

Never let a crisis go to waste: social policy opportunities from COVID-19



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned our worlds upside down. 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 shopping 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 the pandemic presents.

COVID-19 provides unique opportunities for rethinking and redesigning long-standing rules and regulations covering how we live and work. In this paper we share a range of ideas relating to **health, labour markets, the tax and transfer system, 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.

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 – barriers to access and cost of health care.

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.¹ 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 of 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.² There are also documented benefits of providing telehealth in Australian Aboriginal communities.³ Benefits include improved communication between patients and health care providers, reduction in trauma from travel, more inclusive decision-making

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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. 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.

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.

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 section). But it also

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potentially brings opportunities to revitalise rural areas and regional towns.⁴ 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. 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.

Regional employment

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 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”.⁵

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. Domestic tourism has been identified as 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.⁶

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 all involve 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.

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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 typical timeframe 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.⁷

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.⁸ As Jennifer Davidson points out, "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".⁹ As former Treasury Secretary Ken Henry says, it's a time when "everything has to be on the table".¹⁰

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. 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.¹¹ 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.¹²

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 recommendations including the abolishment of stamp duty in favour of a land tax. Some jurisdictions such as the ACT and New South Wales are taking steps in this direction. While 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

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stable revenue; it can make housing more affordable for first home buyers; and it doesn't disproportionately penalise those who need to move often.¹³

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 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.¹⁴ Several options could be employed combining these policies to reduce available tax benefits to high-income individuals, and reduce tax avoidance and social and economic disadvantage.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ The number of recipients of the main unemployment benefits doubled from December 2019 to May 2020.¹⁷ This affords a unique opportunity to make longstanding changes to the transfer system, with greater public support.

This opportunity may be leveraged to implement lasting changes and a permanent increase to the rate of JobSeeker. 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.¹⁸ Returning to pre-COVID-19 income-support levels for working-age unemployed people would plunge many households into poverty.

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.¹⁹ Despite the clear negative impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on working mothers,²⁰ others point to the increase in flexible work arrangements that are likely to remain and may promote more gender equality in the workplace.²¹ Allowing staff to work from home may now be a 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. 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. As

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men have had to take more responsibility for childcare during COVID-19, potentially eroding existing social norms,²² this 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.²³ 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.

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 of long day care, was prominent across the period of lockdown.²⁴ The OECD and recent Australian economic reports nominate ECEC as a central strategy for Australia's economic wellbeing, both to increase women's workforce participation and to build human capital for future economic productivity.²⁵ 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, but a new digital divide became starkly apparent as contemporary learning opportunities were not available to all students. Previously, access to books was the index of learning environments. Now, however, effective digital technology is critical for fast access to knowledge and connected collaboration.

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. Providing both online teaching and blended options is pedagogically efficient and optimal. Digital learning provides flexibility and equity by allowing students access to learning alongside personal and work commitments. Digital delivery of lectures with face-to-face work focused on collaborative learning has increasingly been 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

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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.

Homelessness

The health, social and economic devastation caused by COVID-19 has, paradoxically, been an impetus to improve government responses to homelessness. 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.²⁶ Moreover, the experience of homelessness exacerbates underlying health conditions, as homelessness represents a barrier to accessing and benefiting from mainstream healthcare.²⁷

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. 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 help people sleeping rough to move off the streets.²⁸

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 they meet eligibility criteria, including Australian citizenship.²⁹ 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.

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Criminal Justice

COVID-19 has transformed many agencies of the criminal justice system including police, courts and corrections. The challenges arising from lockdowns, along with fundamental questions about the role of policing in democratic societies internationally, are likely to lead to major reforms across the criminal justice system.

There are three potential opportunities for criminal justice system reform in Australia. Firstly, the pandemic has created an unprecedented increase in domestic violence incidents across the world. Most victims of domestic violence, particularly domestic homicide, are women³⁰ and most of the harms caused by domestic assault are felt by vulnerable families.³¹ Since the pandemic started, \$150 million has been pledged to finance more helplines, counselling and support programs to better respond to and lessen the harms caused by domestic violence. This increase in spending is an opportunity for police and others at the frontline, creating real opportunities for the system to better protect vulnerable people, particularly women.

Secondly, the pandemic has created many opportunities for criminal justice agents to use partnership approaches to crime rather than going it alone. For example, Queensland Police recently announced a co-responder partnership approach with the Department of Youth Justice, 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.³²

Thirdly, the economic costs of the pandemic³³ raise significant funding challenges for the criminal justice system, which will ultimately force agencies to be more cost effective. It has also been shown that diversion interventions such as the use of police-led restorative justice and referral to other services are less costly, and can reduce the likelihood of reoffending.³⁴

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.³⁵ 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 of historical global crises have revealed, there may be some reasons for optimism.³⁶

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In this paper we have sought to outline potential opportunities that may arise, or be engineered to arise, from COVID-19. The crisis has thrown a spotlight on how 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 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.

What can we learn from COVID-19 to reduce disadvantage?

- The rollout of telehealth has overcome some of the costs of and barriers to access to healthcare. Further evaluation of the system should be undertaken.
- Working from home has benefits for households and businesses. The gains from a flexible working environment, including workforce participation and more time with families, should not be forgotten as more workers return to the office.
- The increase to the rate of the JobSeeker unemployment benefit has reduced the number of people living in poverty. It should not return to its previous level.
- Childcare is crucially important to workforce participation and needs to remain a focus as the economy recovers.
- Digital delivery of education, when combined with face-to-face and collaborative learning, can be very successful, but equity and access to resources must be addressed.
- Governments can address homelessness, and the long-term benefits of housing-first approaches are successful at reducing homelessness.
- Increased spending on mental health, domestic violence and community support services will help many and will better enable the criminal justice system to protect vulnerable people.

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This paper is led by researchers at **the Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (the Life Course Centre)**, a national research centre investigating the factors underlying social, economic and health disadvantage to provide life-changing solutions for policy and service delivery. The Centre is administered by the Institute for Social Science Research at The University of Queensland and is a collaboration with The University of Sydney, The University of Melbourne and The University of Western Australia as well as a network of international experts and government and non-government partners. For further details please see our website at [Life Course Centre](#)

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