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Research Insights

Behind closed doors: the surge in mental distress of parents

In the midst of a major economic downturn and increasing family-work conflict, parents are left very distressed.

COVID-19 and how parents are squeezed between financial pressures and caring responsibilities

The COVID-19 crisis is having an alarming effect on Australians' mental health. Reports of high mental distress have doubled since the pandemic began in early 2020.¹ There is an especially worrying trend emerging for a large and important sub-group of Australians: parents. High mental distress has become particularly prevalent for non-employed fathers, and for employed parents of primary school aged kids.

The mental health of parents is of great importance: in 2018, 36% of the workforce – more than 4.6 million individuals – were parents to a child below age 18.* High levels of mental distress among such a large part of the workforce, can have major ramifications for overall productivity levels. Moreover, if parents experience high levels of stress, family relationships can be strained – in extreme cases, giving way to intimate partner violence, child abuse and child neglect.²

The COVID-19 crisis has brought with it two major sources of mental distress: financial stress, and stress caused by work-family-conflict. The surge of unemployment, and loss of working hours for those who still have a job, can directly lead to mental distress.³

In addition, the current crisis has primarily affected second earners in a household⁴; as a result, the main earner is exposed to potential distress from their new status as sole earner. Such stress may be exacerbated if their job security is low, or if they have several dependents now reliant on the sole income.

The second source of mental distress, family-work-conflict, also comes with a heavy economic and social burden. Even before the pandemic, parents who experienced high work-family-conflict were more likely to reduce hours, to change occupations or employers (thereby losing valuable human capital) and to give up supervisory roles.⁵ Since the COVID-19 crisis began, research has demonstrated that restrictions such as working from home, school closures, and stringent rules on childcare and school attendance have increased work-family-conflict greatly.** We find that this extra load imposed on parents has major effects for parents' mental health. This bears great risks for their long-term productivity, their capacity to stay employed and their ability to create a safe environment in which their children can thrive.

Key Insights

1 Parents' mental distress has soared during the COVID-19 crisis, and especially concerning is the mental health of fathers.

Pre-COVID-19, fathers were a less vulnerable group with only 5% to 9% of them reporting high levels of mental distress (Fig. 1). With the COVID-19 pandemic, they are now the most distressed group: 25% of fathers whose youngest child is aged 0 to four and 33% of fathers whose youngest child is aged five to 11 report high levels of mental distress.

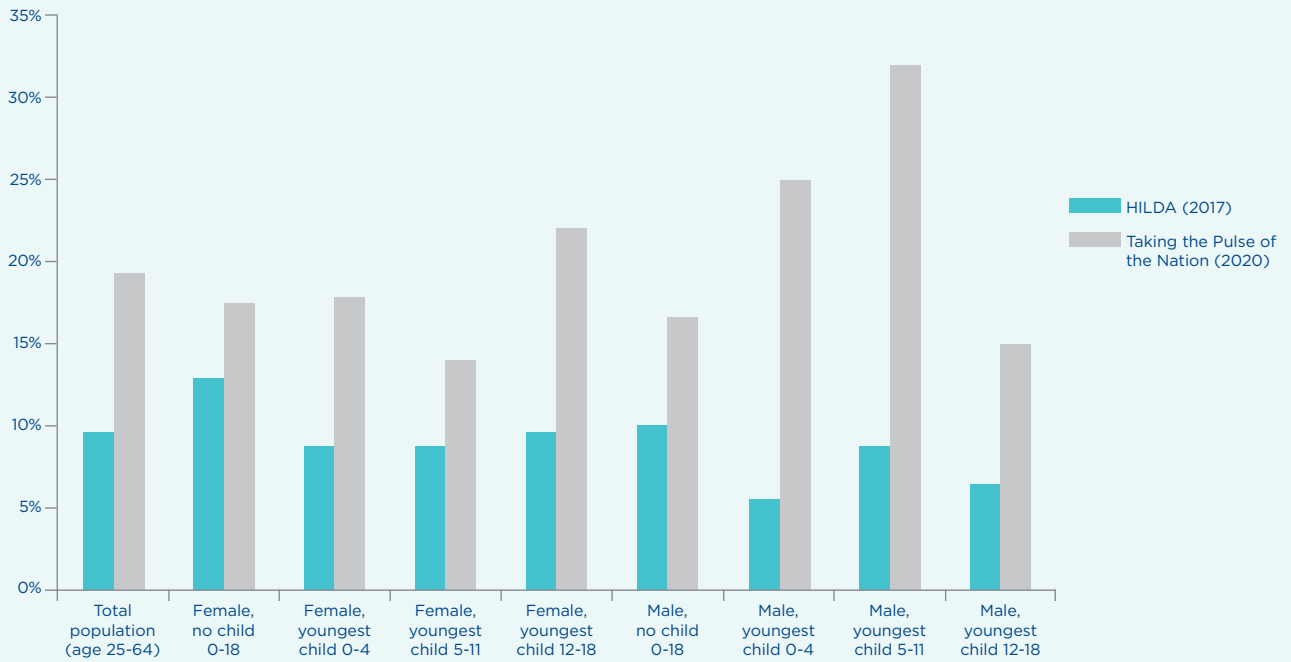
Among women, mothers used to have better mental health than childless women; now they have lost that advantage. Overall, they are now noticeably worse off than women without kids. Among mothers, mental distress has increased the most (from 9% to 22%) for mothers of older children (youngest child aged 12 to 18).

Childless men and women have also experienced increased levels of mental distress with COVID but less so than parents.

* Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, Wave 18, own calculations. A 'parent' may be natural, adopted, step or foster parent to a child who lives in the same household.

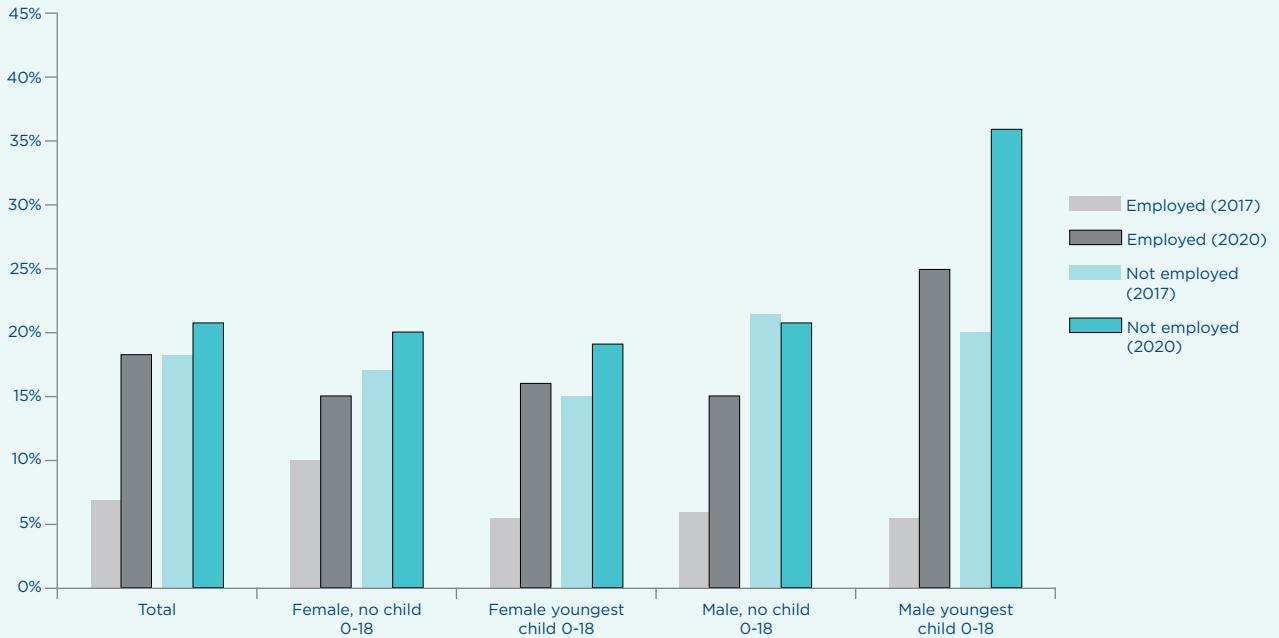
** Recent literature presents mixed findings on whether the increased burden of child care and housework exacerbated or counteracted gender inequity at home. While women are still doing more housework and childcare than men, Hand et al. (2020) find no change in the division of domestic labour during COVID-19 for Australia. Sevilla and Smith (2020) find an increase in the share of childcare done by men for the UK, and Farré et al. (2020) find the opposite for men in Spain.

Figure 1: Mental distress, 2017 versus 2020, by gender and parent status



Source: Authors' calculations based on 3,409 observations on individuals aged 25 to 64 from Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey data (for 2020 values), and on 10,395 observations on individuals aged 25 to 64 from the HILDA Survey, Wave 17. The sample is weighted to be representative of the Australian population aged 25 to 64.

Figure 2: Mental distress by employment status, parent status and gender



Source: Authors' calculations based on 3,409 observations on individuals aged 25 to 64 from Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey data (for 2020 values), and on 10,395 observations on individuals aged 25 to 64 from the HILDA Survey, Wave 17. The sample is weighted to be representative of the Australian population aged 25 to 64.

2 Among the non-employed, fathers display the highest rates of high mental distress

Poor mental health is prevalent among people who are not employed, and this is no different during the COVID-19 crisis: about 21% of those not employed display high levels of mental distress (up from 18% in 2017) (Fig. 2).

This is a moderate change, albeit starting from a high level. However, this increase is heavily concentrated among non-employed fathers, for whom mental distress rose greatly (from 20% to 36%). In contrast, non-employed childless men did not experience any increase in mental distress. Because of high employment rates among fathers, this group is relatively small. Still, There are about 330,000 non-employed fathers in Australia. Approximately 120,000 of them currently experience high mental distress.

The mental health of non-employed mothers also suffered compared to pre-pandemic but this change hardly differs from that seen for childless women without a job, and it is much smaller than for non-employed fathers.^{***}

3 Employed parents whose youngest child is aged five to 11 more distressed than non-employed parents

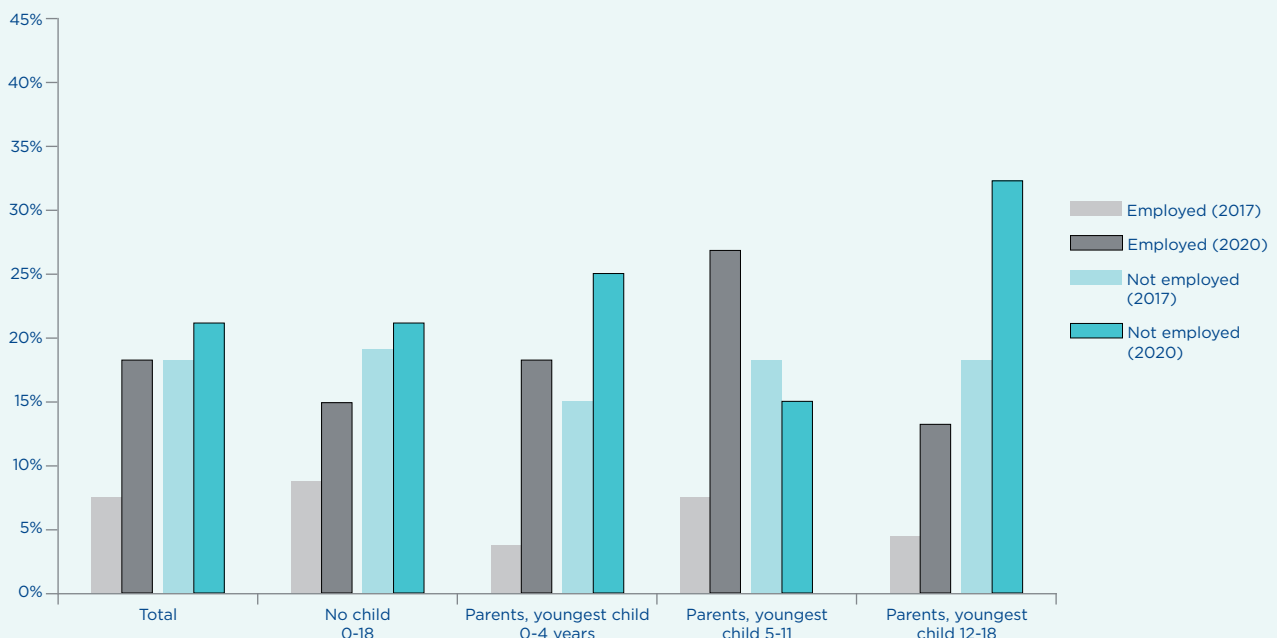
A perhaps even more worrying pattern is the surge in mental distress for employed Australians, which rose from 7% pre-COVID to 18%, and is now nearly as high as the rate for Australians who don't have a job (Fig. 3).

This development is primarily experienced by employed parents, with a large variation by age of the youngest child. If the youngest child is aged five to 11, high mental distress among the parents nearly quadrupled (from 7% to 27%).

Not only does this group experience the highest level and strongest increase in mental distress – they are now worse off than non-employed parents with children of the same age.

Given the usually strong relationship between having a job and being in good mental health, this phenomenon is striking. It also affects a large number of people: nearly 1.5 million Australians have a child aged five to 11 and are employed, and according to our estimates, over a quarter of them currently experience high mental distress.

Figure 3: Mental distress by employment status, parent status and child age



Source: Authors' calculations based on 3,409 observations on individuals aged 25 to 64 from Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey data (for 2020 values), and on 10,395 observations on individuals aged 25 to 64 from the HILDA Survey, Wave 17. The sample is weighted to be representative of the Australian population aged 25 to 64.

^{***} It is worth noting that women are rarely the primary earner in their households, and their mental distress might respond more strongly to their partner being non-employed. Hence, there could be high rates of mental distress hidden among mothers whose partners are not working (similarly to fathers who do not have a job). Unfortunately, we cannot explore this because our data does not record partner's employment status.

4 Financial stress related to poor mental health for non-employed fathers, but does not explain the experience of employed parents whose youngest child is aged five to 11

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a strong connection between mental distress, and experiencing financial stress.¹ Table 1 shows financial stress to be a potentially important mediator for mental distress, but not for everybody.

Non-employed fathers indeed display much higher levels of financial stress (51%) than employed fathers (37%), or other non-employed groups (average of 30%).² On the other hand, financial stress does not explain the very high levels of mental distress experienced by employed parents with children aged five to 11: they experience financial stress at rates very similar to other parents.

The alarming levels of distress experienced by these parents are plausibly caused by life changes beyond their family's financial situation: namely, widespread working from home arrangements and school closures. Before drawing further conclusions on this point, we checked whether employed parents of children aged five to 11 were more often affected by other negative labour market experiences or worries around losing their job. We find this to be an unlikely explanation for the level of mental distress they are experiencing.

5 Employed parents whose youngest child is five to 11 only have a slightly higher risk of losing their job

Employed parents with children aged five to 11 are about as likely to have experienced either a reduction or an increase in working hours as other employed parents, and only very slightly more likely than employed childless Australians (Table 2). They do receive JobKeeper or JobSeeker more often than the overall population (38%, compared to an average of 29%). However, this is also true for employed parents of younger children, who do not experience the same increase in levels of mental distress. Moreover, the relationship between JobKeeper and mental distress is unclear. Herault et al. (2020) show that about two out of three workers whose employment is threatened by the virus, do not actually receive JobKeeper.³ In this situation, receiving JobKeeper might be a weak signal of job insecurity, and a stronger signal of at least temporary protection from its fallout.

Employed parents with children aged five to 11 work slightly more often in one of the top five industries with the largest employment losses due to COVID-19 (32%, compared to an average of 27%)⁴, but this does not translate into higher rates of mental distress. Indeed, the rate of high mental distress for this group of parents is 31% if they are employed in the affected industries and 26% otherwise.

Overall, taking their working hours, rates of receiving JobKeeper and industry of employment together, the mental distress experienced by working parents whose youngest child is aged five to 11 does not appear to be primarily caused by economic worries. While this analysis cannot establish a causal link, our findings thus suggest strongly that instead, this phenomenon is caused by family-work conflict. Working parents of school children have had to unexpectedly organise home-schooling while maintaining productivity, and this would have been most stressful for those with young school children.

+ At the same time, financial stress among mothers turns out to be nearly unrelated to their own employment status - corroborating a need for further analysis of mothers' mental distress by their partner's employment status instead of their own.

¹ The top 5 industries with the largest loss of employment are (i) Arts and Recreation Services, (ii) Accommodation and Food Services, (iii) Information, Media and Telecommunication, (iv) Other Services and (v) Administrative and Support Services (ABS, 2020).

Table 1 Financial stress by parental status, gender and age of children

	Employed	Not employed
Total	27%	31%
Female, no child 0-18	22%	26%
Female, youngest child 0-18	30%	33%
Male, no child 0-18	21%	31%
Male, youngest child 0-18	37%	51%
Total	27%	31%
No child 0-18	22%	28%
Parents, youngest child 0-4	34%	33%
Parents, youngest child 5-11	34%	34%
Parents, youngest child 12-18	36%	50%

Source: Authors' calculations based on 3,409 observations on individuals aged 25 to 64 from Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey data. The sample is weighted to be representative of the Australian population aged 25 to 64.

Table 2 Job characteristics of employed persons, by parental status and age of children

	Had hours reduced	Had hours increased	Receives JobKeeper or JobSeeker	Works in heavily exposed industry
Total	34%	7%	29%	27%
No child 0-18	32%	6%	27%	26%
Parents, youngest child 0-4	38%	8%	33%	27%
Parents, youngest child 5-11	38%	8%	38%	32%
Parents, youngest child 12-18	34%	10%	21%	24%

Source: Authors' calculations based on 2,150 observations on employed individuals aged 25 to 64 from Taking the Pulse of the Nation Survey data. The sample is weighted to be representative of the employed Australian population aged 25 to 64.

Policy Conclusions

Additional support is needed to protect parents' mental health

It has been very clear from early on in the pandemic that mental health issues were going to be one of the greatest consequences of the lockdowns and economic recession.¹ The Federal Government has responded by supporting employment and income via the JobKeeper and JobSeeker schemes, by designing a National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan and investing an additional \$500 million into mental health services, including increased accessibility and capacity through the use of telehealth, and a dedicated website (headtohealth.gov.au) and additional Medicare subsidised psychological therapy session for eligible people.

Now that more data becomes available, it is possible to identify specific population groups in need of targeted support. Parents are at a particularly heightened risk of mental distress, especially non-employed fathers (mediated by financial stress) and employed parents of primary school aged children (mediated by family-work conflict). Targeted financial support for non-employed parents can ease financial pressure and help decrease mental distress. An extension of the JobSeeker program for unemployed parents and additional childcare subsidies for the most vulnerable will help mitigate the negative long-term consequences of the pandemic for the careers of parents. Additional childcare subsidies for low income parents would enable financially stressed parents to keep their childcare enrolment. After a period of free childcare from April to June, fees were charged again from 13 July. The impact of this extra expense on families is yet to be measured but is expected to be large. First signs of reduced enrolments have recently been reported.

Conflicts between work and family life generated by school closures and the increased pressure of maintaining working hours while caring for children, likely contributed to a rise in the mental distress of employed parents whose youngest child is aged five to 11. This is the only group that displays very high levels of mental distress when employed, compared to the non-employed.

With a second wave spreading throughout Melbourne and into parts of regional Victoria, schools have moved to remote learning and childcare centres have closed except for essential workers and vulnerable children. Supporting working parents by providing time for home-schooling and caring for children could go a long way to alleviate mental distress, which will also impact the wellbeing of children.

While employers may not have financial capacity to offer additional leave entitlements, leave entitlements subsidised by the government would alleviate the pressure that caring responsibilities create on parents' work commitments. Such leave could be provided to parents working from home while home-schooling their children, caring for their children at home because they are sick or are not attending childcare during a lockdown.

As most parts of Australia are moving into economic recovery it is of utmost importance that employers acknowledge the major disruption that the pandemic has had on parents' productivity, especially those who are mid-career and fear being disadvantaged in their career progression.

Alleviating the stress parents are now facing will set the right incentives to comply with the public health advice to stay at home or to keep children home when presented with even mild symptoms. The Victorian experience shows the disastrous consequences of people going to work while sick. The new special paid pandemic leave for workers without sick leave and the Victorian worker support payment are a step in the right direction, but still insufficient. Financial support needs to be extended to families with young children who are affected by school and childcare closures, or need to stay home following the stringent but necessary rules on runny noses which are unavoidable over winter.

Further Information

Datasets

This analysis has been drawn from *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* – Melbourne Institute’s survey of the impact of COVID-19. The aim of the weekly survey is to track changes in the economic and social wellbeing of Australians living through the effects of the coronavirus pandemic whilst adapting to various changes in Federal and State government policies. The survey contains responses from 1,200 persons, aged 18 years and over. The sample is stratified by gender, age and location to be representative of the Australian population. The current analysis draws on weeks 10 to 13 of the survey (collected between 8 June and 3 July, 2020). We focus on the population aged 25 to 64, and use data from 3,409 individuals.

Wave 17 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, was also used to provide a comparison on the mental health of Australians prior to COVID-19. Information on mental distress was last collected in 2017. The HILDA Survey is Australia’s nationally representative longitudinal household study. Commenced in 2001, the HILDA Survey follows approximately 17,000 individuals from across the country, annually interviewing respondents about their family life, health, economic wellbeing and a range of other aspects of life in Australia. We use data on 10,395 individuals aged 25 to 64.

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Definitions:

Mental distress: As part of the information collected to construct the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), the HILDA survey asks respondents the questions *In the last four weeks, about how often did you feel nervous? as well as In the last four weeks, about how often did you feel depressed?* Respondents can answer all, most, some, a little, or none of the time. We define an individual to be in high mental distress, if they respond “all of the time” or “most of the time” to one or both questions.

The *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey includes the question *During the past week about how often did you feel depressed or anxious?*, with the same response options as in the HILDA Survey. We define an individual to experience high mental distress, if they respond, “all of the time” or “most of the time”.

Financial stress: The *Taking the Pulse of the Nation* survey includes the question: *How would you describe your current financial conditions, in terms of paying for essential goods and services such as bills, rents, mortgages?* Respondents can answer: very financially stressed, moderately financially stressed, making ends meet, moderately comfortable financially, or very comfortable financially. We define an individual as financially stressed if they report to be very financially stressed or moderately financially stressed.

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