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

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## **Abstract**

This paper identifies and examines a range of policy reform opportunities in Australia arising from COVID-19. 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.

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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 many aspects of our lives, including how we work, socialise, interact with family, and spend our spare time. Much has already been written about the many negative health, social and economic consequences of the pandemic and it will be some time before we can assess the full extent of these outcomes, especially since the pandemic is likely to be ongoing for some time. At the same time, the pandemic has led to a number of changes that open previously unexpected opportunities for potential positive outcomes. In this paper we examine health, labour markets, tax and transfer systems, gender equality, education, housing, and criminal justice, areas that we believe are central in discussions of social disadvantage. We argue that COVID-19 provides unique opportunities for rethinking and redesigning long-standing, taken-for-granted rules and regulations in each of these areas. Some may arise coincidentally, and others will require purposeful policy and design.

As in some previous global crises, such as the Second World War which gave rise to the United Nations, the COVID-19 pandemic may also be a moment for serious reflection and reorientation of institutions and values at a broad scale. The pandemic may engender a willingness to look beyond our own short-term priorities to support measures that emphasise societal goals over and above individual needs and support the greater good, including provision for those who are most adversely affected by the crisis through no fault of their own. The principal idea underlying “never waste a crisis” is that changes which were previously not possible are now feasible and the opportunity to realise them should not be wasted.

We make no attempt here to develop the detailed design elements or to rank areas for change in terms of feasibility or government expenditure priorities. These are beyond the scope and intent of the paper and likely only possible when additional data and evidence about the full costs and outcomes of COVID-19 are known. Rather our aim is to provide an overview of the possibilities for redesigning policies in a 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.

*{insert Figure 1 here}*

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 will depend 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 2020 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 2020 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). At the same time, we note that tax reform is always a complex issue with the tendency to create winners and losers. Therefore, the details of any tax reform would need to be carefully considered to ensure that social and economic inequality was in fact improved, not worsened, as a result.

##### 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 (Sainsbury and Breunig 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 is 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 (Sainsbury and Breunig 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, Li and Uren 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, Gray and Biddle 2020). The number of recipients of the main unemployment benefits 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 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).

## 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, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey and Tertilt 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 employment location. 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, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey and Tertilt 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 schoolwork 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, Perales and Baxter 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. 2020a, 2020b) 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 (Willcox, Sarma and Lippel 2016; Sarma 2018, 2020). 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 (Universities Australia 2020), 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 as the impact on youth employment is starkly felt (Cuervo and Wyn 2016; Clarke, Borlagdan and Mallette 2020). 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**

People who are homeless have higher rates of chronic ill health than the general population (Fazel, Geddes and Kushel 2014). Moreover, the experience of homelessness exacerbates underlying health conditions, as homelessness represents a barrier to accessing and benefiting from mainstream healthcare (Parsell, Clarke and Kuskoff 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.

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. Australia 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).

It is estimated 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. 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). Ultimately, COVID-19 has demonstrated that homelessness is a policy, rather than an economic, problem; the solutions can be found through changed policy that is within reach.

## **8. Criminal Justice**

The pandemic has arguably hastened the path to reform in three areas of the Australian criminal justice system. First, the pandemic has created an unprecedented increase in domestic violence incidents across the world (Bullinger, Carr and Packham 2020; Campbell 2020; Usher, Bhullar, Durkin, Gyamfi and Jackson 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, Morgan and Brown 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).

In 2020, the Australian Government pledged \$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 to better protect vulnerable people, particularly women.

Second, the pandemic has 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, Corbett, and Katelaris 2020) and reductions in crime (Halford, Dixon, Farrell, Malleson and Tilley 2020).

Third, the economic costs of the pandemic (ABS 2020a, 2020b; Baker, Bloom, Davis and Terry 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, MacKenzie and Mitchell 2005). It has also been shown (Wilson, Brennan and Olaghere 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.

## **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). The principle of never letting a crisis go to waste suggests that the pandemic has opened a window of opportunity that we should use to reflect on new possibilities, before moving on to the next step of assessing which are desirable and feasible.

In this paper we have sought to outline potential positive outcomes that may arise or be engineered 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.

The covid pandemic has created new evidence that allows an improved assessment of known activities, such as telehealth, home and on-line education, and digital technology. It has shown how some activities can be changed very quickly, such as working from home. It has highlighted the value of some professions that are currently under-valued and therefore underpaid, such as teaching, childcare, aged care, and medical workers. It has emphasised new efficiencies, such as partnership activities between police and health officials and highlighted the existence and extent of highly problematic activities such as violence against women. It has shown how risk is a significant influence on outcomes independent of personal effort, such as people who are unemployed through no fault of their own, or at greater risk of bad health by virtue of their lack of housing. It has created a tax burden that provides an impetus for tax reform in ways that reduce inequality such as removing exemptions from the GST, removing the regressive nature of tax on saving, replacing stamp duty with a land tax, abolishing negative gearing on property, and introducing inheritance taxes. It has changed people's behaviour and these changes in behaviour may change attitudes towards, for example, men taking care of children.

More broadly it has highlighted the value of life and potentially opened the way for a society oriented more toward what the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1925) defined as a society characterised by *gemeinschaft* in which individuals are inclined towards social community as opposed to societies characterised by *gesellschaft* where individuals are guided by their own self-interests and needs. Whatever might be said about reducing unequal access to health by geography, social and health circumstances, the pandemic has provoked a national dialogue that has forced us to ask deep questions about how we value lives that are also embedded in and dependent on an

effective economy. In effect, the pandemic is provoking a debate on the values and processes that inform decisions about Australia's political economy.

Some of the reforms discussed here require increased government expenditure in areas such as childcare and welfare payments, while others such as telehealth or working from home, may be cost-neutral, or even cost-saving. But even those requiring increased expenditure may in turn produce additional revenue through increased employment rates of mothers for example, or increased consumption expenditure generated from higher payments to those on income support. Moreover, a life course approach encourages long-term thinking about the savings in areas such as education, unemployment and health to be realised from additional investment in the early years or the long-term savings to be gained from higher welfare payments that enable better housing, food consumption, health and wellbeing. 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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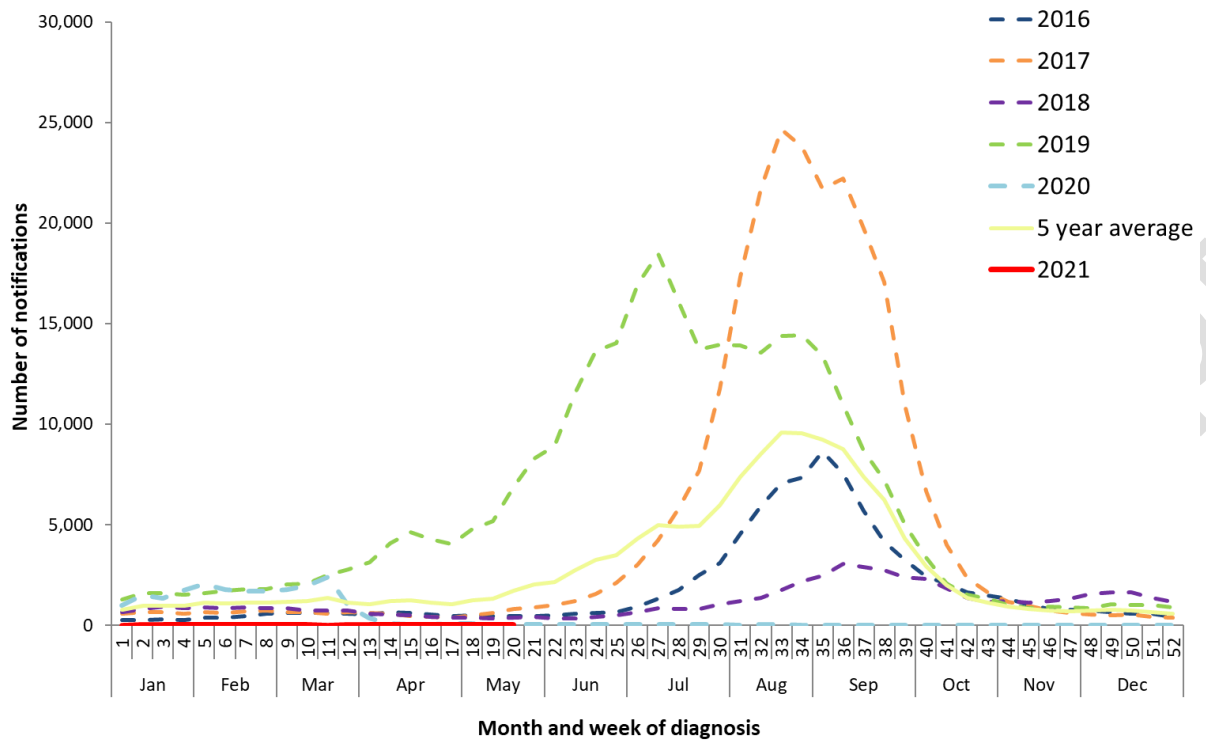
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**Figure 1. Notifications of laboratory-confirmed influenza, Australia, 01 January 2016 to 23 May 2021, by month and week of diagnosis.** Source: National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System, Australian Government Department of Health.