeeper and the JobSeeker supplement. Average hours work is still, however, well below what they were in February 2020 (21.9 hours). This final point suggests that there is still plenty of slack in the labour market.

Figure 7 Average hours worked, February 2020 to April 2021



Note: Those who were not employed have their hours worked set to zero. The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

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

Using a linear regression model of change in hours worked between November and April 2021, and controlling for hours worked in November 2021 as well as demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic variables (that is, a lagged dependent variable model), the change in hours worked was less positive for females compared to males. Table 3 also shows that the change in hours worked was more negative for older Australians and younger Australians (though that partly reflects the regular pattern of hours worked declining more as people age); more positive for those born overseas in an English-speaking country compared to those who were born in Australia.

Taking a longer term perspective and looking back prior to COVID-19 (that is, changes since February 2020), changes in hours worked were more negative more for females than males, and more negative for older Australians. Changes in hours worked were also more positive for those born overseas in an English-speaking country compared to those who were born in Australia and those who lived in the most advantaged of communities. It should also be noted that, although the difference isn't statistically significant due to low sample sizes, the changes in hours worked over the period were more positive for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians than for the non-Indigenous population.

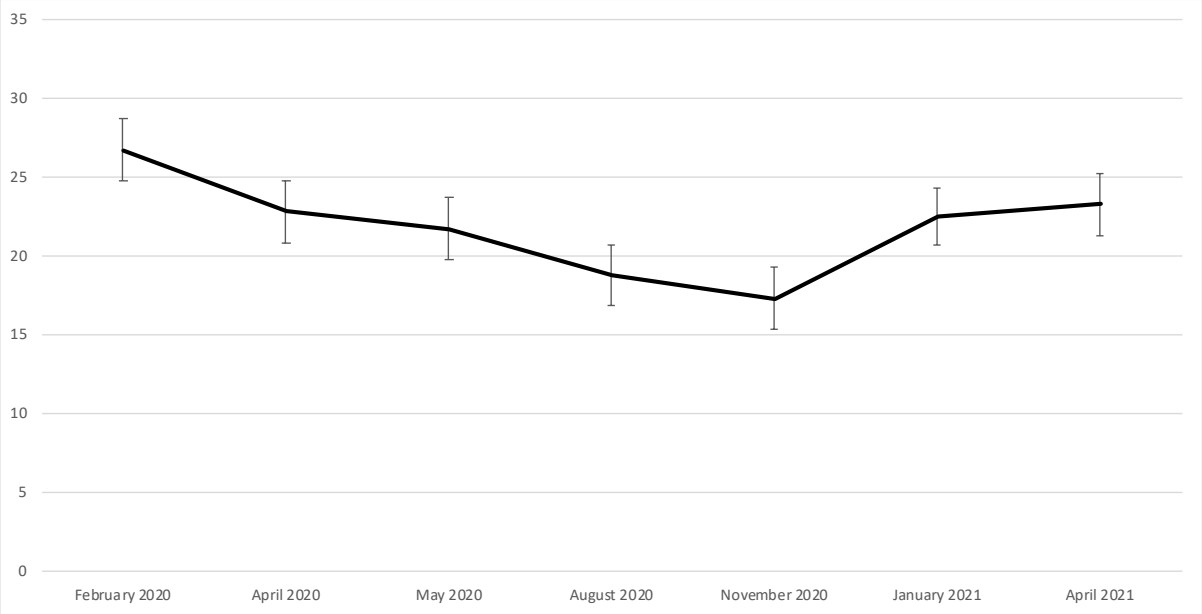
The final employment variable that we present this section is the expected probability that an employed person reports for losing their job in the next 12 months. In April 2021, the average expected probability of job loss was 21.4 per cent, slightly above the 20.5 per cent reported in January 2021, but below the 22.4 per cent reported in November 2020 and well below the peak of 25.0 per cent reported in August 2020.

4.2 Income change

Previous analysis in this series showed a very large drop in household income between February and April 2020 (Figure 8). Average income then declined slightly, but within the confidence interval bands, between April 2020 and August 2020, with a large increase in November 2020 ($1,725 per week) as labour market activity returned but transfer payments remained at their relatively high levels (Biddle et al 2020). Since the last analysis of income change, we observed a fall in income between November 2020 and January 2021 ($1,598), and a slight but not statistically significant increase in income between January 2021 and April 2021 ($1,635). On balance, and taking into account the fact that the November 2020 observation may have been an outlier, it would appear that average income in Australia is still below the pre-COVID level ($1,761 per week in February 2020).

The proportion of Australians who said that they were finding it difficult or very difficult on their current income stayed reasonably steady between January 2021 and April 2021 – from 22.5 per cent to 23.2 per cent (Figure 7). This measure of financial stress is below what it was prior to the pandemic, but above the COVID-19 low-point (November 2020, 17.3 per cent) when income had started to return to pre-pandemic levels, but expenditure opportunities were still quite restricted.

Figure 8 Per cent of Australians who were finding it difficult on current income, February 2020 to April 2021



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

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

5 Housing circumstances and stress

During the early stages of the pandemic, there was a fear amongst some policy makers and in the general community that there would be a collapse in the housing market. As the housing market includes renters, there was also a hope by some renters that housing prices would fall, thereby improving affordability allowing them to enter the housing market. These fears/hopes have not been realised, as house prices in Australia have increased substantially over the

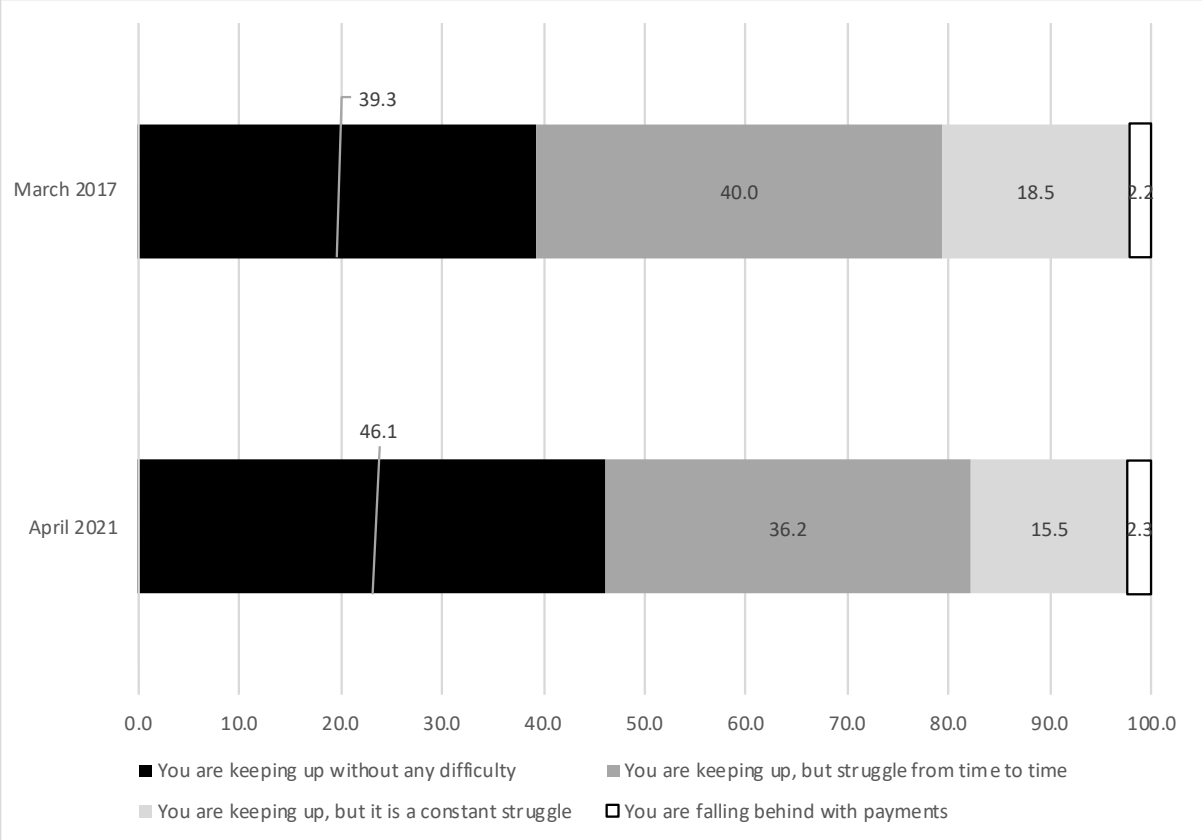
period.

According to data from CoreLogic[9] dwelling prices increased by an average of 6.1 per cent across the five largest capital cities, with even more rapid increases in Darwin (15.3 per cent), Canberra (14.2 per cent) and Hobart (13.8 per cent). The question on housing is therefore less about whether the bottom has fallen out of the market due to the recession, but the extent to which affordable housing has become out of reach for the average Australian.

In January 2021, 13.7 per cent of respondents said that in the last 3 months they have 'not been able to pay the mortgage or rent on time because of a shortage of money' (5.5 per cent were unable to pay a mortgage only, 7.2 per cent were unable to pay rent only, and 1.0 per cent were unable to pay both). Combining the housing stress measures, there had been a very slight increase in the per cent of people who were unable to pay either rent or mortgage on time in the previous 3 months between November 2020 (13.4 per cent), but both months were lower than August 2020 (14.2 per cent) and the peak experienced in May 2020 (15.1 per cent).

In April 2021 respondents who were either paying off a mortgage or who were renting were asked: 'Some people can easily afford to pay their main expenses, others find it more difficult to pay. Thinking about your situation, how easy or difficult is it for you to pay for your rent or mortgage?' This question was also asked in March 2017. There has been an increase in the per cent of respondents over the period who said that they were 'keeping up without any difficulty', from 39.3 per cent to 46.1 per cent (Figure 9). Much of this increase has come from a decline in the proportion of people who said that they were 'keeping up, but struggle from time to time', from 40.0 per cent to 36.2 per cent. The per cent of Australians who say that it is a constant struggle, or who are falling behind with payments has also declined over the period – 20.7 per cent in March 2017 and 17.8 per cent in April 2021

Figure 9 Ease in paying rent or mortgage, per cent of adult Australians – March 2017 and April 2021



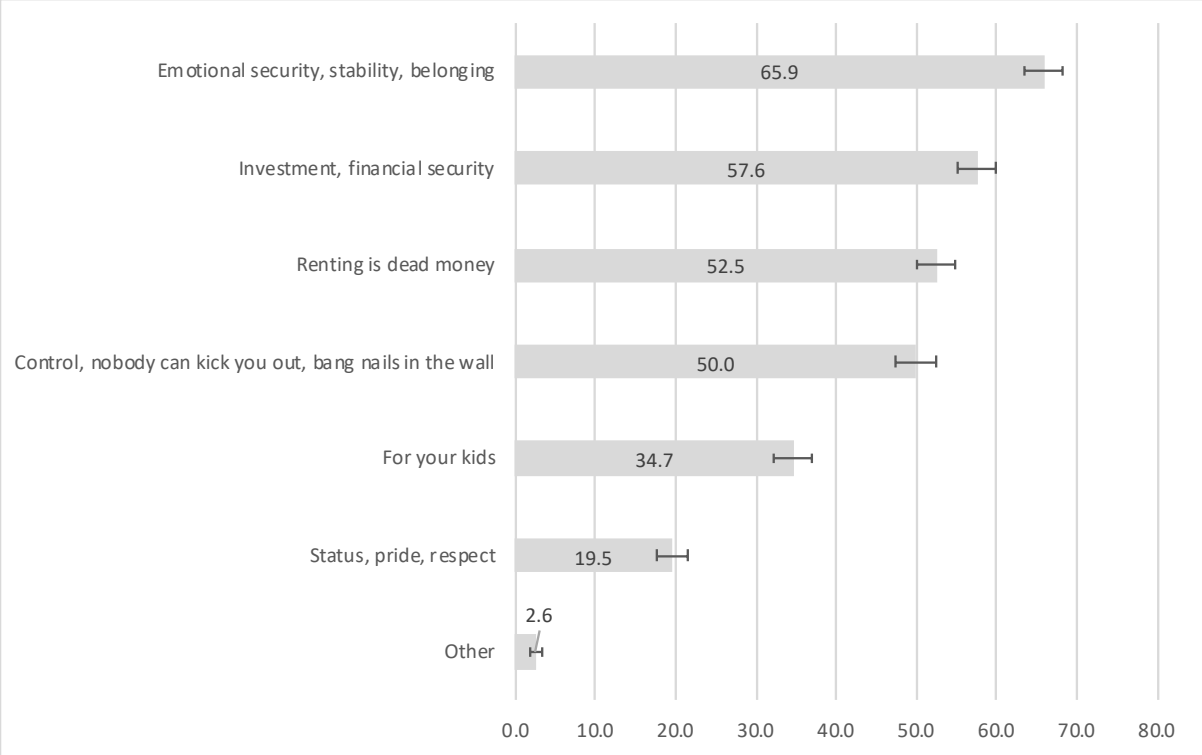
Source: ANUpoll March 2017 and April 2021.

Using an ordered probit model and controlling for demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic variables (Table 4) young Australians (aged 18 to 24 years) were more likely to say they were struggling. However, those born overseas in a non-English Speaking country, those with a degree, and those who live in the most advantaged of neighbourhoods were less likely to be struggling with their rent or mortgage.

In Model 2, we can see that after also controlling for income (which had a negative relationship with whether or not a person was struggling) there were no significant differences in the extent to which respondents were struggling for those who were renting from a private landlord or a public housing authority (compared to those paying off a mortgage). After controlling for income and tenure type, older Australians, those born overseas in an English speaking country, those with an undergraduate degree, and those who live in the middle quintile of suburbs based on socioeconomic status were struggling less with their rent or mortgage.

In April 2021, respondents who either owned their own home outright or who were paying off a mortgage were asked: 'People decide to become home owners for various reasons. What were your main reasons for becoming a home owner?' with six specific response options given in random order (based on questions asked in 2017). The most commonly cited reason (Figure 10) was 'Emotional security, stability, belonging' (66.3 per cent of home owners) followed by 'Investment, financial security' (57.6 per cent).

Figure 10 Reasons for home ownership – home owners and those paying off a mortgage, April 2021

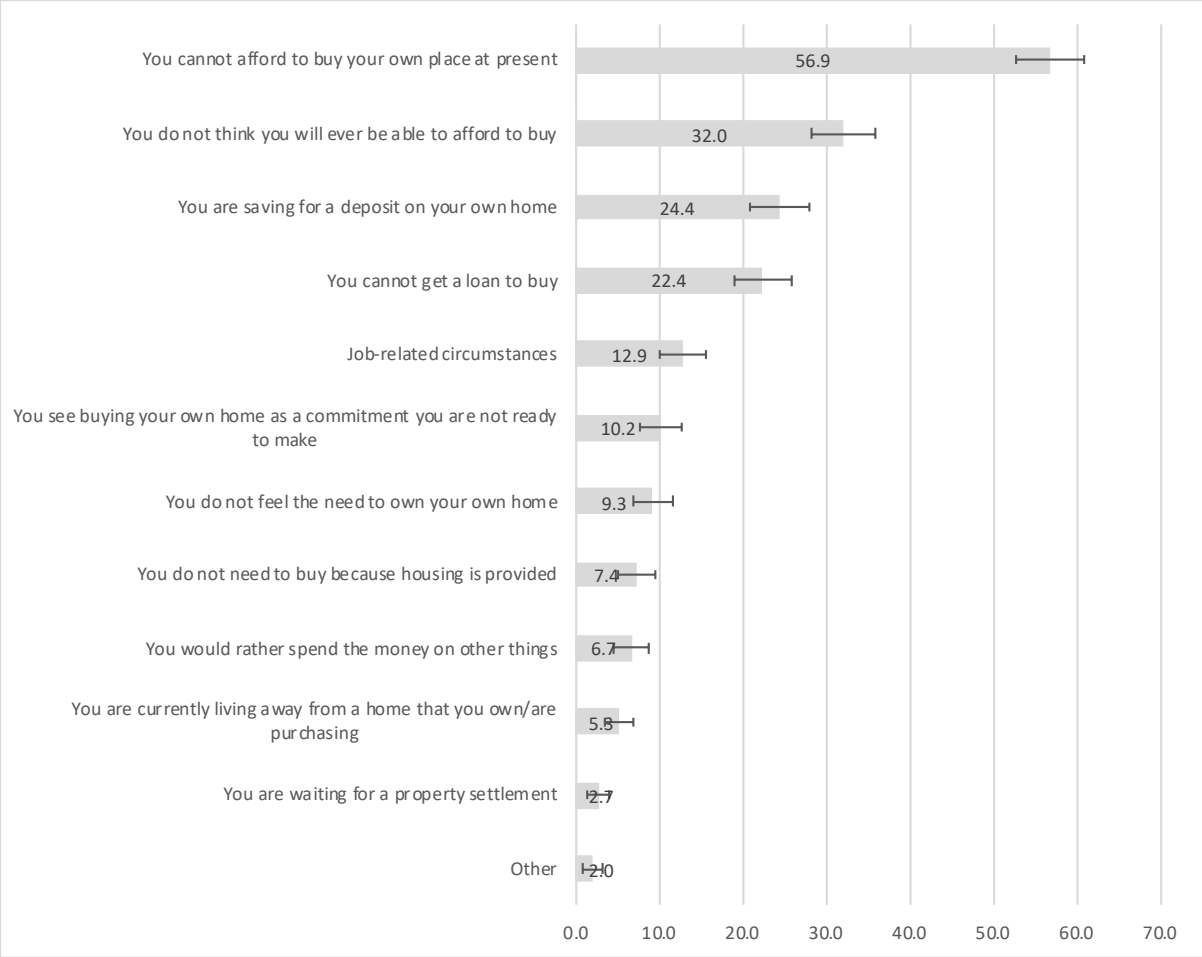


Note: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, April 2021

In April 2021, respondents who did not own their own home outright and who were not paying off a mortgage were asked: 'What were your main reasons you are not currently buying housing?' Eleven response options were given in random order. The most commonly cited reason, given by 56.9 per cent of respondents is that the respondent felt that they 'cannot afford to buy your own place at present', with 32.0 per cent of respondents also saying that they do not think that they will ever be able to afford to buy.

Figure 11 Reasons against home ownership – renters, April 2021

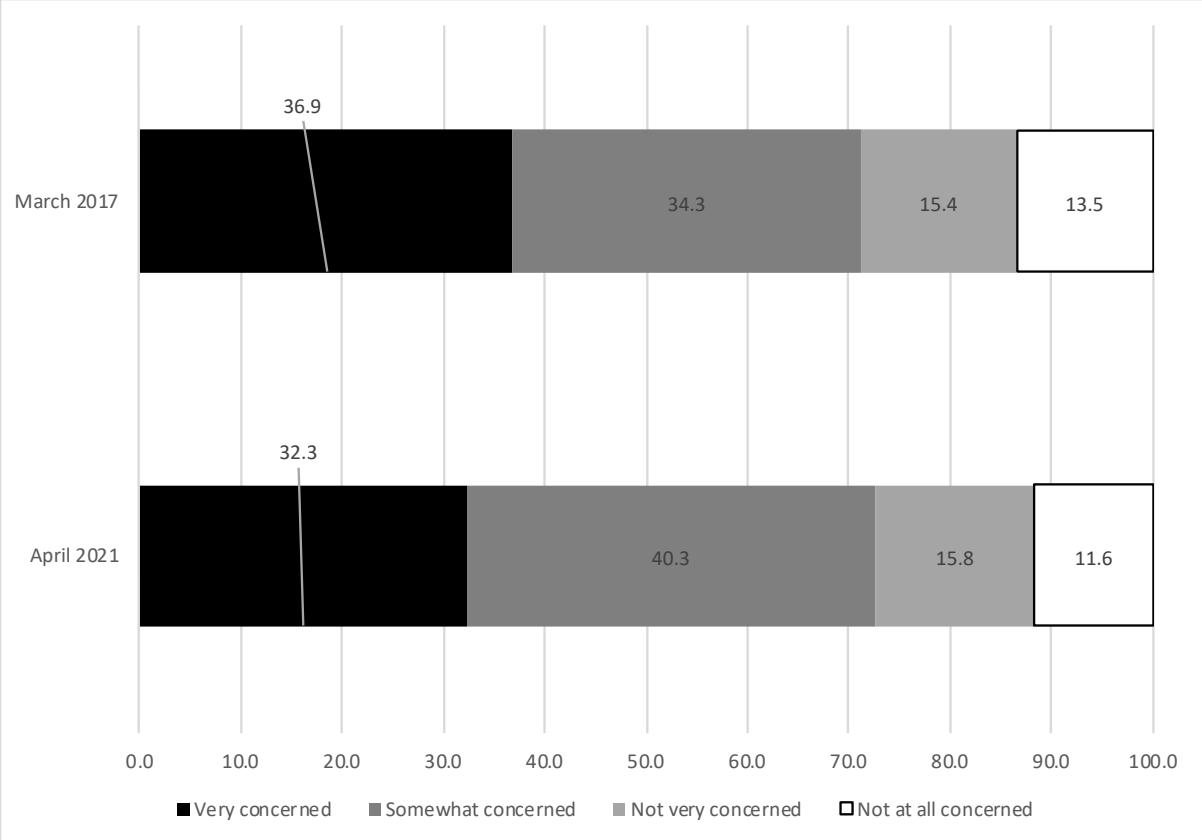


Note: The "whiskers" on the bars indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimate.

Source: ANUpoll, April 2021

In April 2021, respondents who did not own their own home outright and who were not paying off a mortgage were also asked: 'Are you concerned or not concerned about being able to afford to buy housing during your lifetime?' This question was also repeated from 2017. Between March 2017 and April 2021 there was a decline in the per cent of Australians who were very concerned about being able to afford to buy a house (from 36.9 per cent to 32.3 per cent). There was a large increase in the per cent who were somewhat concerned (from 34.3 per cent to 40.3 per cent), but combined there appear to be a steady proportion of Australians concerned about not being able to enter the property market since 2017.

Figure 12 Level of concern for ever being able to afford to buy housing, those who currently do not own their own home, March 2017 and April 2021



Source: ANUpoll, April 2021 and March 2017

Using an ordered probit model and controlling for demographic, geographic, and socioeconomic variables (Table 5), young Australians (aged 18 to 24 years) and older Australians who were renting (aged 45 years and over, and particularly aged 65 years and over) were more concerned about not being able to buy housing, as were those who had a degree. Controlling for the above characteristics, income appears to if anything have a positive correlation with concern about being able to buy housing, with higher income households being more concerned than low income households (albeit with a p-value of 0.129). Those who are living rent free were also slightly more concerned, though once again the difference was not quite statistically significant (p-value = 0.109)

On balance, it would appear that although levels of housing stress and concerns are quite high in April 2021, there has not been a worsening since 2017 when these questions were last asked on ANUpoll. If anything, Australians are less likely to say that they are struggling with rent/mortgage and renters were less likely to say that they were very concerned about ever being able to afford to buy housing. There are one group who are far more concerned about housing than others – Australians aged 18 to 24. Given we have shown earlier in this paper that this group has had the greatest worsening in mental health outcomes during the pandemic, one means to potentially reduce this psychological distress amongst young Australians may therefore be to minimise housing stress.

6 Concluding comments

COVID-19 infection rates have continued to be low and mostly concentrated in returned

travellers in quarantine as community transmission remains mostly under control. The Australian economy remains remarkably strong, with Australia one of the first developed countries in the world to return to pre-COVID employment aggregates.[10]

Analysis presented in this paper shows that anxiety and worry due to COVID-19 and expectations of infection continues to fall and in the case of expectations of infection over the next 6-months, only just over one-in-ten Australians think it is likely that they will contract COVID.

With the ending of JobKeeper and the JobSeeker COVID supplement in late March it is important to monitor what happens to social, health and economic wellbeing. Data collected from the Australian adult population in April 2021 shows that, at least in the period immediately following the cessation of this form of government financial support, that life satisfaction, mental health, employment rates, hours worked and income have either remained stable or continued to improve. While the full impact any reduction in government financial support may take some time to appear, it is very encouraging that at least in the very short term there does not appear to have been a worsening of outcomes for Australians.

On balance, it would appear that although levels of housing stress and concerns are quite high in April 2021, there has not been a worsening since 2017. If anything, Australians are less likely to say that they are struggling with rent/mortgage and renters were less likely to say that they were very concerned about ever being able to afford to buy housing. Concerns about housing affordability are not misplaced, but record low interest rates and (potentially) reductions in other expenditure during the COVID-19 period have meant that Australians are more positive about their own housing circumstances than they were pre-COVID.

There is a continued recovery in economic, social and health outcomes of the Australian population. It is a story of remarkable resilience. While the overall picture is positive, younger Australians (up to 34 years of age) have substantially worse mental health outcomes than they did in February 2017 prior to COVID. This is despite the rest of the Australian population thinking that young Australians have been less impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic than older Australians. Those aged 18 to 24 years are also the one group who are far more concerned about housing than the rest of the Australian population.

Appendix 1 About the survey

The primary source of data for this paper is the April 2021 ANUpoll. Data collection commenced on the 12th of April 2021 with a pilot test of telephone respondents. The main data collection commenced on the 13th of April and concluded on the 26th of April. The final sample size for the survey is 3,286 respondents. 54.7 per cent of the sample had completed the survey by the 15th of April and the average interview duration was 13.9 minutes. Of those who had completed the April 2021 survey, 94.6 per cent (N=3,109) had completed the January 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 5.1 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 4,002 respondents were invited to take part in the survey, leading to a wave-specific completion rate of 82.1 per cent. Taking into account recruitment to the panel, the cumulative response rate for this survey is around 7.0 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 (2014/241).

Appendix 2 Regression tables

Table 1 Factors associated with anxiety and worry and expected infection in next six months, April 2021

Explanatory variables	Anxiety and worry		Likely to be infected	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Female	0.325	***	0.155	***
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.413	***	-0.056	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.095		-0.121	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.133		0.001	
Aged 55 to 64 years	-0.273	***	0.053	
Aged 65 to 74 years	-0.312	***	0.044	
Aged 75 years plus	-0.384	***	0.044	
Indigenous	0.450	**	-0.196	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	0.023		-0.051	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.123		0.168	*
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.007		0.139	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	0.010		0.043	
Has a post graduate degree	0.245	**	0.078	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.114		0.000	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	0.083		0.048	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.036		-0.069	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	-0.013		0.032	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	-0.020		0.064	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	0.055		0.030	
Lives in a non-capital city	-0.171	**	0.022	
Constant	-0.151			
Cut-point 1			-0.492	
Cut-point 2			1.422	
Cut-point 3			2.890	
Sample size	3,133		3,124	

Source: ANUpoll, April 2021

Notes: Probit and Ordered Probit Regression Models. The base case individual is female; 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 *.

Table 2 Factors associated with changes in life satisfaction, January to April 2021

Explanatory variables	Coeff.	Signif.
Life satisfaction in January 2021	-0.311	***
Female	0.141	**
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.218	
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.006	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.301	***
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.287	***
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.441	***
Aged 75 years plus	0.577	***
Indigenous	-0.079	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	-0.044	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	-0.151	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.173	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.001	
Has a post graduate degree	0.146	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.282	***
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	0.138	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	0.061	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	0.049	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	0.062	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	0.009	
Lives in a non-capital city	0.064	
Constant	1.639	***
Sample size	2,965	

Source: ANUpoll, January and April 2021

Notes: Linear Regression Model. The base case individual is female; 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 *.

Table 3 Factors associated with changes in hours worked, from February/November 2020 to April 2021

Explanatory variables	From February 2020		From November 2020	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Hours worked in February/November 2020	-0.263	***	-0.343	***
Female	-1.646	**	-2.308	***
Aged 18 to 24 years	2.241		0.982	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.322		-1.023	
Aged 45 to 54 years	-0.400		-1.040	
Aged 55 to 64 years	-2.326	**	-4.050	***
Aged 65 to 74 years	-7.127	***	-9.589	***
Aged 75 years plus	-6.553	***	-9.265	***
Indigenous	4.908		2.444	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	2.840	***	2.307	**
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.704		-0.109	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.246		1.754	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	-0.460		-0.302	
Has a post graduate degree	0.007		-0.478	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.422		0.239	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	1.254		1.134	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.080		1.154	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	0.982		1.390	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	0.785		1.352	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	1.340		2.375	**
Lives in a non-capital city	-0.506		-0.116	
Constant	6.735	***	8.932	***
Sample size	2,580		2,509	

Source: ANUpoll, November and April 2021, Life in Australia, February 2020

Notes: Linear Regression Models. The base case individual is female; 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 *.

Table 4 Factors associated with ease in paying rent or mortgage April 2021

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Income (natural log)			-0.753	***
Private renter			0.119	
Public renter			-0.072	
Female	0.073		0.019	
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.279	*	-0.161	
Aged 25 to 34 years	0.036		-0.091	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.043		-0.039	
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.040		-0.190	*
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.014		-0.503	***
Aged 75 years plus	-0.217		-0.903	***
Indigenous	0.287		0.267	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	-0.190	*	-0.114	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.092		-0.031	
Speaks a language other than English at home	0.150		0.072	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	0.081		-0.088	
Has a post graduate degree	-0.193		0.103	
Has an undergraduate degree	-0.324	***	-0.142	
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	0.108		0.140	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.080		-0.232	**
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	-0.149		-0.292	***
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	-0.178	*	-0.181	*
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	-0.320	***	-0.222	*
Lives in a non-capital city	-0.014		-0.070	
Cut-point 1	-0.163		-5.778	
Cut-point 2	0.887		-4.601	
Cut-point 3	1.987		-3.353	
Sample size	1,738		1,669	

Source: ANUpoll, April 2021

Notes: Ordered Probit Regression Models. The base case individual is female; 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 *.

Table 5 Factors associated with concern for being able to ever buy April 2021

Explanatory variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff.	Signif.	Coeff.	Signif.
Income (natural log)			0.110	
Public renter			0.030	
Rent free			0.235	
Female	-0.032		-0.021	
Aged 18 to 24 years	0.314	*	0.271	
Aged 25 to 34 years	-0.035		-0.068	
Aged 45 to 54 years	0.364	**	0.398	**
Aged 55 to 64 years	0.528	***	0.541	***
Aged 65 to 74 years	0.962	***	0.986	***
Aged 75 years plus	1.570	***	1.663	***
Indigenous	0.001		-0.083	
Born overseas in a main English-speaking country	0.131		0.132	
Born overseas in a non-English speaking country	0.002		0.092	
Speaks a language other than English at home	-0.002		-0.012	
Has not completed Year 12 or post-school qualification	0.197		0.265	
Has a post graduate degree	0.160		0.133	
Has an undergraduate degree	0.403	***	0.419	***
Has a Certificate III/IV, Diploma or Associate Degree	0.066		0.140	
Lives in the most disadvantaged areas (1st quintile)	-0.096		-0.104	
Lives in next most disadvantaged areas (2nd quintile)	0.216		0.184	
Lives in next most advantaged areas (4th quintile)	0.050		0.028	
Lives in the most advantaged areas (5th quintile)	0.155		0.145	
Lives in a non-capital city	0.121		0.180	
Cut-point 1	-0.064		0.800	
Cut-point 2	1.064		1.925	
Cut-point 3	1.724		2.590	
Sample size	793		762	

Source: ANUpoll, April 2021

Notes: Ordered Probit Regression Models. The base case individual is female; 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 *.

References

Biddle, N., Edwards, B., Gray, M. and K. Sollis (2020). 'Tracking outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic (November 2020) – Counting the costs of the COVID-recession.' COVID-19 Briefing Paper, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, Australian National University, Canberra.

Endnotes

1 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-56796679

2 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-03/new-zealand-date-for-cook-island-covid-travel-bubble-australia/100113020

3 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-04-19/nz-travel-bubble-singapore-pacific-international-flights/100078130

4 https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-resilience-ranking/

5 https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-03/india-covid-travel-ban-australia-jail-fines-breach/100111452

6 The exact question asked was 'Which of these descriptions applies to what you have been doing for the last 7 days?' with the first option being 'In **paid work** (or away temporarily) (employee, self-employed, working for your family business)' [bold in original]

7 This was found by dividing the seasonally adjusted estimate by the original estimate of the employment to population ratio.

8 In April 2019 the original employment to population ratio estimated by the ABS was 62.5, whereas the seasonally adjusted estimate was 62.4.

9 https://www.corelogic.com.au/research/monthly-indices

10 https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-15/australia-unemployment-drops-to-5-6-as-recovery-strengthens