



# WORKING PAPER SERIES

## NEVER LET A CRISIS GO TO WASTE: OPPORTUNITIES TO REDUCE SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE FROM COVID-19

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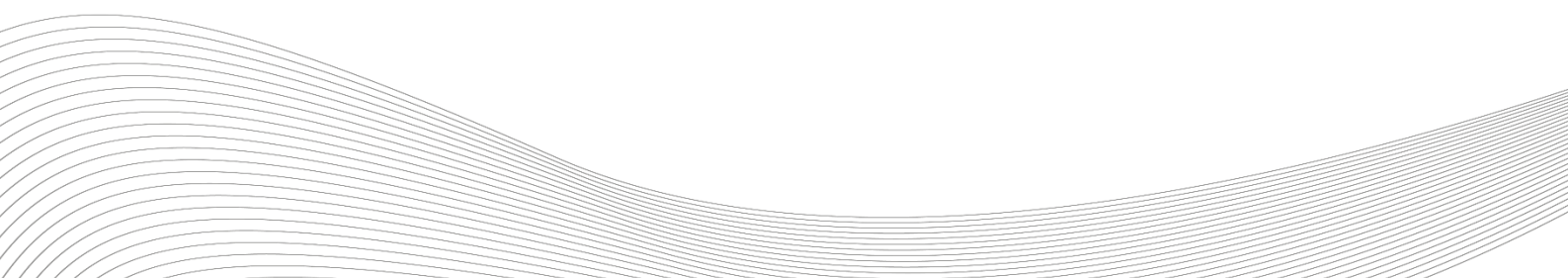
## NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

This collaborative, multi-disciplinary paper by social policy experts from the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (Life Course Centre), led by Director Professor Janeen Baxter, explores how COVID-19 has brought opportunities to address long-standing problems in health, labour markets, the tax and transfer system, gender equality, education, housing and criminal justice in Australia.

Far more than a health pandemic, COVID-19 has changed almost all aspects of how we live and work. Australia is not alone in this situation. COVID-19 has global reach and no country is immune to its impact. We do not yet know the full extent of these changes and it will be some time before we, and others, are able to reflect on the full impact of COVID-19, whether it be in terms of health, employment, industry closures, domestic violence, social isolation or mental health. It is much too early to outline these impacts with any confidence. But what we can do at this early stage is to reflect on the opportunities that COVID-19 presents for examining some of our taken-for-granted rules and regulations about living and working.

In this paper, Life Course Centre researchers share ideas on potential opportunities for rethinking, redesigning and reworking social policies to address disadvantage. They present a broad range of ideas covering both opportunities that may arise coincidentally and others that will require purposeful policy and institutional redesign. The paper presents an optimistic, forward-looking counterpoint to what has undoubtedly been a catastrophic global social, health and economic event.

There will be other pandemics and other global shocks. What we learn, and do, today will have significant bearing on future preparations and responses. The examples in this paper are just some of the ways we might leverage the COVID-19 crisis to build a better society.



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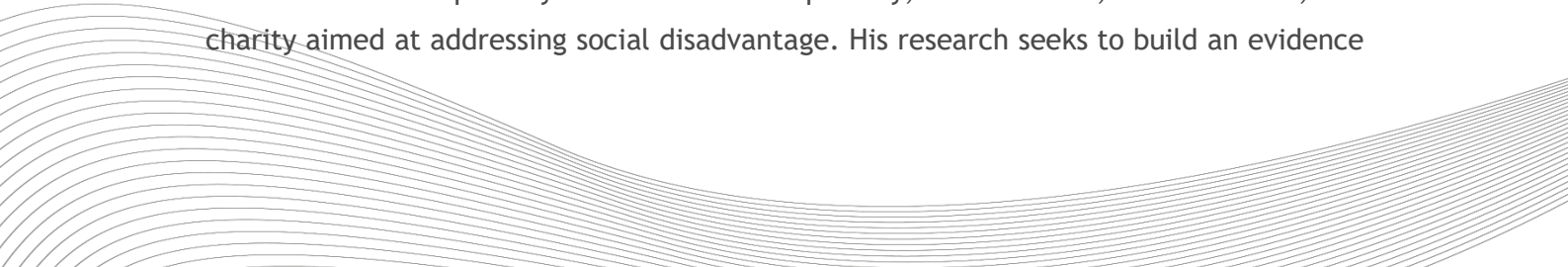
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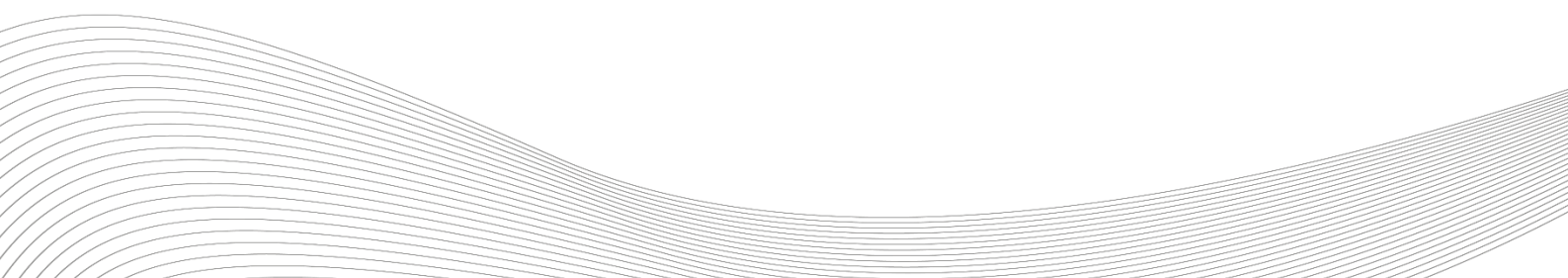
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## ABSTRACT

This paper from social policy experts at the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (Life Course Centre) identifies and examines a range of policy reform opportunities in Australia arising from COVID-19. Their analysis provides an optimistic, forward-looking counterpoint to what has undoubtedly been a catastrophic global event. The authors demonstrate how COVID-19 presents unique opportunities for rethinking and redesigning long-standing rules and regulations covering how people live and work in Australia, with some opportunities arising coincidentally and others requiring purposeful policy and institutional redesign. They present a broad range of ideas to address entrenched disadvantage in health, labour markets, the tax and transfer system, gender equality, education, housing and criminal justice in Australia, in order to leverage the COVID-19 crisis to build a better society.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; reform opportunities; social and economic policy; disadvantage

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned our worlds upside down. Far more than a health pandemic, the measures put in place by government and health authorities to arrest the spread of COVID-19 have abruptly changed nearly all aspects of our lives, including how we work, socialise, interact with family, and spend our spare time. Even previously straightforward and unproblematic activities such as whether, when and where to shop for groceries or a visit to a doctor have been disrupted.

Much has already been written about the current and likely future consequences of the pandemic. We see daily news reports on the numbers of deaths, infections, shutdowns, job losses, industry closures and wellbeing impacts. It will still be some time before we can fully assess these impacts, but what we can do at this early stage is reflect on the opportunities that the pandemic presents.

COVID-19 provides unique opportunities for rethinking, redesigning and reworking long-standing, taken-for-granted rules and regulations about living and working. In this paper we share a range of ideas relating to such opportunities in health, labour markets, tax and transfer systems, gender equality, education, housing, and criminal justice. Some of these may arise coincidentally and others will require purposeful policy and institutional redesign. Our aim is to provide an optimistic, forward-looking counterpoint to what has undoubtedly been a catastrophic global event.

## 2. Health

The constraints and restrictions on physical proximity and movement during COVID-19 provoked a marked shift in public policy and health service provision via the extension of Medicare coverage for telehealth services, introduced in March 2020. This altered two fundamental parameters that contribute to unequal health outcomes - spatial barriers to access, and cost of health care.

Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged that the roll-out of telehealth was fundamentally reactive. The hazards of reactive, as opposed to proactive, implementation have been well outlined (Smith et al. 2020). There are also barriers to overcome in coverage, reimbursement, licensure, broadband access and adequacy, and privacy and security (Myers 2019). In short, telehealth implementation during the pandemic is suboptimal to a more planned, considered roll-out.

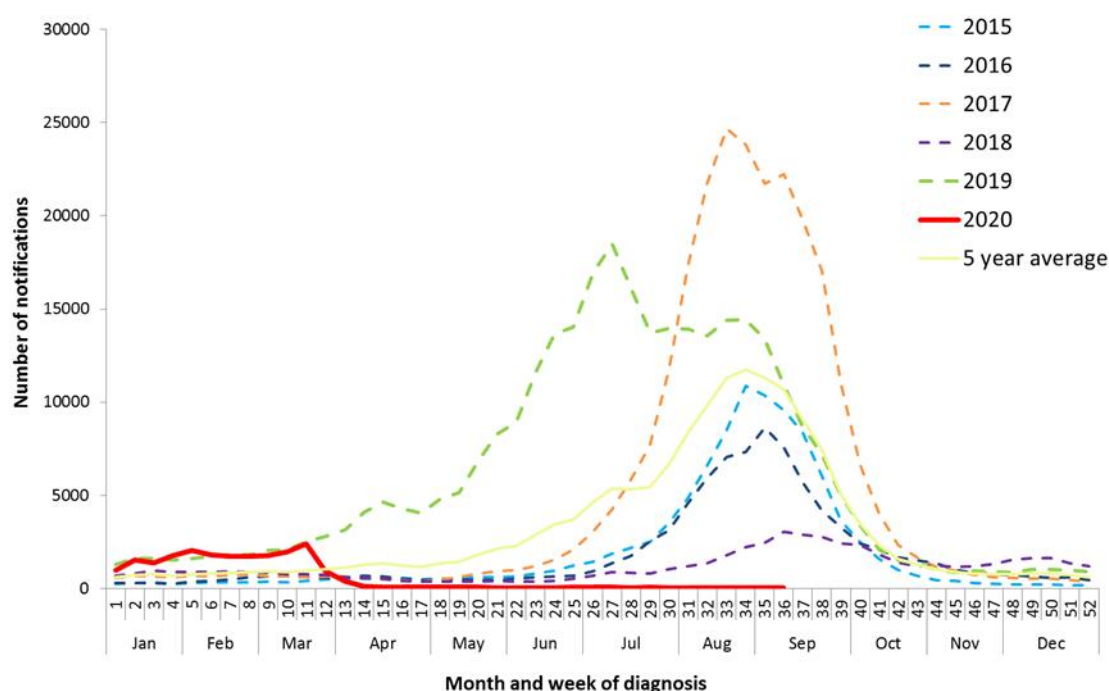


COVID-19 now provides opportunities for large-scale assessment, at population level, of the impact of telehealth provision on health access, use and outcomes using quantitative methodologies. Until now, confidence in the value of telehealth has been limited by the predominance of descriptive studies and small sample sizes (Caffery et al. 2017). The pandemic is a rare ‘standout’ evaluation opportunity, provided by a natural experiment, and for which comparative and counterfactual evidence are available for both costs and access differentiated by disadvantage. Longer-term health outcomes are most likely to be revealed on onward use and rates of illness.

Previous reviews on the benefits of telehealth have reported its potential to reduce the inequities in access and health outcomes of Australians in rural areas, and to address chronic difficulties in recruiting and retaining rural health workers (Moffatt and Ely 2010). There are also documented benefits of providing telehealth in Australian Aboriginal communities (St Clair et al. 2019). Benefits include improved communication between patients and health care providers, reduction in trauma from travel, more inclusive decision-making from family members spread across large areas, access to more specialist services, and support of local staff in accurate assessment and treatment plans.

Another lesson from COVID-19 is that public health systems remain the ‘front line’ of prevention and response. If there was any doubt about this, witness Australia’s current rates of laboratory confirmed seasonal influenza (Figure 1). The pandemic has confirmed the vital importance of preventative health. In the absence of a vaccine, public health has turned to well-understood principles of infection control including behavioural measures such as quarantine, social distancing, restrictions to assembly, hand washing and wearing masks. The public does not typically ‘see’ prevention and community advocacy for prevention is rare as people hardly express advocacy for ‘not getting a disease’. What is apparent is that public health measures are most effective when the opinions and advice of medical science are trusted and enabled to lead. While COVID-19 has focussed attention on jurisdictional variability in public health capacities, it is also seen as a test of community trust in political and scientific leadership.

**Figure 1.** Notifications of laboratory confirmed influenza, Australia, 1 January 2015 to 6 September 2020, by month and week of diagnosis.



Source: National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System, Australian Government Department of Health

Finally, the pandemic has prompted a national dialogue on deep questions about how we value lives that are embedded in, and dependent on, an effective economy. The principal shock has been caused by a global health event and our national debate is about what underpins an economy. It is not just employment and jobs. This shock is fundamental to the human capital contributions that health makes to the economy. In effect, the pandemic is provoking a debate on the values and processes that inform decisions about Australia's political economy.

### 3. Labour Markets

The Australian lockdown and closing of borders in March 2020 had an immediate impact on employment in many sectors. Naturally, sectors depending on people travelling and socialising, such as airlines, accommodation, restaurants, travel agencies, theatres, and music, have been severely affected. This was followed by sectors servicing these industries. Although many businesses have been very inventive in finding ways to



continue their business in some way by pivoting to online and contactless pick-up strategies, this cannot fully replace previous turnover.

However, these changes have also revealed a number of opportunities for creating a better future for working Australians. What has perhaps been most surprising is the extremely quick transition of the work done in many office jobs, including government departments and major businesses, and all levels of education, to the home. Another, perhaps surprising, shift has been a refocus on locally produced essential products due to concerns about supply lines. We have also come to better understand the importance of health and care workers, and the crucial role of teachers.

### *3.1 Working from Home*

Despite very limited time to prepare, the transition to working from home appears to have been largely successful. Where many industries would have been reluctant to allow staff to work from home before, this suddenly became the only way to continue operations.

Working from home does not work for all industries or all workers. Those successfully working from home are predominantly higher paid office-based workers, with suitable space in their homes. It also brings many challenges for parents juggling care and paid work (see Gender Equality section). But it also potentially brings opportunities to revitalise rural areas and regional towns (Fitzgerald 2020). Largely unsuccessful efforts have been made previously to bring employment to locations outside the main cities in Australia. COVID-19 potentially resolves this problem in some industries by allowing workers to live in rural and regional areas, while the businesses remain in major cities. With sufficiently increased populations in regional towns, schools, health provision, shops and services are more likely to remain viable. This ensures access to these amenities for farmers and other local workers, as well as additional local employment.

Whether this eventuates depends on sufficient numbers of city dwellers being attracted to a rural lifestyle, and whether employers embrace longer-term working from home arrangements beyond the current crisis. There are predictions (KPMG 2020) of a post-COVID-19 future where more work is done outside the office, so that corporate real estate can be repurposed or reduced.

### *3.2 Local Manufacturing of Essential Goods*

Job creation in regional areas could focus on the manufacturing of essential goods. At the start of the pandemic, the importance of local manufacturing came to the fore, when concerns arose over whether Australia had sufficient supply of facemasks and ventilators. In response, it has been pointed out (Ranald 2020) that “The government has assisted firms to develop local manufacturing capacity for facemasks and ventilators”, “The government has directed and funded private hospitals to treat pandemic patients” and “It has also reintroduced some screening of foreign investment by the Foreign Investment Review Board to prevent predatory takeovers by global companies”.

This all goes against usual free trade and private investment aims. But unusual times call for unusual responses, and Ranald has highlighted that “Both academic and social movement critics of neoliberal policies are arguing for longer term change. Unions and some sections of manufacturing industry are calling for active local industry policies to enable local manufacturing of essential health products”.

### *3.3 Domestic Travel*

More service-oriented jobs in regional areas could be created if Australians increase levels of domestic travel due to international border closures. The Australian Government is currently developing Tourism 2030, the next national long-term tourism strategy to start in January 2021 and an opportunity to respond to changes from COVID-19. It has been identified (OECD 2020) that domestic tourism is the main chance for driving tourism recovery, as it forms 75 per cent of the tourism economy in OECD countries and is expected to recover more quickly than international tourism.

The OECD points to the need to look at the crisis as an “opportunity to rethink tourism for the future” focussing on measures to support sustainability and resilience. Also looking at the longer term (Ioannides and Gyimóthy 2020) argue that COVID-19 is an opportunity for “adopting a more sustainable path” and to move to “greener and more balanced tourism”. Tasmania has taken a first step in encouraging local, intra-state tourism by offering Tasmanians accommodation and tourism experience vouchers. This \$7.5 million initiative was announced on 27 August by the Tasmanian Premier, to run between 7 September and 1 December 2020. This offer was taken up so quickly that a second round of \$5 million was announced on 23 September 2020.

### *3.4 Valuing Teaching, Care and Medical Workers*

If there is one thing that the current crisis has made clear, it is the importance of essential teaching, care and medical workers. Except perhaps for medical doctors and university lecturers, these occupations are not well-remunerated in many countries, including Australia. Nursing, child and aged care and primary school teaching are all jobs involving great responsibility, often requiring university qualification. However, wages are not commensurate with these requirements and responsibilities. COVID-19 may afford an opportunity to translate increased appreciation of these essential workers into improved compensation and conditions.

It has been argued (Guerrero et al. 2020) that home health care workers need “policies that improve training, provide equipment, ensure stable, good paying, and high-quality jobs so they can continue to care for our communities and loved ones safely and securely”. While others (Michaelson 2020) cast the issue in terms of “meaningfulness” defined as “how much one’s work matters in a moral sense”. This is an argument for better pay for occupations providing intangible value, but also for employees and employers to look for ways to make moral contributions to society, and for policy makers to acknowledge the nonmonetary contribution of work to society.

## **4. Tax and Transfer System**

COVID-19 provides Australia with an important opportunity to reduce social and economic disadvantage by undertaking major reform of the tax and transfer system. The sudden global economic crisis generated by the pandemic has drastically shortened the timeframe typically necessary for major policy reform. The JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments, for example, were adopted almost overnight with bipartisan support. Moreover, COVID-19 is challenging people’s perceptions of what it means to be unemployed. On March 23 alone, more than 90,000 people found themselves in the ‘dole queue’ either in person, online or on the phone (Davidson 2020).

For many, this was their first time turning to the social safety net for support. Some argue that this may lead to a new consensus on welfare and social benefits (Sandher and Kleider 2020). “For many quiet Australians jobs will return, the dole queue will become a distant memory, but treating those looking for work with the respect they deserve

need not be” (Davidson 2020). As former Treasury Secretary Ken Henry says, it’s a time when “everything has to be on the table” (Hartcher 2020).

#### *4. 1 Tax*

The Australian Government’s quick fiscal response to COVID-19, whilst providing a safety net to many individuals and households, leaves a large bill to be paid that we can expect to keep growing. Unlike the Global Financial Crisis, where the Reserve Bank of Australia could cut the cash rate to stimulate the economy, the current cash rate is closely approaching the zero lower bound providing little scope for easing of monetary policy. This shifts the responsibility of rebooting the economy onto fiscal expansion (Mannheim 2020). Increased unemployment, travel bans, and restrictions on businesses through social distancing and lockdown measures will also reduce expected tax receipts, leaving a sizeable hole in the Federal Budget. Major tax reform provides a solution to this sobering reality. Not only can a more efficient taxation system assist in economic recovery from COVID-19, but it can simultaneously be used as a tool to reduce social and economic disadvantage.

There are a number of possible tax reforms the government could employ to increase tax receipts and reduce tax avoidance. First, the goods and services tax (GST) rate could be increased. Australia’s current GST of 10 per cent is lower than the OECD average of around 20 per cent, providing scope for a rate increase to boost tax revenues (Khadem and Janda 2020). The government could also increase the range of taxable items to which GST applies, reducing a distortion that occurs between exempt and non-exempt items. Opponents of this reform argue that lower income households would be disproportionately affected, as they spend a larger proportion of their earnings on consumption. However, compensation arrangements, through established support mechanisms in the transfer system or tax offsets for low income earners, can be made to protect the most vulnerable in society more efficiently (OECD/KIPF 2014; Thomas 2020).

A second avenue for potential reform is the tax treatment of income from savings. Whilst taxes on income from wages are progressive in nature, income from savings are not. Individuals in the highest income tax bracket, on average, pay the lowest marginal tax rate on income from savings, expressed as a percentage of income (Breunig et al. 2020). This result is driven by different tax arrangements on income from different types of savings. Some are progressive, others are regressive, or flat. For example,

whilst the taxation rate on superannuation ratings are flat at 15 per cent, there are tax concessions enjoyed by older Australians who often earn higher incomes than younger Australians, and whose jobs are more secure in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (King et al. 2020). A progressive tax on wages, combined with a flat tax on income from savings, could add to the budget bottom line, and will lead to a more equitable taxation system (Breunig et al. 2020).

Another decade-old avenue of tax reform has recently started to gain traction - the abolishment of stamp duty. In 2010, former Treasury Secretary Ken Henry published a tax system review that outlined a list of tax reform recommendations. The abolishment of stamp duty in favour of a land tax is one recommendation yet to be implemented (Irvine 2020). Some jurisdictions such as the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales are taking steps in this direction. Whilst stamp duty provides a large portion of revenue for states, it is very volatile, rising during property booms and falling during busts. It is distortionary and many people avoid it by not moving to a more suitable home. Proponents of a land tax argue it is harder to avoid; it provides more stable revenue; it can make housing more affordable for first home buyers; and it doesn't disproportionately penalise those who need to move often (Irvine 2020).

In a similar vein, the combination of negative gearing and the capital gains tax discount creates a tax shelter for high-income property-owning households, resulting in significant forgone tax receipts for the government. These tax benefits encourage wealthy investors to invest in residential property, which increases house prices and disproportionately crowds out low to middle-income earners from home ownership (Hodgson et al. 2018). Several reform options could be employed combining these policies to reduce available tax benefits to high-income individuals, and also reduce tax avoidance and social and economic disadvantage (Cho et al. 2017; Duncan, et al. 2018; Hodgson et al. 2018).

Finally, Australia is in the small minority of OECD countries that does not tax inheritances. An inheritance tax could increase tax receipts whilst reducing intergenerational persistence of wealth and disadvantage. An increase in life expectancy has led to the average inheritance amount in Australia growing more quickly than wages, and inheritances often go towards supplementing the retirement savings of middle-aged Australians rather than helping younger people enter the housing market

(Emslie and Wood 2019). Given that inheritance taxes are less distortionary than income taxes, this provides a promising avenue for reform.

#### *4.2 Income Support*

Australia has made major, temporary, changes to the income support system in response to COVID-19, with increases in current income support payments as well as implementation of the JobKeeper wage subsidy. These short-term changes are credited with moderating the financial impact of COVID-19 on Australia and are estimated to have kept 2.2 million Australians from poverty (Phillips et al. 2020). The number of recipients of the main unemployment benefits have also doubled from December 2019 to May 2020 (Klapdor and Giuliano 2020). This affords a unique opportunity to make longstanding changes to the transfer system, with greater support from the public.

Transfers are likely to become an important tool in Australia's economic recovery, based on their role in causing the rapid impact of the second stimulus package following the GFC (Kennedy 2009). Increased welfare spending is an efficient way to grow the economy and increase employment, putting money into the hands of those with a higher marginal propensity to spend. An increase of \$75 a week for 770,000 Australians is estimated to create an additional 12,000 jobs (Deloitte Access Economics 2018) particularly helping the hard-hit services sector (Janda 2020).

While fiscal motivations suggest a short-term growth in transfers, this opportunity may be leveraged to implement lasting changes. Any welfare growth lends the opportunity to focus welfare on those areas and people hit hardest by the pandemic, or those facing long-term disadvantage. The current increase in JobSeeker benefits is estimated to have reduced the number of people living in poverty by 32 per cent (Phillips, Gray and Biddle 2020). Going back to pre-COVID-19 income support levels for working-age unemployed people would plunge a large number of households into poverty.

### **5. Gender Equality**

Much has been written about the impact of the pandemic on women with most of the evidence suggesting substantial negative implications for gender equality (Ribeiro 2020). But despite the clear negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on working mothers (Collins et al. 2020), others (Alon et al., 2020) point to the increase in flexible work arrangements that are likely to remain and may promote more gender equality in the



workplace. Allowing staff to work from home may now be a feasible long-term strategy, where previously employers have often been reluctant.

Working from home is an attractive option for many employees seeking to achieve better work-life balance. For example, less time spent commuting, the ability to attend a child's school event in the middle of the day without taking the whole day off, and living in a nicer more spacious home in a more affordable neighbourhood but further away from where employment is. Such flexibility may not only allow more women to stay in the job they had before having children but could also provide men with opportunities to be more involved with their children.

This could be a well-timed opportunity as men have had to take more responsibility for childcare during COVID-19, potentially eroding existing social norms (Alon et al. 2020) which could be built on for longer-term changes. A study by the Australian Institute of Family Studies shows 61 per cent of fathers reported spending more time helping their children with learning and school work while working from home, and 16 per cent spent more time doing personal care activities for children (Baxter et al. 2020). Coupled with earlier studies showing that time spent by fathers in educational activities with children is associated with moderate-to-large improvements in children's cognitive outcomes, this suggests reason for optimism in longer-term outcomes (Lopez et al. 2019). Larger contributions to family life and caring by fathers could in turn reinforce positive employment impacts for mothers.

Another positive has been increased recognition of the importance of childcare with the Australian Government providing free childcare during the early stages of COVID-19 to relieve some of the burdens faced by families suffering economic hardship, particularly essential workers such as frontline health care providers who are predominantly women. This short-term policy made childcare services free for families from early April to the end of June 2020. Although the support package has now been removed, it did highlight the essential work provided by childcare and the critical importance of paid and unpaid care work undertaken by women.

With the exception of those designated as essential workers, parents found themselves at the frontline of education as they supported their children's learning at home. The experience brought a new appreciation of the work of professional educators as parents juggled their own work duties and those previously undertaken by teachers. The

experience also provided opportunity for parents to engage more with their children's learning, understand their children as learners, and form connections with schools and educators. As children return to their early learning centres and schools and adult students return to university campuses and technical education settings, opportunities will arise for critical reflection on change in education policy and practice.

## 6. Education

COVID-19 has been the catalyst for calls to make early childhood education and care (ECEC) free and universal, to recognise the role of ECEC as educational, and redress the inequities seen in children's development as they enter school. The importance of ECEC, particularly long day care, was prominent across the period of lockdown (Morrison 2020). Despite the considerable evidence showing how critical educational experiences in the first five years are in establishing positive life course trajectories of learning (Heckman 2011; Garcia et al. 2017; Thorpe et al. 2020) and despite a decade of policy recognition of the foundational educational role played by ECEC (OECD, 2001, 2006, 2017), in the immediate crisis 'childcare' was foregrounded. The OECD and recent Australian economic reports place ECEC as a central strategy in Australia's economic wellbeing, both increasing women's workforce participation and building human capital for future economic productivity (OECD, 2019). The potential of ECEC to deliver on economic recovery, however, is predicated on the quality of provision and the skills, training, wellbeing and stability of the ECEC workforce.

The pandemic sent the majority of children home from their classrooms. Across all school years, education was delivered remotely with learning activities provided by teachers and undertaken, with parent support, in the home environment. Digital technologies took centre stage. Schools, teachers and students relied heavily on digital technologies to maintain social connection with teachers and fellow students, and also foregrounded new student-led, enquiry-based learning opportunities. For parents the question of 'how much is too much?' became redundant as the advantages of access to digital technologies and the affordance of digitally engaged interaction became evident. Yet such learning opportunities were not available to all learners. A new digital divide became starkly apparent. In past years, access to books was the index of learning environments. For fast access to knowledge and connected collaborative access, effective digital technology is critical.

The university sector also moved online. For those universities that already offered online and on-campus options this change was not substantial but, for many, going online placed significant burden on teaching staff. Provision of online teaching and blended options are pedagogically efficient and optimal. Digital provision allows for student flexibility and equity in allowing student access to learning alongside personal and work commitments. Digital delivery of lectures with face-to face work focused on collaborative learning is increasingly found to be optimal.

At the same time, the loss of international students, and specifically the loss of the accompanying income these students generate, placed the higher education sector in a precarious financial position that has had pervasive effects. Notable was the reliance of universities on the revenue generated by international students in supporting research. While Australia has punched above its weight in delivering high quality research, the failure of government agencies to support the full costs of research became patently clear. The October Federal Budget has made some provision to shore up university research but the provision for ongoing support remains unclear.

The role of technical and further education (TAFE) providers has been more silent during COVID-19 but the demise of the sector, and the need to rebuild, is surfacing. The low availability of apprenticeships and the precarious model of apprenticeships that are run within a labour-hire model have come under scrutiny. As we move to economic recovery the TAFE sector has become a focus. The recent budget has placed significant faith in infrastructure projects and incentivised industry to employ and train apprentices. The importance of trade and technical skills is again being recognised.

## 7. Housing

The health, social, and economic devastation caused by COVID-19 has, paradoxically, been an impetus to improve government responses to people who are homeless. As the pandemic spread globally, it became apparent that the risk of contracting the virus was not evenly distributed across the population. Rather, some disadvantaged groups were at heightened risk, including people without housing. People who are homeless have higher rates of chronic ill health than the general population (Fazel et al., 2014). Moreover, the experience of homelessness exacerbates underlying health conditions, as homelessness represents a barrier to accessing and benefiting from mainstream healthcare (Parsell et al. 2018). Although not universally adopted in all countries, an

effective and widely promoted strategy to prevent the spread of COVID-19 was social distancing. Health experts and governments realised that the homeless were at heightened risk due to living in congregate homeless accommodation or other conditions with shared or sub-standard amenity.

The public health knowledge of the significant risks that homelessness represents, in relation to COVID-19, motivated governments to swiftly intervene to provide accommodation for the homeless. In Australia, as in many other countries, governments quickly funded temporary accommodation enabling people to move off the streets or leave shelters. By the standards of what passes for homelessness action in normal times, the amounts committed to these initiatives were often unprecedented. The US government announced \$4 billion to prevent and respond to homelessness during COVID-19. The New Zealand, Canadian and French Governments each committed the equivalent of hundreds of millions of Australian dollars to temporarily accommodate homeless people during COVID-19 (Parsell, Clarke and Kuskoff 2020). In the UK, the government allocated £105 million, and it was reported that 90% of rough sleepers known to councils were offered accommodation as part of the COVID-19 response (Fitzpatrick et al. 2020).

The huge public spend by governments internationally to accommodate homeless people during the pandemic has been emulated by a number of state governments in Australia. Over and above the forecast spend on homelessness for general services, during COVID-19 Australia's five mainland states have spent an approximate \$229 million to respond to people who are homeless during COVID-19. The lion's share of this has been to pay for temporary accommodation to support people sleeping rough to move off the streets (Parsell, Clarke and Kuskoff 2020). The temporary accommodation has primarily been hotel accommodation, which was vacant because of the COVID-19 travel restrictions. The Queensland Government also leased a large modern student accommodation building that was also vacant because of international travel restrictions. This accommodation was used to empty Brisbane's three large state-funded homeless shelters.

The money spent to access accommodation for people experiencing homelessness during COVID-19 was exceptional. In New South Wales, the Minister responsible referred to it as "the largest single investment to tackle rough sleeping, or street homelessness, in history" (Koziol 2020). It was not simply the unprecedented spend that characterised

the intervention as unique. Throughout COVID-19, governments have worked successfully across siloed departments, as well as coming together with the not-for-profit sector, with a shared understanding of the problem and commitment to collaborate to assist homeless people to access accommodation (Parsell, Clarke and Kuskoff 2020).

A lack of consistent and transparent government data means that it cannot be known with certainty how many people have been extraordinarily supported to access accommodation during COVID-19. Data limitations similarly mean that we do not know to what extent the number of people accommodated during COVID-19 differs from what would have been achieved in the absence of the pandemic. Data limitations notwithstanding, there have been estimates (Pawson et al. 2020) based on triangulating a range of government data and public reports. They estimate that between March and June 2020, between 2,621 and 3,879 people sleeping rough were accommodated in Australia (Pawson et al., 2020). The estimate is much greater, up to 33,000 people between March and September, if accommodation placements afforded to the broader population of people who are homeless, beyond rough sleepers, are included.

Although the estimates do not conclusively demonstrate the success of Australia's response to homelessness during COVID-19, the broader example illustrates that governments have used the pandemic to provide accommodation, often quality accommodation that is self-contained, to some of Australia's most marginalised citizens. While at no point did these initiatives entirely eliminate rough sleeping in our major cities, they rapidly reduced the scale of street homelessness to historically low levels in mid-2020 (Pawson et al. 2020).

Scholars and advocates have long argued that government should and can intervene to address rough sleeping, and to a significant extent, COVID-19 has demonstrated what governments can do. Moving forward, COVID-19 teaches us that governments can find the funding to end rough sleeping. What is required is a commitment to end street homelessness beyond the pandemic, and to ensure that the responses are long-term, rather than temporary. Indeed, some governments have launched programs to support the 2020 hotel-housed cohort into long term housing, provided that they meet eligibility criteria, including Australian citizenship (Pawson et al. 2020).

It is significant to note that the evidence has long demonstrated that homelessness is bad for health, and that Housing First and other housing-led models are successful at ending homelessness (Padgett, Henwood and Tsemberis 2016). As Australia contemplates a post-COVID-19 world, it is important that governments respond to the nation's homelessness challenge with evidenced-based responses that recognise the breadth and depth of the problem, and extend far beyond a point-in-time cohort of rough sleepers. While street homelessness must be more actively addressed to enable people to exit homelessness and sustain housing, fundamental solutions to the broader problem will require a significant and ongoing investment in social housing and a range of affordable housing options as well as associated support services.

## 8. Criminal Justice

COVID-19 has transformed many roles for agencies of the criminal justice system including police, courts and corrections. The challenges arising from the lockdowns, along with deep questioning about the role of policing in democratic societies internationally, are likely to lead to major reforms across the entirety of the criminal justice system. It is highly likely that lockdown and Black Lives Matter protests could lead to wholesale changes in the way we approach law and order issues, hastening the use of science and evidence to shape fairer, more democratic criminal justice systems.

There are three potential opportunities for criminal justice system reform in Australia where the pandemic has arguably hastened the path to reform. Firstly, the pandemic has created an unprecedented increase in domestic violence incidents across the world (Bullinger et al. 2020; Campbell 2020; Usher et al. 2020). For Australian women, data shows that since the start of the pandemic 4.6% experienced physical or sexual abuse, 5.8% coercive control and 11.6% some form of emotional abuse (Boxall et al., 2020). Of the women who experienced physical or sexual abuse since the start of the pandemic, 65.4% experienced an increase in the severity or frequency of domestic violence or experienced it for the first time (Boxall et al., 2020). Most of the victims of domestic violence, particularly domestic homicide, are women (Spencer and Stith 2020) and most of the harms caused by domestic assault are felt by vulnerable families (Kofman and Garfin 2020).

Since the pandemic started, the Australian Government has pledged a \$1.1 billion to further mental health services, Medicare, and domestic violence support services to



assist with the impacts of COVID-19 (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020). An initial \$150 million was pledged to finance more domestic violence helplines, counselling, and support programs to better respond to and lessen the harms caused by domestic violence. This increase in spending to respond to domestic violence is an opportunity for police, and others at the frontline of response, creating real opportunities for the criminal justice system to better protect vulnerable people, particularly women.

Secondly, the pandemic has created many opportunities for criminal justice agents to approach responses to crime problems in a partnership manner rather than going it alone. For example, the Queensland Police recently announced a co-responder partnership approach with the Department of Youth Justice that is based on a co-responder model already implemented in the mental health space. The new partnership between police and youth justice aims to create more capacity for early intervention and diversion of young people from the criminal justice system (Taylor 2020). The co-responder teams will operate 24/7 with police officers and youth justice workers working together to foster better relationships between at risk youth and criminal justice authorities.

COVID19 has also created opportunities for police to work in partnership with health officials in ways that had not been imagined prior to the pandemic. For example, the Queensland Police are now responsible for enforcing physical distancing laws, under Movement and Gathering Direction from the Chief Health Officer. The dual outcome of this partnership has been less community transmission of COVID-19 and other viruses (Dalton et al. 2020) and reductions in crime (Halford et al. 2020).

Thirdly, the economic costs of the pandemic (ABS 2020; Baker et al. 2020) raise significant funding challenges for the criminal justice system which will ultimately force criminal justice agencies to re-think their approaches to be more cost effective. This is perhaps amplified in relation to police at a time of escalating calls for “de-funding police” (Levin 2020). The bleak economic outlook, coupled with demands on police to be more cost effective, might create opportunities for police and other criminal justice agencies to use research evidence to guide their policies and practice. For example, extensive evidence shows that boot camps are expensive but not an effective approach for responding to youth crime issues (Wilson et al. 2005). It has also been shown (Wilson et al. 2018) that diversion interventions such as the use of police-led restorative justice

and referral to other services are less costly, and are effective at reducing the likelihood of reoffending.

Overall, there are many challenges for the criminal justice system as it grapples with the complexities of responding to COVID-19. But, at the same time, there are several reasons that the pandemic might hasten some reforms in the criminal justice system that are well overdue.

## 9. Conclusions

We are in the midst of a global crisis that has upended our lives. A life course approach suggests the long-term impacts of the pandemic will be experienced not just by those directly affected but also by future generations (Settersen et al. 2020). While the immediate health impacts are more consequential for the elderly, the long-term health, economic and social impacts may have lasting consequences for children and young people, particularly those who are already disadvantaged and who may be further affected by family disruption, reduced educational opportunities, parental illness and stress, and poor economic outlooks. But as earlier studies investigating the effects of historical global crises have revealed, there may be some reasons for optimism (Elder 1974).

In this paper we have sought to outline potential positive outcomes that may arise, or be engineered to arise, from COVID-19. The crisis has thrown a spotlight on how taken-for-granted, seemingly entrenched, institutional frameworks can be redesigned overnight. Governments have rapidly changed the rules of some of our major institutions - education, labour markets and tax and transfer policies - and individuals have adapted quickly. This shows that innovative, previously unthinkable, fast-moving interventions can be achieved and widely accepted. There will be other pandemics and global shocks. What we learn, and do, today will have significant bearing on future preparations and responses. The examples in this paper are just some of the ways we might leverage the crisis to build a better society.

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