

# The Restructuring of Social Inequalities During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Australia

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**Abstract.** As the COVID-19 virus began to spread across Australia, a six-week national lockdown was implemented in late March 2020. Australians were largely confined to their homes and nonessential economic and social activities ceased. Subsequently, lockdowns were implemented at various times in various states, territories and regions in response to local outbreaks of the virus. To examine how the restrictions associated with the pandemic impacted on the working lives of young Australians during the 2020 lockdowns, I draw on Life Patterns project data generated from semistructured interviews conducted with 40 participants in September and October 2020. From a class perspective, the lockdowns exacerbated existing inequalities related to occupation. Some participants, such as those in the hospitality sector, were stood down whereas other participants either worked from home (e.g., professionals and white-collar workers) or continued working as usual after being classified as essential workers (e.g., nurses, doctors, security guards). Participants who were stood down immediately were left to fend for themselves until the Federal Government introduced JobKeeper payments. They had to rely on their annual leave, withdraw money from their retirement savings and/ or move in with family or friends just to survive. Participants who were able to keep working saved money due to being confined to home and not be able to socialise or take holidays. Consequently, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some participants depleted their savings whereas others had built on their existing wealth.

**Key words:** Australia; COVID-19; Inequality; Life Patterns project; Precarious work

## Introduction

Australia is a relatively wealthy country where the standard of living is high and social inequality is rarely acknowledged. Although social classes exist, there is an apparent reluctance to identify as being anything except middle class. This may be partly due to peculiarities in the distribution of income that undermine the nexus between education and employment. For example, manual workers in the mining industry and some tradespersons earn more than highly educated academics (ABS 2021). Although differences in lifestyles according to cultural preferences exist, class cleavages are not as noticeable as in other societies and intergenerational inequality hardly registers as a national concern.

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Therefore, for many Australians, the COVID-19 pandemic illuminated these hidden divisions within society by highlighting the plight of those less fortunate.

The aim of this article is to examine how changes to employment during the pandemic were experienced by young adults. Specifically, the research question asks: How were changes to employment during the pandemic experienced by young adults in Australia? To answer this research question, I performed thematic analysis of data generated by semistructured interviews conducted during September and October 2020 with 40 young adults aged around 32 years. Although these interviews covered a range of topics, given that the aim of this article is to provide an insight into the employment experiences of young adults, only the data pertaining to employment experiences are analysed.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows: after providing a brief overview of the context prior to 2020 and the extant literature on inequalities related to occupation and employment status, the data and methods of analysis are introduced. The presentation of the results of the thematic analysis of the interviews is followed by a discussion of how the pandemic impacted on social inequalities in Australia.

### *Context*

In an effort to curb the spread of COVID-19, the Federal Government closed the national border and implemented a national six-week lockdown from late March to mid-May 2020. The immediate impact of the lockdown varied according to employment status and occupation as new divisions between workers became evident. The main divisions were between three groups of workers: those who could work remotely from home; essential workers who could not work from home; and nonessential workers who lost their jobs. Inequalities related to occupation were then exacerbated by inequalities related to location. After the national lockdown ended, workplaces slowly reopened, albeit with density restrictions in place. Cases of the COVID-19 virus were closely monitored and local lockdowns were implemented to curb its spread. Unfortunately, for the people living in Victoria, problems with the implementation of the quarantine system for travellers returning to Australia resulted in multiple waves of COVID-19 and consequently, multiple lockdowns. During 2020 and 2021, the residents of Melbourne were in lockdown and confined to their homes for a total of 262 days (Vally & Bennett, 2021). Thus, some workers in Melbourne endured long periods of working from home whereas others experienced long periods of not being able to work and earn their regular incomes. Furthermore, essential workers experienced extended periods of exposure to the virus as they continued to work. Meanwhile, in other states and territories, life returned pretty much to normal after the national lockdown and the incomes of workers in nonessential jobs that could not be conducted remotely were less affected.

Although the pandemic lockdowns increased the precarious nature of employment for millions of Australians, they were successful in achieving their aim: that of saving lives. Australia recorded just 910 deaths from COVID-19 in 2020. Meanwhile, based on the number of excess deaths, the World Health Organisation estimated that the global

death toll was 3.4 million people in 2020 (WHO, 2023). In other words, 3.4 million more people died than would have been expected under normal circumstances (WHO, 2023). Furthermore, the restrictions implemented to control the spread of COVID-19 in Australia resulted in a very mild flu season, reducing the number of deaths due to illnesses such as influenza and pneumonia by 36 per cent (ABS, 2021a). Although the restrictions on movement during the periods of lockdown were very successful in controlling the spread of COVID-19, their impact on the livelihoods and experiences of millions of people was unprecedented. Apart from the closure of workplaces and schools, families were isolated for long periods of time, unable to visit, or be visited by, their relatives. Funerals were limited to small groups, weddings were postponed, and new mothers gave birth without the support of their parents, extended families and friends.

### **Economic inequality in Australia**

Although there are many dimensions to social inequality, in this paper, the focus is on economic inequality, and in particular, inequalities related to income derived from employment. Levels of economic inequality are typically measured by Gini coefficients for income and wealth and, in Australia, these measures have been relatively stable over the past decade. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), between 2009-10 and 2019-20, the Gini coefficient for income inequality increased marginally from 0.428 to 0.436 and the Gini coefficient for wealth inequality increased marginally from 0.602 to 0.611 (ABS, 2022). However, a comparison of equivalised disposable household incomes of the 10th percentile and the 90th percentile highlights the scale of inequality more clearly. In 2019-20, the equivalised disposable household incomes of the bottom 10 per cent of households was just \$464 per week and for households in the top 90 per cent, it was \$1744 per week. Equivalised disposable household income refers to net household income (that is, after tax and other deductions) divided by the number of people in the household. For example, if a household consists of two adults who are both employed, the net income from both adults is added together and divided by two.

As in other countries around the world, the restructuring of the Australian labour market from industrial to postindustrial led to an increasing proportion of jobs being part-time, casual and precarious (Campbell & Burgess, 2018; Campbell & Price, 2016; Furlong et al., 2017; Kalleberg, 2009, 2011, 2012). The growth of the services sectors generated demand for highly educated and highly skilled workers and the decline of the manufacturing sector lowered demand for lower-skilled and semiskilled workers. These twin forces encouraged young people to prolong their educational careers and complete university qualifications. This led to an oversupply of graduates chasing graduate jobs and an undersupply of qualified workers to fill jobs in the trades. Consequently, the incomes of tradespersons have grown faster than those of graduates and exceed those of many professionals. For example, according to the ABS (2021b), in 2020, the average annual salary for an education professional was \$75,966 whereas automotive and engineering trades workers earned, on average, \$78,343 and electrotechnology and tele-

communications trades workers earned, on average, \$87,898. Another complication of the Australian labour market is related to the extraction of minerals. The mining sector generates the highest percentage of export income and is able to pay relatively high wages to low-skilled and semiskilled workers. According to the ABS (2021b), the average weekly cash earnings of people employed in the mining sector in 2020 was \$2,798 whereas professionals in the scientific and technical services sector earned, on average, \$1,911 and professionals in the education and training sector earned, on average, \$1,374. Consequently, the nexus between education and employment is disintegrating as high levels of education are not necessarily rewarded in the labour market in terms of income or employment stability (Chesters & Wyn, 2019).

### **Impact of the pandemic on employment**

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian unemployment rate was 5.2 per cent in June 2019 (ABS, 2023a). Due to the restrictions on businesses during 2020, the unemployment rate increased to 7.5 per cent in June 2020, however, in June 2021, the unemployment rate had recovered to be just 5 per cent. ABS (2023b) statistics suggest that casual workers were the most likely to lose their jobs between 2019 and 2020. In May 2019, 25 per cent of all workers were employed on a casual basis. The share of all employees who were casual workers declined to 20.6 per cent in May 2020 before increasing to 23.6 per cent in 2021. In other words, the increase in the unemployment rate was largely due to casual employees losing their jobs. In Australia, casual employees are employed on zero-hour contracts and have no security in terms of hours, income or tenure. Thus, they can be laid off immediately. This high rate of insecure workers is common across the world as labour markets have become increasingly stratified with a small minority enjoying the privilege of security and the large majority struggling to survive due to employment insecurity (Furlong et al., 2017). Given the central role that work plays in life (Kalleberg, 2012), experiencing insecurity in employment has implications for health and wellbeing, the scars of which are evident decades later (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Chesters et al., 2021).

Although inequality related to occupation is usually manifested in income, during the pandemic, another aspect of occupational inequality became apparent. Workers in some occupations, such as teachers, lawyers, accountants, and clerks were able to maintain their incomes by working from home and completing their tasks remotely via the internet. Meetings were held via platforms such as Zoom and Teams; and tasks could be completed through securely logging into the employer's network. Workers classified as being 'essential' were also able to maintain their incomes. For example, professionals and support workers in health; tradespersons in the building industry, mining industry workers, public transport workers, delivery drivers, cleaners and security guards were all classified as essential workers as were those employed manufacturing food, medicines and personal protective equipment. Workers who could not work from home and were not classified as being essential were laid off, losing their incomes without warning, and

in many cases, without leave entitlements to draw on. Due to the lockdowns and hospitality and retail workers not being regarded as essential workers, ABS (2023a) employment statistics indicate that between May 2019 and May 2020, the number of chefs declined from 100,700 to 75,400; the number of waiters declined from 139,000 to 40,600; and the number of checkout operators and cashiers declined from 223,300 to 154,200.

### **Government support for workers**

Workers in the hospitality and retail sectors are typically employed as casuals on a part-time basis with no paid leave entitlements. Consequently, when their workplaces shut-down, they had to register for meagre unemployment benefits or fend for themselves. In Australia, welfare payments for the unemployed are paid at a universal rate regardless of prior income. Therefore, workers who lost their jobs in March 2020 faced a very bleak future. Moreover, to qualify for unemployment benefits, claimants must have exhausted their leave entitlements and have very little cash on hand. In March 2020, the unemployment benefit (JobSeeker) was just \$565 per fortnight (two weeks). When thousands of Australians were seen queuing to register for JobSeeker, their peers who were lucky enough to maintain their employment were shocked and the Federal Government scrambled to implement a new payment, JobKeeper, to support this cohort of workers so that they did not become ‘unemployed’ (The Treasury, 2020a).

Between 30 March and 27 September 2020, the JobKeeper payment was set at \$1500 per fortnight for all workers regardless of usual hours worked (The Treasury, 2020a). The JobKeeper payment was paid to employers rather than directly to the workers, therefore, employers could determine who to pay and how much to pay them. There were no checks to ensure that the full payments were passed onto workers or that workers who were employed before the national pandemic lockdown were actually paid. Although the JobKeeper payment continued after 27 September 2020, the amount was reduced. For those who usually worked at least 20 hours per week, the payment was reduced to \$1200 per fortnight and for those who usually worked less than 20 hours per week, the payment was reduced to \$750 per fortnight. Businesses claiming JobKeeper after 27 September 2020 had to demonstrate that they had suffered a decline in turnover (The Treasury, 2020c). The JobSeeker payment for the unemployed was increased by \$550 per fortnight for six months (The Treasury, 2020b).

### ***Theoretical perspective***

The concept of social class generally refers to divisions within society based on indicators such as education, occupation and income. Although there are different ways of examining how education, occupation and income stratify a population, class theorists (Breen 2009; Wright 2009) typically agree that the population of any given society can be sorted according to a hierarchy from low levels of prestige to high levels of prestige. Prestige can be regarded as the level of respect and admiration attached to the workers

employed in particular occupations. Relatively high levels of prestige are expected to be accompanied by relatively high levels of income.

Although social class is not generally discussed in Australia, there is some recognition of the differences in prestige attached to particular occupations. For example, professionals such as lawyers and accountants enjoy high levels of prestige as well as high levels of income. Semi-skilled workers in the mining industry earn relatively high levels of income (ABS 2021) however, due to being manual workers, they do not enjoy high levels of prestige. Social class differences related to occupation typically differentiate between highly educated and highly skilled workers, semiskilled white collar-workers, semi-skilled blue-collar workers, and low skilled manual and nonmanual workers (Breen, 2009). There is an expectation that jobs requiring higher levels of skill and education are associated with higher levels of remuneration and prestige. During the pandemic, differences according to industry and the type of work performed became more important and new cleavages emerged. For example, within low-skilled manual occupations, some workers such as cleaners were regarded as essential workers and thus maintained their employment and income. Other low skilled blue-collar workers, such as factory workers not producing essential goods such as food and medicines, were laid off. At the same time, highly skilled professionals such as optometrists were classified as nonessential and were laid off as optometry business closed during the lockdowns. Workers who were regarded as being essential were the least likely to lose their incomes. For example, security guards typically have lower levels of skill but were more likely than chefs and hotel managers to remain employed. Office workers who could complete their tasks remotely from home were more likely than allied health professionals who were not regarded as being essential to maintain their incomes.

Traditionally, workers with higher levels of autonomy are regarded as being higher up the prestige scale as are those with responsibility for the supervision of staff, regardless of their level of education. For example, a manager overseeing the work of 100 staff members may not necessarily have a university degree, however, they are assigned to the service class. The reorganisation of work due to the pandemic restrictions highlighted how these traditional measures of prestige have become less important. Levels of autonomy increased for employees working from home as it was not possible for managers to closely supervise their staff. Although some professionals had been able to work from home before the pandemic, working remotely became widespread for white-collar workers, regardless of their position in the employee hierarchy. These new ways of working may create new ways of thinking about social class and what constitutes prestige. If the flexibility to work from home is included as a measure of prestige, existing social classes would become divided according to this new dimension. In existing class schemas (see Breen, 2009) white collar workers are classified according to their level of skills and education and whether or not they supervise other workers, however, supervision of lower ranked workers was not possible when all workers were completing



their tasks remotely. In other words, supervisors were not able to physically supervise their staff. Consequently, white-collar workers may need to be classified according to their level of autonomy as well as their level of skill and education and their supervisory responsibility. That said, it is not yet clear how much of the increase in flexibility that the pandemic created with regards to where and when work tasks could be completed will be maintained in the decades to come. There is no guarantee that the switch to remote working will not be reversed and that employees may be expected to work onsite where they can be physically supervised.

From a social class perspective, worker exploitation is another aspect of interest. Workers who were able to work from home were exploited because they had to use their own personal resources to complete their work. For example, they needed an appropriate space, a stable internet connection, office furniture and the ability to switch off from their family life during working hours. Essential workers were exploited due to their interactions with people who may have been infected. The only option available to essential workers wishing to avoid their increased risk of catching the virus was to not work and thus, forgo their income. Some essential workers may have been able to use up their paid leave entitlements but there was no way of predicting when each lockdown would start and end and eventually, they would have exhausted their paid leave. The workers employed in jobs that were neither classified as essential nor suitable for remote work were made acutely aware of their level of exploitation when they were laid off with little to no notice and having, in many cases, no paid leave entitlements. Although many of these workers had been engaged in precarious employment for long periods of time, they may not have realised that they were regarded as the reserve army of workers who can be called upon when needed and discarded when not needed. These workers had to rely on welfare benefits funded by the Federal Government until their workplaces reopened and their employers called them back to work. Their lives were made even more precarious by the uncertainty regarding the lockdowns which were often implemented with only a few hours warning.

Summing up, the restrictions implemented to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus resulted in new dimensions of social inequality related to occupation and location. Classified as nonessential and unable to work from home, casual workers in the hospitality and retail sectors were abruptly laid off and the precarious nature of their employment and their lives became apparent to all Australians. Workers located in the state of Victoria were more severely impacted than their counterparts across the rest of Australia due to the prolonged periods of time that they were locked down in their homes. Rather than provide welfare payments directly to the workers affected by their lockdown policies, the Australian government provided payments to businesses to keep their workers employed without having any oversight over which workers were paid and how much they were paid.

## Methodology

### *The Life Patterns project*

To answer the research question, How were changes to employment during the pandemic experienced by young adults in Australia?, I conduct analysis of data generated by 40 semistructured interviews with participants from the Life Patterns project. This project is a multicohort, mixed methods panel study that is tracking young people as they transition between education and employment throughout the life course. Currently, there are 3 cohorts: cohort 1 left secondary school in 1991; cohort 2 completed secondary school in 2006 and cohort 3 completed secondary school in 2023. Participants in cohort 2 were surveyed between March and May in 2020 and a subset of 40 participants were interviewed via Zoom in September and October 2020 when they were aged around 32 years. Ethics approval for this project was granted by the University of Melbourne Ethics Committee when the participants were recruited in 2005. The participants agreed to engage in this longitudinal project by completing annual surveys and, if invited, participating in one-on-one interviews. Participants are informed at the beginning of each survey and each interview that they have the right to not answer any of the questions and that they may withdraw from the project at any time.

### *Data collection*

The 2020 interviewees were selected from the larger cohort of 500 participants on the basis that they had been interviewed in previous waves. They were originally selected for the qualitative component of the project based on their gender, location, family socio-economic status, level of education and occupation. The Life Patterns project aims to generate both longitudinal qualitative and quantitative data.

Table 1 Selected characteristics of participants

Characteristic	N=40	Characteristic	N=40
<b>Sex</b>		<b>Marital status</b>	
Male	16	Living with partner	33
Female	24	Other	7
<b>Highest level of education</b>		<b>Parent status</b>	
University degree	33	Child/children	13
Other	7	No child	27
<b>Location</b>		<b>Own/ buying a property</b>	
State/ territory capital city	28	Yes	21
other	12	No	19
<b>Employment status</b>			
Employed	35		
Not employed	5		



Each participant consented to the interview being recorded for research purposes. The interview guide included general questions related to the impact of the pandemic restrictions and lockdowns on their employment, income, family life and social life. Of the 40 participants, 24 were women, 33 had completed a university level educational qualification, 28 were living in a state capital city, 21 owned a property or were paying off a mortgage, 35 were employed, 33 were partnered, and 13 were parents – see Table 1.

### ***Data analysis***

After the recorded interviews were professionally transcribed, I conducted a thematic analysis by reading and rereading the interview data several times. By focusing on how their employment status may have, or may not have, changed during the 2020 pandemic, I identified three main themes related to their employment experiences. The first theme related to participants who were able to keep working during the pandemic. There was a general sense of relief, of feeling lucky because they were able to continue working and were not financially disadvantaged by the lock downs. These participants were either continuing to work in the usual place of employment or were working from home. The second theme was derived from the comments of those who were working from home and were struggling to separate work from home life. The third theme was derived from the comments of those who were laid-off and were struggling to survive.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Pandemic-related redundancies***

The workers who were immediately and severely impacted by the lockdowns associated with the pandemic were those employed in hospitality sector. As discussed above, workers in this sector are typically engaged in precarious employment with little or no security of tenure or income. They are not entitled to paid leave or redundancy payments. Businesses had no time to prepare for the initial six-week national lockdown and, in many cases, simply sent text messages to the staff informing them that all of their shifts were cancelled. Casual workers were left with no option but to register for unemployment benefits until the Federal Government introduced the JobKeeper payment. For example, a male chef living in Melbourne commented,

*We started off on JobSeeker, and then the JobKeeper kicked in properly, and then we were on that. I think we got four weeks, maybe even five. So, we basically got the call to come back because we were going to reopen, everything was fine for a few weeks, and then we shut it again.*

Other participants indicated that they used up some of their leave and then were transferred onto JobKeeper before they became eligible for JobSeeker. For example,

*I was stood down for 3 months...Initially, I was going to take long service leave and annual leave...but then Jobkeeper came in [Female events manager living in regional NSW].*

Due to the rushed development and implementation of the JobKeeper payments, the Federal Government paid the funds directly to employers with an expectation that the payments would then be passed onto their employees. However, as some participants noted, this was not always the case. For example:

*JobKeeper, it's just the other thing that they took advantage of. They pick and choose who to put on a JobKeeper and they ended up just looking after their immediate family who don't even work in the restaurant [Male chef living in rural Tasmania].*

In order to cope with their sudden loss of income, some participants took advantage of the opportunity to withdraw funds from their retirement savings (superannuation). The Federal Government permitted withdrawals of up to \$10,000 in 2020 and 2021. The long-term consequences of withdrawing from their superannuation funds will be that they will have a lower balance when they retire and therefore, their income throughout their retirement years will be lower. In other words, to alleviate their financial difficulties during the pandemic, they have set themselves up for a lower standard of living later in life. Therefore, their precarious existence will be maintained unless they can secure an income high enough to quickly replace the funds withdrawn from their retirement savings. One of the participants, an assistant manager of a hotel located in country Victoria, explained that he withdrew from his superannuation fund because, “*At the time, I got stood down indefinitely*” and he was unsure of when he would return to work and start earning a living again, so he “*did it just so we had that money as a buffer.*” Not all businesses were eligible for JobKeeper and unfortunately, for this participant, his employer was ineligible so he was concerned that he would have to register for unemployment benefits (JobSeeker) once his paid leave entitlements were exhausted.

One group of workers who became acutely aware of their disadvantaged position in the labour market were those on fixed term contracts. In recent decades, there has been a trend for highly skilled professionals to be employed on fixed term contracts (Kalleberg, 2009). Contractors generally enjoy higher incomes and more flexibility. However, this flexibility worked against them during the pandemic and as their contracts ended, so did their employment. Contractors are generally eligible for paid leave and redundancy payments. Consequently, contractors were not eligible for JobSeeker benefits until they had used up all of their paid leave entitlements and they were not eligible for JobKeeper because that was paid directly to the employers and it was the employers who decided who to retain on their staff. As our participants explained, they expected that their contracts would be renewed as they had been in the past.

*Working remotely for about a month and a half, and then my contract with that company ended but didn't get extended... I was not eligible for JobKeeper [contract ended] or JobSeeker because my partner makes more money than the cutoff [Male visual effects designer living in Melbourne].*

There was also a sense that some employers were taking advantage of the situation and making sure that their employees felt ‘grateful’ for any income, even if it was the JobKeeper payment funded by the government.

*The lucky businesses that have survived and they kind of let you know that they're doing you a favour by employing you. And it just feels pretty awful, I would say and that just makes you feel very trapped [Male chef living in rural Tasmania].*

Furthermore, the reality of precarious employment became clearly evident for participants who always had regular employment and earnings despite being on casual or fixed term contracts.

*We've just seen how swiftly that can all be taken away. So yeah, my thoughts about stability, have definitely changed [Male chef living in Melbourne].*

### ***Essential workers risking exposure to COVID-19***

Being regarded as an essential worker during the pandemic allowed many workers to keep working but increased their risk of contracting the virus. In 2020, little was known about the coronavirus and there was no vaccine. Fear of contracting COVID-19 was a daily experience for front-line workers who kept working despite the risks, however, they considered themselves to be lucky to be able to keep working and earning an income. This group included healthcare professionals and auxiliary staff such as nursing assistants, ward clerks, orderlies, cleaners and security guards. Some participants mentioned the extra tasks they had to incorporate into their daily routines. For example,

*We're pretty lucky really all in all but yeah, it's, it was definitely a different kind of thing and then having to think about all the other stuff with work, with making sure you've got all your signage and all the sanitizing stuff and extra things just to put on top of your usual daily routines [Female chiropractor living in Sydney].*

One participant explicitly stated that his workload had increased:

*Due to COVID, it's actually increased quite a lot of work, because we're pre-vetting a lot of ships before they come in. Yesterday we had two crew members arrive outside of Port Hedland with COVID. So, it was on the ships. You've got to recheck them and do 14 day, and make sure they do 14 (days) quarantine. So, there's that security as well. You have to do pre-COVID checks before going to work [Male shipping officer living in regional Western Australia].*

Other essential workers, such as tradespersons, delivery drivers and public transport workers, were also at an increased risk of contracting the virus as they performed their regular jobs. They did acknowledge that there were some minor changes to the way they carried out their work, but they were largely unaffected and their incomes were maintained.

*It hasn't really changed too much for me, because people still need plumbers... Maybe with work in the way that if I go and do work at a nursing home or something like that, there might just be different rules in place. Yesterday I got my temperature taken when I had to do a job [Male plumber living in Brisbane].*

*Up here, we've just been traveling and working mostly as normal. They take your temperature on job sites and you have to fill out the forms [Male technician living in Brisbane].*

There was also some recognition that despite being in low paid work, some essential workers were better off than their counterparts in other sectors who had been laid off. For example,

*I have actually had a stressful few months. But I still have perspective. I'd say it's a lot less stressful than people lining up around the block from Centrelink [Female hospital ward clerk living in Melbourne].*

### ***Working from home – a new dimension of exploitation***

People who were employed in jobs that could be carried out remotely from home were able to maintain their regular incomes, save time and money by not having to commute to the office and by not being able to socialise with friends or go on holidays. The overarching theme that emerged from the interview data for those who were able to work from home was that of 'feeling lucky.' For example, a male project manager living in Melbourne said, "*So, I'm lucky, very, very lucky, on the whole, from the whole COVID experience, in that, my job hasn't been affected.*"

The ability to save a substantial portion of their income was also frequently mentioned by those lucky enough to work remotely. For example,

*We've been fortunate that we've been able to save a lot more than what we usually have. We've gotten together a deposit, and we've been house-looking since about July [Male public servant living in Melbourne].*

However, many of the participants who were working from home mentioned their struggles to separate work *from* home. For example,

*For me at home, I don't have the spare office room, so I work in my bedroom and it's just hard to switch off. You finish work and then I'm just on the laptop and then I'll be like "Oh, another hour" or "I'll finish this up" [Female administration support officer living in Sydney].*

For participants living in Melbourne, the extended lockdowns engendered a sense of being trapped and feelings of resentment that they were confined to home. For example, a female marketer living in Melbourne commented, "*The mental health part of it just being locked up in your own home is pretty crazy but I've been lucky keeping my job.*"

The mental health impacts associated with working from were often mentioned. Participants missed the collegiality that they experienced in their office environments. For example, a male property valuer living in Hobart said, "*But not having the ability to talk to other people and network and just that collegiality that comes with an office environment, it starts to drain on you after a little while.*"

This disruption to the social interactions embedded in everyday work practices was also noted by some of the essential workers who enjoyed going into work despite the

increased risks of catching the virus. For example, a male nurse living in Melbourne commented,

*I feel sorry for the people that are stuck working from home. So I feel sorry for those sorts of people that don't get that sort of social interaction, they've got to do it all via video, which is a bit awkward and it's not the same.*

Thus, despite being exposed to COVID-19 on a daily basis, some essential workers were less concerned about the virus than the mental health impacts of isolation from colleagues and friends. A male public servant living in Melbourne noted that working from home was “*a modern day version of slavery for a lot of people. They're working all the time and the messages keep coming through well after business hours*”. An indication of some recognition of how the pandemic contributed to the exploitation of workers.

### **Implications for Policy**

The insights provided by the analysis of the 40 interviews conducted with young adults during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the importance of developing workable policies and programs. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was unexpected, governments are generally expected to be well-prepared for disasters. The new welfare payment called JobKeeper was paid to employers rather than employees and was paid at a universal rate regardless of the hours typically worked by the employee prior to the pandemic. There was no oversight by the relevant government departments, so employers were able to decide who to pay and how much to pay them. Consequently, the outcomes for workers were heavily reliant on the goodwill and honesty of their employers. Some employees received the full payment of \$1500/ fortnight regardless of the hours they usually worked prior to the pandemic, some workers were paid a percentage of the \$1500/ fortnight according to their usual hours, and other workers were not paid at all. These workers had to sign up for unemployment benefits which were paid at a much lower rate. The government had the capacity to pay workers directly through the welfare system and this may have ensured a fairer distribution of the billions of dollars expended to keep people out of poverty. Furthermore, the temporary increase in the JobSeeker rate (unemployment benefits) during the pandemic allowed the long term unemployed to enjoy a slightly more comfortable lifestyle and demonstrated the inadequacy of the regular rate of payment. When the JobSeeker rate returned to its usual very low level, the unemployed were once again consigned to living in poverty. In other words, the temporary increase during the pandemic provided some temporary relief and an indication of how the unemployed could live if the higher rate of payment was a permanent change.

### **Conclusions**

Thematic analysis of qualitative data generated by one-on-one interviews conducted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that social inequality has be-

come more noticeable in Australia. During the pandemic, divisions according to occupational status were overlaid by divisions according to employment status and location. The overarching theme emerging from the interviews with participants who were able to keep working was that of feeling 'lucky.' They were able to maintain their incomes and avoid unemployment and the deprivations associated with unemployment in Australia. The realisation that thousands of Australian workers had been stood down for an indefinite period of time and were queuing to register for unemployment benefits forced the Federal Government to introduce a new welfare payment (JobKeeper) and increase the meagre unemployment benefit (JobSeeker). Workers who were classified as being essential and those who could complete their work tasks from home were confronted with the inequalities embedded within Australian society. When the pandemic lockdowns came into force in late March 2020, casual workers were the first to be laid off exacerbating their already precarious lives. Casual workers are typically employed on a part-time basis and have no leave entitlements, therefore, their ability to set aside money for emergencies such as the pandemic lockdowns is severely limited. Part-time workers have low incomes, casual workers have irregular incomes and casual part-time workers have irregular low incomes. Those employed in the hospitality sector were among the first to be laid off and the last to be re-employed due to restrictions on trade implemented after the initial lockdown was lifted. Restaurants, cafes, hotels and clubs were subject to density restrictions so many businesses opted to serve only take away food thus lowering their staffing needs. Consequently, even though businesses were able to re-open after a relatively short period of lockdown, workers were not necessarily able to return to work.

Experiencing unemployment during the early stages of engagement with the labour market, has a scarring effect throughout the life course (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Furlong et al., 2017). Therefore, the pandemic lockdowns may depress the incomes of laid-off workers for decades. In turn, this may depress levels of subjective wellbeing/happiness (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011; Chesters et al., 2021). Furthermore, in an effort to maintain their prepandemic lifestyles despite losing their jobs, some participants withdrew funds from their retirement savings. By lowering their superannuation balances so early in their employment careers, these young adults have set themselves up for a lower standard of living in their retirement years.

The aim of this article is to provide an insight into how experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic varied according to pre-existing employment situations. Although there is no claim that the excerpts of qualitative data generated by 40 semistructured interviews are representative of the Australian population, they indicate that the young adults interviewed may have a new appreciation for the way that Australian society is structured. For many young adults, the lockdowns implemented to curb the spread of COVID-19 highlighted the precarity of employment and, thus, the incomes of large sections of the workforce. The overarching theme of feeling lucky to maintain both employment and income suggests that the participants who were not laid off were patently aware that not all their peers were shielded from the economic consequences of the pandemic and that their 'luck' was in sharp contrast to the experiences of those less fortunate.



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