The Life Patterns research program is designed to follow patterns in people’s lives over time in order to gain a longitudinal and holistic understanding of the ways in which two generations of Australians are responding to our rapidly changing world. The program is based at the Youth Research Collective, in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne.

The generosity and ongoing support of the Life Patterns participants has meant that this study has built up a unique picture of the reality of the lives of two generations.

THE LIFE PATTERNS PROGRAM:

- follows two generations of Australians - one that left secondary school in 1991 (corresponding to the popular notion of ‘Gen X’) and another that left secondary school in 2006 (corresponding to the popular notion of ‘Gen Y’ or the ‘Millennials’). Multiple comparisons can be made between the two cohorts across different points in their lives.

- explores the pathways through different areas of life taken by Australian young people including their experiences in education, the labour market, their family and personal relationships, attitudes to life, concerns, and health and wellbeing.

- provides a unique picture, very different from the stereotypes of smooth transitions from education to work, or of the narcissistic or complacent generation often described in public discourse. We have argued for the importance of paying attention to the diversity of experiences that characterise young people’s lives.

- allows for insights to be drawn that feed into policy advice and also into public debate. Our work is often in the media disputing the simplistic claims about young people.

- was designed to follow patterns in young people’s lives over time in order to gain more than a static glimpse. We are interested in developing a more dynamic picture of young people’s lives rather than a single snapshot in time.

The Life Patterns project is ongoing, thanks to the continued engagement of the participants, and the support of the University of Melbourne and the Australian Research Council.
Across Australia, the death toll from the COVID-19 pandemic has been comparatively low due to the strict measures implemented to control the spread of the virus. The Federal Government closed the national border in March 2020 after which anyone returning to Australia had to isolate for 14 days. The national border remained closed until February 2022. Although state and territory borders also closed, the length and timing of these closures varied. For example, the Western Australian border reopened in March 2022 after being closed for 700 days (Warriner 2022). Health is a state/territory responsibility therefore, a National Cabinet was formed so that the Federal Government and State and Territory Governments could coordinate their response to this health emergency. The initial 6-week national lockdown eased in late May but by July 2020, a second wave had taken hold in Melbourne. Throughout 2020 and 2021, various states and territories entered, emerged from and re-entered lockdowns. Consequently, state and territory borders were closed for the best part of two years, isolating people from their extended families and friends who lived in another state or territory. Travel was almost impossible for long periods of time. Overall, the residents of Melbourne endured 262 days in lockdown (Vally & Bennett 2021). In 2020, Melbourne residents were only allowed to leave their homes for four reasons: to buy essential items; to access health care or caregiving; for work if they were an essential worker; and for exercise (restricted to one hour per day within 5 kilometres of their homes). In 2021, a fifth reason to leave home, to get vaccinated, was added to the list. These measures impacted directly on the taken for granted ways that Australians have relied on to connect with friends, family and colleagues and on the many cultural and social events that enabled a sense of community, challenging taken for granted uses of social time and of space.

The findings from survey data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic from participants of cohort 1 and cohort 2 of the Life Patterns longitudinal research program, presented in this report, offers insight into the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic on people’s relationships. It draws on data about participants from cohort 1 (aged in their late 40s) who were surveyed in August-September 2020 and participants from cohort 2 (aged in their early 30s) who were surveyed in April-May 2021. We received completed surveys from participants residing in every Australian state, the ACT and overseas. Both surveys included a series of questions asking participants about their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it had impacted on their relationships with their families and friends. Of particular interest are their responses to the open text questions.

Our previous analyses of cohorts 1 and 2 of the Life Patterns longitudinal research program have documented how these two generations of Australians have managed significant social change. These changes include …the expansion of precarious work to most parts of the labour market, two economic recessions, the shift from Keynesian to neoliberal-inspired policies, the widespread use of social media and the impact of globalisation forces such as the mobility of capital and labour (Wyn, 2020: 2).

Their responses to these changing circumstances, we argue, have contributed to the formation of a ‘new adulthood’ which has rendered the temporal hallmarks of previous generations (such as age of leaving the parental home; of home ownership, marriage and partnership and parenthood) increasingly irrelevant. Other temporal markers of ‘successful adulthood’, such as completing formal education and achieving stable employment and the means for a sustainable livelihood have become difficult to pin down as young people move in and out of education and take up different kinds of employment status across time (Chesters, 2020). Making sense of these changes is the burden of this generation as they rewrite the expectations of a ‘good life’ that is in tune with the times. Previous analyses of the experiences and views of Life Patterns participants has exposed the work people do to make sense of the unique temporal challenges and pressures they face in making sense of their lives.
For example, Cahill and Leccardi’s (2020) analysis of cohort 2 participants in 2018 exposes the fear of the impacts of climate change, technological change and an ageing population, as a common backdrop to their lives. Against this backdrop of uncertainty about personal and societal futures, Cahill and Leccardi show that participants found temporal pressures were amongst the most difficult to come to terms with. These temporal pressures included the sense of failing to meet markers of achievement (such as employment, marriage, parenthood and home ownership) in a timely manner as well as managing the ‘sped-up’ time pressures of the everyday as digital technologies increasingly blur the boundaries of life. Cook and Woodman’s (2020) analysis of cohort 2 participants highlights the role of family, friends and significant others in providing the support (emotional, material and practical) that enables young adults to make sense of the present and see ‘the horizons of possible futures’ more clearly (2020: 127).

The COVID-19 pandemic has added to the complexity and uncertainty of people’s lives. Our analysis explores this through the lens of the intensification of experiences of time and space that responses to the pandemic have brought about.

The significance of friends and family for making sense of the challenges young adults face and creating space to reflect on life is also a key finding by Cahill and Leccardi, who highlight the importance of:

…the peer-shared creation of experience in ‘slow time’ outside the imperatives of speed: ‘like when someone sits down with you and you’ve got an hour with them and they say “how are you?”’ (Cahill & Leccardi, 2020: 78).

Relationships: Disrupted, Challenged, Reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic
In 2020, 261 cohort 1 participants completed the Life Patterns survey. Two-thirds of the participants were women; 75% of the participants held at least one university degree; almost 75% were either married or in a de facto relationship; 71% were parents; and 90% were living in Victoria - see Table 1. In 2021, 470 cohort 2 participants completed the Life Patterns survey: 70% of the participants were women; 81% held at least one university degree; 67% were either married or in a de facto relationship; 41% were parents. Over 40% of the participants were living in Victoria, 23% were living in Tasmania, 17% were living in NSW, 9% were living in the ACT and the remainder were either living in other parts of Australia or living overseas - see Table 1.

### TABLE 1 CHARACTERISTICS OF COHORT 1 IN 2020 AND COHORT 2 IN 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Cohort 1 [n=261] %</th>
<th>Cohort 2 [n=470] %</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<td>81</td>
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<tr>
<td>De facto/ married</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overseas</td>
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</table>

Youth Research Collective, Melbourne Graduate School of Education
In 2020, 70% of male and 62% of female cohort 1 participants were living with their partners and children and a further 11% of both male and female participants were living with their partners (without children). In 2021, 33% of male and 40% of female cohort 2 participants were living with their partners and children and a further 36% of male and 25% of female participants were living with their partners (without children). These differences between the two cohorts are not unexpected given that cohort 1 participants were aged in their late 40s and cohort 2 participants were aged in the early 30s. The graph in Figure 1 illustrates the differences in living arrangements between males and females in both cohorts.

**FIGURE 1: LIVING ARRANGEMENTS ACCORDING TO COHORT AND GENDER**

In 2020, 65% of male and 69% of female cohort 1 participants were living in capital cities. Ten per cent of males were living in rural areas whereas just 4% of female participants resided in rural areas. In 2021, 62% of male and 59% of female cohort 2 participants were living in capital cities and 11% of both cohorts were residing in country towns. The graph in Figure 2 illustrates the differences in residential location between males and females in both cohorts.

**FIGURE 2: RESIDENTIAL LOCATION ACCORDING TO COHORT AND GENDER**
3. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON TIME SPENT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

The cohort 1 (2020) and cohort 2 (2021) surveys included questions related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Both cohorts were asked about the extent to which COVID-19 had affected the amount of time that they were able to spend with members of their family (partner, mother, father, children, siblings, other relatives) and their friends. The answer options ranged from 0= not at all to 10 = to a great extent. There was also a ‘not applicable’ option for participants to select if appropriate.

Almost 60% of cohort 1 males and 46% of cohort 1 females reported that COVID-19 had no impact on the amount of time spent with their partner; and 58% of cohort 2 males and 63% of cohort 2 females indicated that COVID -19 had not affected the amount of time spent with their partner. Forty-six per cent of cohort 1 males and 43% of cohort 1 females reported that COVID-19 had not impacted on the amount of time spent with their children; and 57% of cohort 2 males and 85% of cohort 2 females indicated that COVID -19 had no effect on the amount of time spent with their children. The higher percentages for cohort 2 participants compared to cohort 1 participants are not surprising given that are more likely to have very young children living with them. Less than 10% of participants in each cohort indicated that COVID-19 had no impact on the amount of time that they had spent with their friends. The graph in Figure 3 illustrates the differences between male and female participants in both cohorts who indicated that COVID-19 had no impact on the amount of time spent with family and friends. Thus, it would seem that for the majority of families, COVID-19 had little impact on the amount of time spent together. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of participants indicated that the COVID-19 had impacted on the amount of time they had spent with members of their extended families and friends.

FIGURE 3 COVID-19 DID NOT IMPACT TIME SPENT WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS

COVID-19 did not impact time spent with family & friends

- Partner
- Children
- Mother
- Other relatives
- Siblings
- Father
- Friends

- Cohort 1 Male
- Cohort 1 Female
- Cohort 2 Male
- Cohort 2 Female
4. RELATIONSHIPS IN TIME AND SPACE DURING COVID

The 2020-2021 surveys included an open text question asking participants to comment on how the pandemic had affected their relationships with family and friends. Of the 261 cohort 1 participants who completed the survey, 233 provided comments and of the 470 cohort 2 participants who completed the surveys, 340 provided comments. These comments generated almost 21,000 words for analysis. A content analysis identified five main themes: positive impacts of increased time with immediate family; less pressure to organise social events; negative impacts due to being isolated from extended family members; negative impacts due to the intensification of relationships at home; the uses and disadvantages of technology to keep in touch. These themes illustrate the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the nature and quality of time and space in people’s relationships, because the restrictions to people’s lives, which included limiting the people who can have face-to-face contact with each other and restricting the distance that people could travel. The limitation on travelling to work for many freed-up time that would usually have been spent commuting. As we discuss below, in shifting taken for granted uses of time and space, these measures created new opportunities as well as new challenges for relationships.

TIME

The lockdowns involving restrictions on movement and face-to-face socialising with others were a significant disruption to taken for granted ways of relating. For many, expanding the time available to be with immediate family was a positive, while recognising that it also created challenges. For some, the restricted contact with friends was an opportunity to re-evaluate their friendships.

EXPANDING TIME WITH IMMEDIATE FAMILY

Participants in both cohorts reported that having more time to spend with their partners and children was a positive development for them, bringing people “closer together”, making things “less rushed and hectic” and enabling a more desirable balance between work and non-work. The following quotes illustrate the experience of ‘expanded time’ for relationships during the COVID restrictions:

COVID-19 affected my relationship with my husband and two daughters in a positive way because of the time we have been able to spend together. The time we have spent in isolation has only strengthened our relationship [Cohort 1 female learning support officer living in a capital city].

If anything, working from home has been a big positive being that I have been able to spend much more time with my wife & young son. It has been good [Cohort 2 male engineer living in a capital city].

My relationship with my partner is very strong, positive and supportive. We have enjoyed being able to spend more time together [Cohort 1 female education support officer living in a regional city].

Although recognising the positive aspects of having more time with family, some participants also felt that the intensification of relationships was challenging, with “too much time spent together” with “no escape from each other” and missed the sociability of friends as the lockdowns (particularly in Victoria) wore on:

I feel that tensions in my relationship with my partner and children have increased. It’s been difficult…the return to schooling from home…has made work time during the day more difficult [Cohort 1 male software developer living in a regional city].

Spending time at home in March [2020] was actually positive for our family. The second lockdown [July-November 2020] has proven much more difficult and created problems [Cohort 1 female professional living in a capital city].

The pressure of lockdown in Melbourne- having 24/7 care for 3 kids including home schooling & trying to work too means there is little time left to maintain other friendships. It’s so busy [Cohort 1 female communications consultant living in a capital city].
RE-EVALUATING RELATIONSHIP PRIORITIES

The COVID-19 measures also provoked some participants to re-evaluate the investment of time in relationships. For some, as the following quotes illustrate, this took the form of valuing friends and family more explicitly.

It made me realise which relationships were more important to me and which ones I wanted to put effort into. Seeing friends was no longer as easy as going out for drinks, it took effort to regularly communicate when feeling low, organise facetime calls, and think of creative activities to do virtually - for example, I cooked virtually with a friend and had a wine tasting with other friends [Cohort 2 female public servant living in a capital city].

I think it has made me realise the importance of family and friends and therefore it is now a priority to spend time with quality people [Cohort 2 female specification representative living in a capital city].

I need my friends to debrief...it makes me feel very alone even though I have my husband and children with me all the time. It is a very lonely time [Cohort 1 female operations manager living in a capital city].

COVID helped me to figure out which relationships I really wanted to nurture because it took more effort than before. [Cohort 2 male software developer living in a capital city].

However, others welcomed the respite from having to “organise things with my friends who live within the area”, took the opportunity to “weed out” the “crap friends” with whom they no longer had anything in common or simply appreciated having less pressure on their time and their finances. Comments also highlighted the stress that the pandemic measures had placed on relationships.

I don’t mind not seeing friends. It helped me save money. I also didn’t need to make excuses to not see friends [Cohort 2 male lawyer living in a capital city].

Being locked up for so long has changed people. With my friends, tempers flare easily and no one seems to have much energy or inclination to arrange visits or outings [Cohort 2 female public servant living in a regional city].

SOCially isolating spaces

The social isolation of family and friends from each other was experienced as a sense of loss. Isolation across the generations was particularly difficult. Participants’ comments that they were “struggling” and that the lack of personal contact was “heartbreaking”. For some, this was expressed as missing “the people I love…the laughter and the fun” and for others, it was having to suspend significant rituals associated with birth, death and dying.

Participants also reported feeling a strong sense of loss and sadness at not being able to support friends and family who were in need or themselves receiving the help they need, feeling stressed by no longer participating in the daily lives of nieces and nephews, cousins and siblings, or having to cancel birthday parties and restaurant gatherings. The following quotes illustrate the depth of feeling about the impact of spatial restrictions on their lives:

I was not able to spend much time at all with extended family, especially my grandmother who is in a nursing home. Only recently have we been allowed to visit with the kids, which will be the second time she has ever been able to hold my 18 month old daughter [Cohort 2 female teacher living in a country town].

My beautiful grandmother is dying and I am unable to spend much time with her, or support my mother due to the restrictions related to COVID-19 [Cohort 1 female nurse and midwife educator living in a capital city].

My father passed away at the end of March [2020] so with only 10 people allowed at the funeral - we haven’t yet properly celebrated his life with all of my interstate family [Cohort 1 female internal communications advisor living in a capital city].

The hardest part was not meeting my first niece until she was nearly 7 months old. She was born with a birth defect and spent a lot of time in hospital. I wasn’t able to support my brother and his wife in some of the most important and hard moments of their life [Cohort 2 female retail assistant living in a capital city].

My sisters were outside the 5km limit in Melbourne and I wasn’t able to see them for months. I usually see them almost daily. My parents are in regional Victoria and I hardly saw them for 6 months. It was very stressful not to see my family regularly [Cohort 2 male media manager/editor living in a capital city].
My parents and relatives live in a different state so COVID-19 and state border closures meant that I couldn’t see any relatives for over a year. This was particularly devastating because my family didn’t get to see my baby for such a long time that he had grown into a toddler by the time they could see him [Cohort 2 female public servant living in a capital city].

EXPANDING DIGITAL SPACES

In response to the restrictions on face-to-face socialising, digital communication became a crucial form of connection for many. Here, participants reflect on how they experienced the use of digital social spaces, using applications such as zoom and facetime to communicate and share activities including mealtimes, games and regular chat times. While digital communications were valued, some participants also reflected on the limitations of virtual relationships.

COVID has affected our ability to see our friends and family…however, we have remained engaged with each other through sharing meals, events and games over zoom calls, facetime etc [Cohort 1 female careers practitioner living in a country town].

I don’t think there has been a significant negative impact on relationships, but they’ve definitely become more reliant on tech, e.g., Zoom calls, more online games as a way to catch up [Cohort 2 Male working as a podiatrist living in a regional city].

We missed our friends and family a lot, but ironically my friends in Tassie and Victoria and I probably started speaking more often than we would have normally, setting up regular Facebook group chats [Cohort 2 female communications advisor living in a regional city].

My immediate family and I made an effort to keep in touch during stage 4 lockdown in Victoria through playing cards online each week while videoconferencing [Cohort 2 female policy officer living in a capital city].

THE POVERTY OF VIRTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

While digital communications enabled positive social spaces to open up or be sustained, comments by a significant majority revealed feelings of frustration and loss. Participants noted that “hugs and kisses can’t be conveyed as well on Skype” and that virtual socialising didn’t bring “the energy” of face-to-face contact. For others, the expansion of digital spaces, including work, put further pressure on their lives.

The pandemic meant I was unable to see my parents for almost 12-months, whilst we create new ways to communicate (whatsapp and zoom) it didn’t, couldn’t replace seeing them in person [Cohort 2 female philanthropist living in a capital city].

I have not been able to see family or friends in person for 5 months…online time with family has not been reliable or as positive as in person [Cohort 1 female social worker living in a capital city].

As the quotes included here demonstrate, being in lockdown was experienced differently according to location, family connections and the ability and willingness to engage via technology. For some participants, juggling working from home, caring for children and trying to maintain relationships with family and friends just became too hard.

For example:

The boundary between work and home life seems to have blurred, so it feels like we have less time for social relationships [Cohort 2 female speech pathologist living in a capital city].
5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Life Patterns surveys conducted during 2020 and 2021 have captured the experiences of cohorts 1 and 2 of the longitudinal program. This report, focussing on the impact of the pandemic on relationships reveals how COVID-19 heightened the awareness of the nature and quality of social relationships for participants. Although the majority of participants in both cohorts indicated that COVID-19 had no impact on the amount of time that they had spent with members of their immediate family (partners and/or children), less than 10% indicated that the pandemic had no effect on the amount of time that they had spent with members of their extended family and their friends. Cohort 2 participants, women, in particular, were more likely than cohort 1 participants to indicate that COVID-19 had no impact on the amount of time that they spent with their children. Given that cohort 2 participants were aged in their early 30s, they were more likely to have very young children/babies at home, so this result is not surprising.

Across both cohorts, participants experienced disruptions to the temporal and spatial underpinnings of their relationships with members of their extended family and their friends, as the analysis of the qualitative data reveals. Participants were forced to reflect on which relationships mattered to them, and to find ways to retain connections through other forms of communication (often online) when the taken for granted face-to-face communications were disrupted. For some, the measures associated with the pandemic (lockdowns and various restrictions) created a welcome expansion of time with immediate family and enabled the prioritising of significant relationships. For others, the intensification of time with immediate family was unwelcome. Participants expressed a sense of loss for the time that has, in a sense been stolen from them by the pandemic: birthdays not celebrated; newborns not held by grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends; deaths that were not recognised through the usual rituals of loss; and needed supports not able to be given or received.

We note that these shifts in the temporal and spatial quality of social relationships occur against a backdrop of existing uncertainty about the timing of life events, across the generations. To recognise this, we have proposed the use of the term ‘the new adulthood’ (Wyn et al. 2020) to acknowledge the shifting timelines for achieving significant life markers (such as educational credentials, employment, parenthood and home ownership,) across the generations. Just as importantly, we also note that both cohorts have also experienced the ‘speeding up’ of time associated with ‘flexible’ labour markets, employment precarity and the affordances of digital technologies (especially cohort 2). Illustrating this, Cahill and Leccardi’s analysis of cohort 2 participants, highlights the work that young adults do to manage the tensions and frustrations of the blurring of work and leisure, of unpredictable futures and outdated blueprints for life transitions inherited from the previous generation. They argue that the tendency to focus on the present, to foster an ability to deal with the unexpected and ‘accept contradictions and ambiguities as opportunities’ (2020: 80).

The disruption of taken for granted temporal and spatial dimensions of relationships that has been wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic added a further layer of complexity to the work that people do to live well. The analysis presented here both highlights the dimensions of time and space for relationships, and the ways in which participants in the Life Patterns program have managed these disruptions.
REFERENCES


FIND OUT MORE
Participant reports and Research reports: education.unimelb.edu.au/ycrc/research/life-patterns#publications
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