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LIFE SATISFACTION DURING THE 2020 PANDEMIC IN AUSTRALIA

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, or the University of Melbourne.

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This Life-Patterns program has maintained a tradition of a strong participatory approach to research, through regular written and verbal feedback by participants, which shaped the progress and outcomes of the research program. We deeply appreciate the generosity, willing engagement and honesty of our participants.

THE LIFE PATTERNS RESEARCH PROGRAM

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.

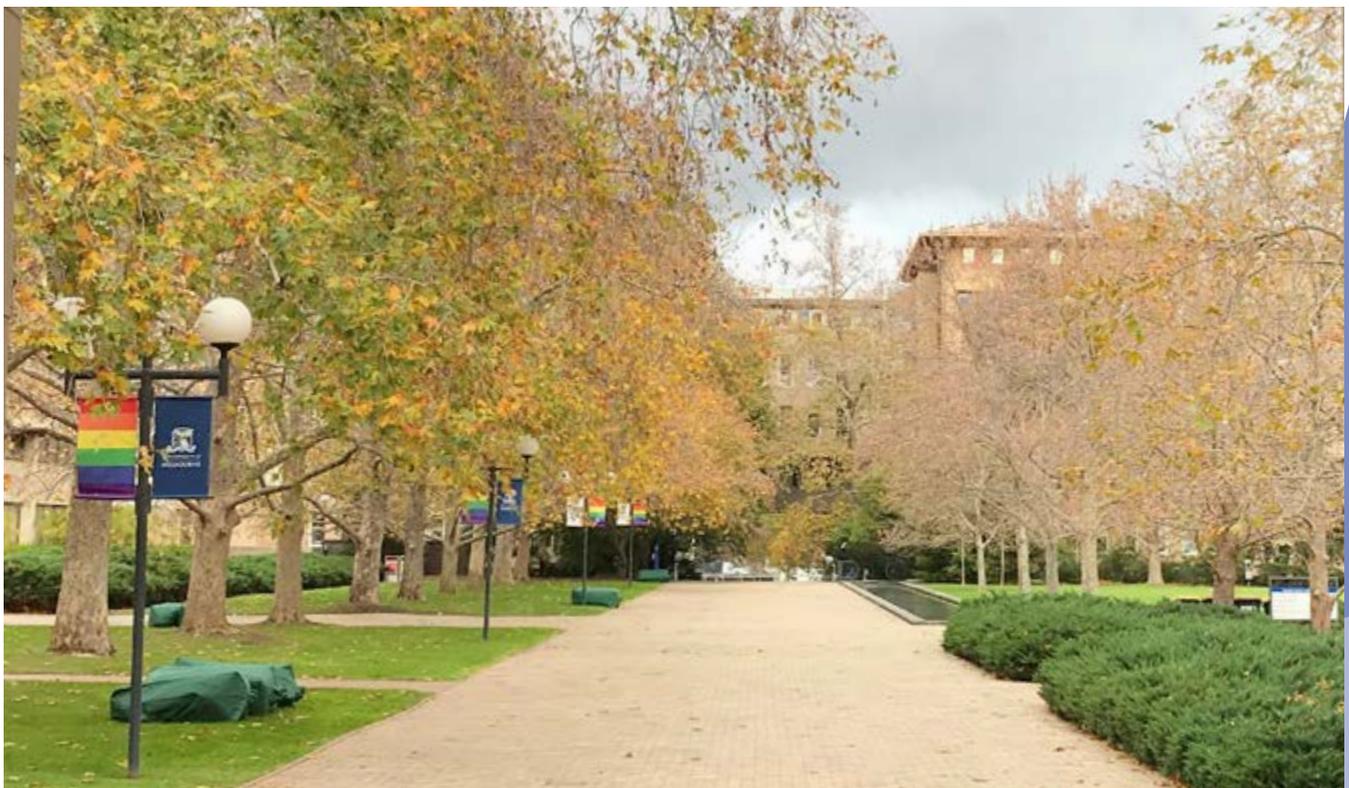
The generosity and ongoing support of the Life Patterns participants has meant that this study has built up a unique picture of the reality of the lives of two generations.

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.



1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from survey data and interview data collected during 2020 from participants of Cohort 2 in the Life Patterns longitudinal research program when they were aged 31-32 years. It focuses on their responses to a series of survey questions asking them about their levels of satisfaction with various aspects of their lives. The survey was administered during the initial phase of the lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic in April and May 2020. We received completed surveys from participants residing in every Australian state, the ACT and overseas. In October-November 2020, we conducted interviews with 40 participants located across Australia about their experiences of the pandemic. These interviews were conducted via Zoom or telephone according to the preferences of the participants. A selection of quotes from these interviews is included in this report to provide an insight into how our participants were coping after eight months of pandemic restrictions.

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. Although state and territory borders also closed, the length and timing of these closures varied. 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.

Although the first case of COVID-19 occurred in January 2020 (Hunt 2020), the first major outbreak occurred in March 2020 when a cruise ship, the Ruby Princess, arrived in Sydney with ill passengers. Around 2600 passengers were allowed to disembark without any health checks. By May 2020, 22 deaths and almost 700 COVID-19 cases had been linked to the Ruby Princess (McKinnell 2020; Noyes & Ward 2020). The initial 6-week national lockdown eased in late May but by July, a second wave had taken hold in Melbourne. So, although restrictions were gradually eased in other states/territories, Victoria, and in particular Melbourne faced a second round of lockdowns.

From 22 July 2020, Victoria entered its second lockdown due to the increasing risk of community transmission of the virus. Originating in the hotel quarantine system, the outbreak spread to nursing homes, hospitals, schools and shopping centres. The mass lockdown was particularly drastic in Melbourne where 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). To isolate the people of Melbourne, roadblocks were set up and travellers were stopped and interviewed by the Police – the so-called ‘ring of steel’. This allowed residents of regional and rural Victoria to travel throughout the state as long as they did not enter Melbourne. These measures remained in place until October 27 when some restrictions were eased however,

residents of Melbourne could not travel more than 25 kilometres from home (ABC 2020). It was not until November 8, that the isolation of Melbourne was lifted and residents could travel throughout the state. Victorians continued to be cut off from the rest of Australia due to the border restrictions imposed by the other states and territories (DHHS 2020). Most state and territory borders were re-opened in time for Christmas however, snap lockdowns and travel restrictions were implemented in various states whenever an outbreak occurred. As at 17 April 2021, Australia had recorded 29,505 cases and 910 deaths (Department of Health 2021). Victoria had the highest number of cases (20,494) and deaths (820) (DHHS 2021).

Against this backdrop, this report examines how the lockdowns implemented across Australia impacted young adults. The aim of the analysis of both survey and interview data is to develop an understanding of how parents managed the isolation from their extended families and their friends. During much of 2020, the restrictions associated with the pandemic limited the ability of parents to spend time with their extended families and friends, limited their ability to develop their social networks by engaging with other parents, limited their contact with health professionals, and restricted their access to childcare, libraries, swimming pools and playgrounds. Being isolated during the pandemic may have negatively impacted upon levels of life satisfaction.

Levels of life satisfaction are influenced by personal, community and societal factors (Diener et al. 2013). For example, living with a life partner is associated with higher levels of life satisfaction as is living in a community with low levels of crime and living in a society that embraces civil and political freedoms (Diener et al. 2013; Veenhoven 1996). Significant life events such as becoming a parent, losing one’s job or life partner temporarily influence levels of life satisfaction, however over time, levels of life satisfaction generally revert back to their former levels (Diener et al. 2013; Headey et al. 2013). Although the 2020 pandemic provides a natural experiment to examine how personal, community and societal factors influence levels of life satisfaction, in this report, the focus is on personal factors such as marital status, employment status, health and parental status.

2. SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

In this section of the report, we provide a summary of the characteristics of the 493 Cohort 2 participants (aged 31-32 years) who completed the 2020 survey. Almost one-third (153) of the participants were men and 69% (340) were women. Over 40% of the participants were living in Victoria; 22% were living in Tasmania; 18% were living in NSW; 16% were living in the ACT; and the remainder were either living in other parts of Australia or living overseas. Almost 80% had at least one university qualification and 60% were employed on a full-time basis –see Appendix.

Male participants were more likely than female participants to be residing in Victoria (54% compared to 39%) whereas female participants were more likely than male participants to be residing in NSW, Tasmania or the ACT - see Figure 1

Male participants were slightly more likely than female participants to be partnered: 69% of male participants compared to 66% of female participants were living with a partner (married or de facto) - see Figure 2. Female participants were more likely to be in a parenting role than male participants: 38% of female participants compared to 27% of male participants were parents.

FIGURE 1 RESIDENTIAL LOCATION BY GENDER

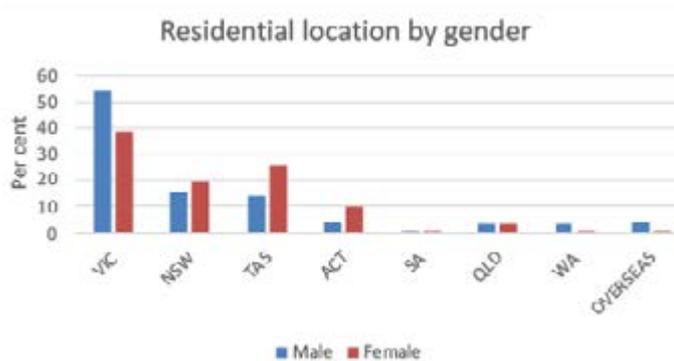
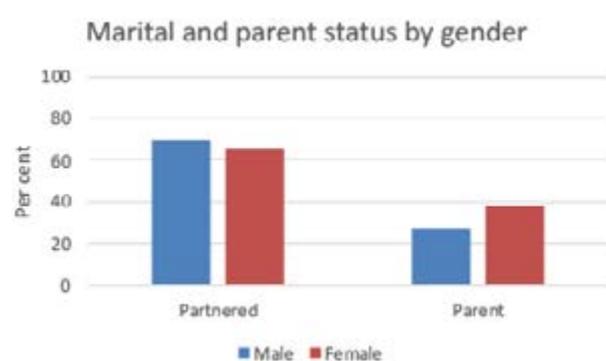


FIGURE 2. MARITAL AND PARENT STATUS BY GENDER



3. LEVELS OF LIFE SATISFACTION

Measures of life satisfaction generally refer to how much an individual ‘positively evaluates the overall quality of his/ her life’ (Veenhoven 1996: 6). We include two measures of life satisfaction in our annual surveys of Cohort 2 participants: one question asking participants about their overall life satisfaction; and a series of seven questions related to their levels of satisfaction with various aspects of their lives: own personal development; relationships with family; work or career; personal relationships; social life; health and fitness; educational attainment. The answer options ranged from very dissatisfied to very satisfied. For this report, we created an index from the responses to these seven questions by taking the average of the responses. For example, if a participant was satisfied with some aspects of their life but not satisfied with other aspects of their life, the index provides an indication of their average level of satisfaction. Levels of life satisfaction, as measured by this index, range from 1.0 to 4.0 with higher scores indicating greater levels of satisfaction and lower scores indicating lower levels of satisfaction. In this study, there was a mean score of 3.04

for life satisfaction, indicating that on average, our participants were mostly satisfied with life.

Table 1 shows levels of life satisfaction according to selected characteristics. Participants with a post-graduate degree reported the highest levels of satisfaction. Participants who were employed on a full-time basis were more likely to report having higher levels of life satisfaction than their peers who were not employed or who were employed on a part-time basis. Living with their partner is associated with higher levels of satisfaction as is being in good health. These results suggest that people who are regularly connecting with others through their work or living arrangements, and whose health is not causing concern, experience relatively high levels of satisfaction with their lives.

TABLE 1. MEAN LEVELS OF SATISFACTION ACCORDING TO SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristic	n=	Mean
Gender		
Male	153	3.05
Female	340	3.04
Education		
Post-graduate degree	148	3.13
Bachelor degree	240	3.06
VET	78	2.92
School	27	2.83
Employment status		
Full-time employed	300	3.11
Part-time employed	134	2.98
Not employed	59	2.88
Marital status		
De facto/ married	329	3.09
Single	164	2.95
Physical Health		
Healthy	370	3.11
Unhealthy	114	2.82
Mental Health 2015 - 2019		
Healthy	369	3.12
Unhealthy	114	2.80

4. LEVEL OF LIFE SATISFACTION ACCORDING TO PARENTAL STATUS

Having established that life satisfaction varies according to gender, education, employment status, marital status and health, we now focus on levels of life satisfaction reported by parents. As noted earlier, 27% of male participants and 38% of female participants were in a parenting role in 2020. Almost all parents (99%) who completed the 2020 survey had young children aged under 5 years and one third had a baby aged under one year. Figure 3 shows that there is no difference in levels of life satisfaction according to parental status for female participants (with a score of 3.04 for both parents and non-parents indicating that they were satisfied with their lives). There is also little difference between male parents and male non-parents (3.08 compared to 3.04).

Figure 4 charts levels of life satisfaction of parents according to the age of their youngest child. Parents with a baby aged less than one year of age reported the highest levels of life satisfaction (3.2) and those with a youngest child aged four years reported the lowest levels of life satisfaction (2.7). Interestingly, parents with a youngest child aged five years or older reported higher levels of life satisfaction than their peers with a youngest child aged four years. These results show that parents are most satisfied with their lives just after the birth of their child but levels of life satisfaction decline until the child reaches school age.

FIGURE 3 AVERAGE LEVELS OF LIFE SATISFACTION ACCORDING TO GENDER AND PARENTAL STATUS

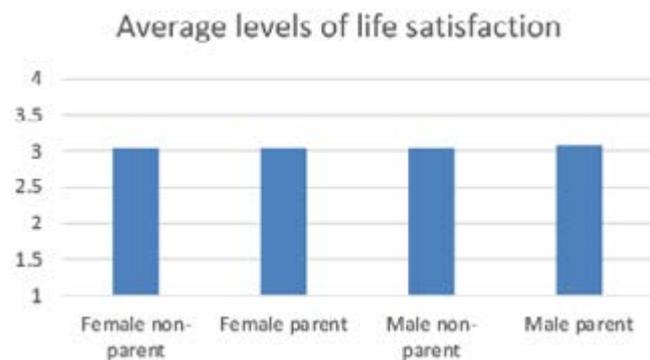
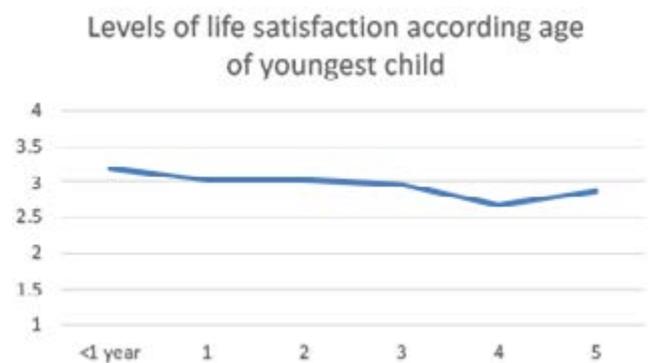


FIGURE 4 AVERAGE LEVELS OF LIFE SATISFACTION ACCORDING TO AGE OF YOUNGEST CHILD



To examine the impact of the pandemic on levels of life satisfaction, we conduct analysis of survey data collected from participants who completed surveys in both 2019 and 2020 (n= 451). To isolate the effects of being a parent on levels of life satisfaction, we constructed two linear regression models and present the results in Table 2. The linear regression models examine whether there is any association between life satisfaction and parenthood after accounting for gender, marital status, education, employment status and health. In 2019, parents reported having lower levels of life satisfaction than non-parents, however, in 2020 parents reported having similar levels of life satisfaction as non-parents. Being partnered had the expected positive effect in both years, consistent with the analysis presented earlier, with participants who were partnered reporting higher levels of life satisfaction than their peers who were not partnered. Similarly, as with the analysis presented earlier, being employed part-time or being not employed was associated with lower levels of life satisfaction as was being unhealthy (for both physical and mental health). Interestingly, having a Post-graduate degree was associated with higher levels of life satisfaction in both years as was having a Bachelor degree in 2020.



Table 2 Life satisfaction in 2019 and 2020

Characteristic	Life satisfaction 2019		Life satisfaction 2020	
	Coefficient	Statistically significant	Coefficient	Statistically significant
Parent [reference = no]				
Yes	-0.10	Yes	0.02	No
Gender [reference = Male]				
Female	0.05	No	0.07	No
Marital status [reference = Single]				
De facto/married	0.19	Yes	0.15	Yes
Highest level of education [reference = school]				
VET	-0.05	No	0.13	No
Bachelor degree	0.10	No	0.19	Yes
Postgrad. degree	0.21	Yes	0.27	Yes
Employment status [reference = employed full-time]				
Employed part-time	-0.09	Yes	-0.13	Yes
Not employed	-0.14	Yes	-0.15	Yes
Physical health [reference = healthy]				
Unhealthy	-0.18	Yes	-0.21	Yes
Mental health [reference = healthy]				
Unhealthy	-0.31		-0.22	Yes
Constant	2.93		2.85	
Adj. R-Squared	0.2504		0.1805	
n=	451		451	

5. INTERVIEW DATA

The results presented in section 4 of this report suggest that parents were less satisfied with their lives than people who were not parents in 2019 but in 2020, being a parent made no difference to levels of life satisfaction. The data were collected in April and May when all parts of Australia were in the first stages of the pandemic lockdowns. There were restrictions on travel between states and territories, schools and workplaces were closed, and families were isolated. Over time, many of the restrictions were lifted however, in Victoria a second wave necessitated further restrictions. The effects of the harsher restrictions implemented in July 2020 are not captured in the survey data. However, in October 2020, selected participants were interviewed about their experiences of the pandemic, thus, providing real time data about the impact of the pandemic. The 40 participants who were interviewed were spread across Australia: 21 in Victoria; 9 in NSW; 3 in Tasmania; 2 in Queensland; 2 in the ACT; 1 in South Australia; 1 in Western Australia and 1 overseas. There were distinct differences according to location with participants in states other than Victoria reporting little to no change in their daily lives once the initial restrictions were lifted. For those living in Victoria, however, experiences differed according to location within the state. People living in Melbourne experienced the so-called 'hard lockdown' for three months from 23 July 2020 to 27 October 2020. They could only leave their homes for four reasons: shopping for essentials; exercise; medical care and caregiving; and work (but only if they were classified as an essential worker). Furthermore, they could not travel more than five kilometres from their home address. The wearing of face masks was mandatory everywhere except inside the family home or when undertaking strenuous exercise in the form of running or bike riding. Exercising outside the family home was limited to one hour per day. People living outside Melbourne had to contend with fewer restrictions but could not travel into Melbourne except for medical care or caregiving or if they were classified as an essential worker. To restrict travel between Melbourne and regional areas, police roadblocks were set up and every driver was stopped and questioned (the so-called 'ring of steel').

In this section of the report, we include some short excerpts from the interviews which provide an insight into how the restrictions impacted on the quality of the daily lives of parents. Participants who became new parents either in the months preceding the lockdowns and those who became new parents during the lockdowns were particularly impacted. Welcoming a first child is typically a period of immense joy and celebration for the parents, grandparents and other relatives. The excitement of sharing the joy with as many people as possible is a long-held tradition that provides a sense of accomplishment and often sustains parents through the many months of sleepless nights and the stress associated with parenting. However, as the pandemic unfolded, new parents experienced isolation from family and friends, had restricted access to social supports, and were often juggling their new caring responsibilities with working from home. Their comments illuminate their sadness and frustration. For example:

One mother who gave birth to a baby girl in August 2020 commented on her disappointment that her partner could not accompany her to her appointments after the 15 week round: *'I had to go in by myself and it was really sad because he wasn't able to be there. He was able to come to the birth and we were part of a continual care program. My pregnancy was the thing that I have grief about, just not being able to celebrate much. It kind of makes me sad actually.'* She also commented on her eagerness to reconnect with family and friends: *'I think one thing I know I'm going to do is not to say no to things...I haven't seen anyone in four months now'* [First-time parent living in Melbourne Victoria].

The mother of twin boys born in March 2020 commented on the stress associated with having two babies, one in NICU and one in another room on the ward: *'no siblings were allowed and they considered his twin brother as a sibling so he wasn't allowed to come into special care with us so we'd have to leave him down on the ward with the midwives so that we could go and visit his brother in the special care nursery...it felt like we were neglecting both of them because you either had to leave one baby down at the ward or leave the other baby'* [First-time parent living in regional NSW]

The mother of baby boy born April 2020 commented that: *'At the beginning with him, it was just us and the midwife, the only people who ever had even touched him, no physical contact with anyone else. It's been really stressful here, going on longer...I've been able to join a mum's group and do a bit more socialising...It's different from those first two months.'* [First-time parent living in Adelaide, South

Australia].

The father of a baby boy born in September 2019 commented: *'He had four or five months of good times. But that just changed so quickly with everything... There was a long period of no sort of outside context. So we're just sort of catching up to all of the socialising now... we literally didn't see anyone, even our family... it's only just now that he is starting to get used to people again.'* [First-time parent living in rural Tasmania]

A mother with a baby boy who was five months old in March when the first lockdown was implemented commented that: *'he started to get really active and engaged with the world... I was trying to find ways to entertain him. He was a really good sleeper... and then as soon as the lock down happened, he started sleeping really poorly. We had a really bad month around then, just up all night every night and I really think it was because we didn't do anything. Before that we'd be out all day here, there and everywhere.'* [First-time parent living in the ACT]

We also interviewed some parents who had toddlers and older children and their comments focused on the being isolated from their families and the difficulties of entertaining their children at home for weeks on end. For example:

'We are moving back to our family... being in lockdown for so long, being away from people... we just wanted to be closer to them from now on' [Father with an 18 month old boy living in regional Tasmania].

'I set up activities in the backyard but it was always raining so we were cooped up inside trying to think of activities for inside... The kids didn't respond very well. Their behaviour wasn't very good because they realized that they couldn't leave the house, I couldn't break up the day' [Mother with a 4-year old boy and 2-year old twins living in regional



A father with 2-year old and 4-year old talked about the isolation and how celebrating milestones had changed: *'My sister-in-law's kid's first birthday was an online affair. Everyone had cake sent to their house... it was lovely but her one year old had no idea what was going on.'* He also commented on the relief of being able to go to playgrounds and parks and meet with friends within the 5 km limit. He found the lockdown *'like being in your own little prison, in your own isolated world... and we don't have an end date'* [Parent with two children under 5 living in Melbourne, Victoria]

Other issues that came up included the difficulties of acquiring essential food items. For example: *'the supermarkets were running out of stock real quick because everyone was panic buying. I couldn't get meat... no wipes, no sanitizer, nothing... it was nerve wracking to go to the supermarket and nothing was there'* [Father with 18-month old son living in regional Tasmania].

Other parents commented on the effects of not being able to enjoy family gatherings as they had been able to do before COVID-19. For example:

'... we are allowed to visit but social distancing and hand hygiene, and no kisses and hugs' [Mother with 7-month old twin boys living in regional NSW].

'... teaching my son that he couldn't go up and hug people... he couldn't just run up and give cuddles was a bit tricky' [Mother of with a 3-year old and 11-month old living in rural NSW].

On a more positive note, some parents commented on being able to spend more time with their children and partners due to working from home, or not working at all. For example: *'it's actually been quite remarkable to spend so much time with my new son... we've just been putting everything into being good parents'* [Father with baby boy living in rural Tasmania].

'We probably would've kept my son in day care a lot longer if it wasn't for the pandemic. So, I've been able to spend that time with him and have that quality time together and watch him grow.' [Mother of 3-year old and 1-year old living in rural NSW].

'The upside is that I get to see the kids a lot more, that's fantastic. I also get to see my wife a lot more, also fantastic.' [Father with a 4-year old and 2-year old living in Melbourne Victoria].

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

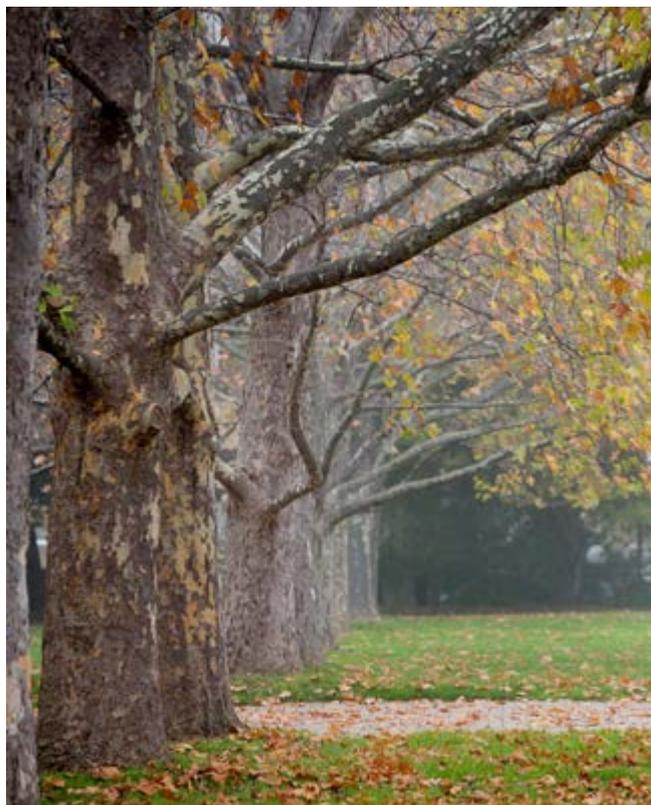
This report examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on levels of life satisfaction based on the analysis of survey and interview data collected by the Life Patterns project in 2020. Almost 500 Cohort 2 participants aged 31-32 years completed the annual survey during April- May and of those 40 were interviewed in October- November.

Life Patterns Cohort 2 participants have been completing surveys on an annual basis since 2005. The 2020 survey included questions about levels of satisfaction with seven different aspects of life which we used to create an index of overall life satisfaction. Analysis of these data show that levels of life satisfaction are affected by level of education, employment status, marital status and health status. These results are in line with those found by other researchers (Ambrey & Fleming 2014; Diener et al. 2013; Headey et al. 2013; McNamara & Mendolia 2014). In contrast to the results presented for 2019, parents in 2020 were no less satisfied with their lives than non-parents. Interestingly, it appears that parents and non-parents were similarly affected during the initial stages of the pandemic. Perhaps the extra work of caring for children while working from home was offset by the time saved by not commuting to work and/ or dropping off and picking up children.

For parents, levels of life satisfaction were highest when their youngest child was aged less than one year. Parents with children aged four years were the least satisfied with their lives and even parents with school-aged children were more satisfied than their peers with four-year old children. During the initial stages of the lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, schools, childcare centres and creches were closed and children had to stay at home with their parents who were typically trying to work from home. This may have been easier for parents with school-aged children who were able, in most cases, to stay connected with their classmates and teachers through the development of virtual classrooms. Parents with pre-schoolers were largely left to fend for themselves juggling their work commitments and trying to entertain their children.

To further explore the differences in the experiences of the pandemic restrictions across Australia, the Life Patterns team conducted one-on-one interviews with 40 participants during October and November 2020. The participants who were interviewed included parents and non-parents living in every state and the ACT. Our analysis shows that parents were particularly concerned about their inability to connect with their extended families and friends during the lockdowns. As expected, the lockdowns had a greater impact on parents living in Melbourne who endured a harsher and longer second lockdown compared to those living in other parts of Victoria and Australia. Although almost all parents commented on the negative aspects of the pandemic, most also mentioned the positives such as being able to spend more time with their children and partners.

At the time of writing, there are no longer any restrictions on travel between the states and territories in Australia and travel between Australia and New Zealand is now possible without the need to quarantine. The lifting of these travel restrictions allows families to reconnect and spend time together. Young children can now play together in parks and playgrounds, meet their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, and attend swimming lessons, toddler gym, library sessions and all of the other activities that families previously took for granted.



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8. APPENDIX

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Gender	n=	%
Male	153	31.0
Female	340	69.0
Location		
Victoria	216	43.8
Tasmania	110	22.3
NSW	90	18.3
ACT	40	16.2
Queensland	16	3.3
Western Australia	7	1.4
South Australia	5	1.0
Overseas	9	1.8
Highest level of education		
Post graduate degree	148	30.0
Bachelor Degree	240	48.7
School/VET	105	21.3
Employment status		
Not employed	59	12.0
Employed part-time	134	27.2
Employed full-time	300	60.9

FIND OUT MORE

Participant reports and Research reports:

[**https://education.unimelb.edu.au/life-patterns#reports-and-publications**](https://education.unimelb.edu.au/life-patterns#reports-and-publications)



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