



FAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA SURVEY

Survey 4, report 1

Looking back, looking forward: families' reflections on 2021 and hopes for 2022

MARCH 2022



This research snapshot presents some findings from the fourth Families in Australia Survey, which ran during November and December 2021 and received more than 5,000 responses. This publication highlights significant events in families' lives over the previous 12 months and how respondents felt about 2022, the coming year.

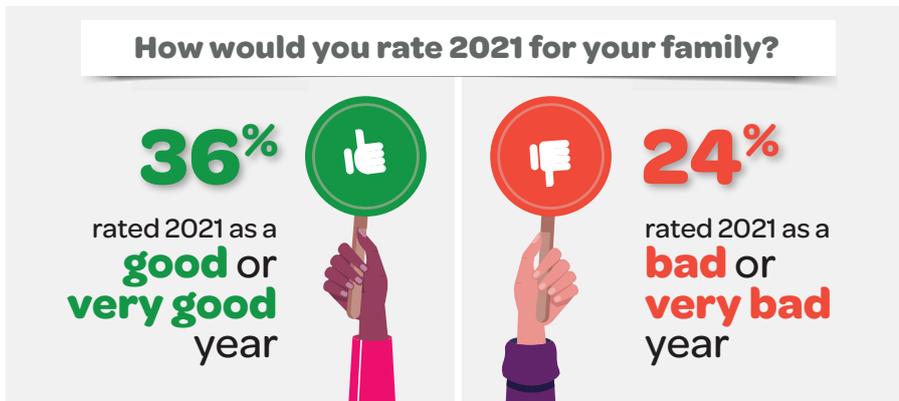
KEY FINDINGS

- Families had mixed experiences in 2021, when asked how they would rate the year for their family, 39% of participants responded 'neither good nor bad'. In contrast, 36% of participants rated 2021 a good or very good year, and 24% considered it a bad or very bad year for their family.
- In addition to COVID, families experienced many other significant events in 2021, both good and bad. New children were welcomed by 4% of participants and 13% experienced the loss of a close family member. Comments suggested that for many families it was these other life events that determined whether the year had been good or bad.
- Expectations for 2022 were high, with 62% of participants expecting it would be better for their families than 2021. This sentiment was particularly strong from participants in states that had experienced long lockdowns.
- Comments reflecting on 2021 or making predictions about 2022 showed that while COVID is continuing to impact everyday life, there are many other challenges and opportunities for families.

OVERALL REFLECTIONS

In November–December 2021, Families in Australia Survey participants were asked how they rated 2021 for their family, whether they considered it to have been a good (or very good) year, a bad (or very bad) year, or neither. Overall, 5,333 survey participants answered this question.¹ As we found when we asked this question at the same time in 2020 (see [A year in review: how we experienced 2020](#)), there was a mix of responses:

- 31% considered 2021 a good year for their family, with a further 5% rating it a very good year.
- 19% rated 2021 a bad year for their family, with 5% considering it a very bad year.
- 39% rated 2021 as ‘neither a good nor bad year’.



The additional comments that survey respondents were invited to provide often illustrated why they had rated the year as neither good nor bad, particularly when both good and bad things happened. For example:

The best of times and the worst of times. We got married, and my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer. COVID trashed my career plans – probably permanently – but we both earned more than ever before. Lockdown endangered our mental health but brought us closer together. We had to leave the life we'd built in Melbourne but we're back with our loving families in COVID-free Perth. Next year will be harder, but my family will get through it with love and pragmatism.

Male, aged 37, Western Australia

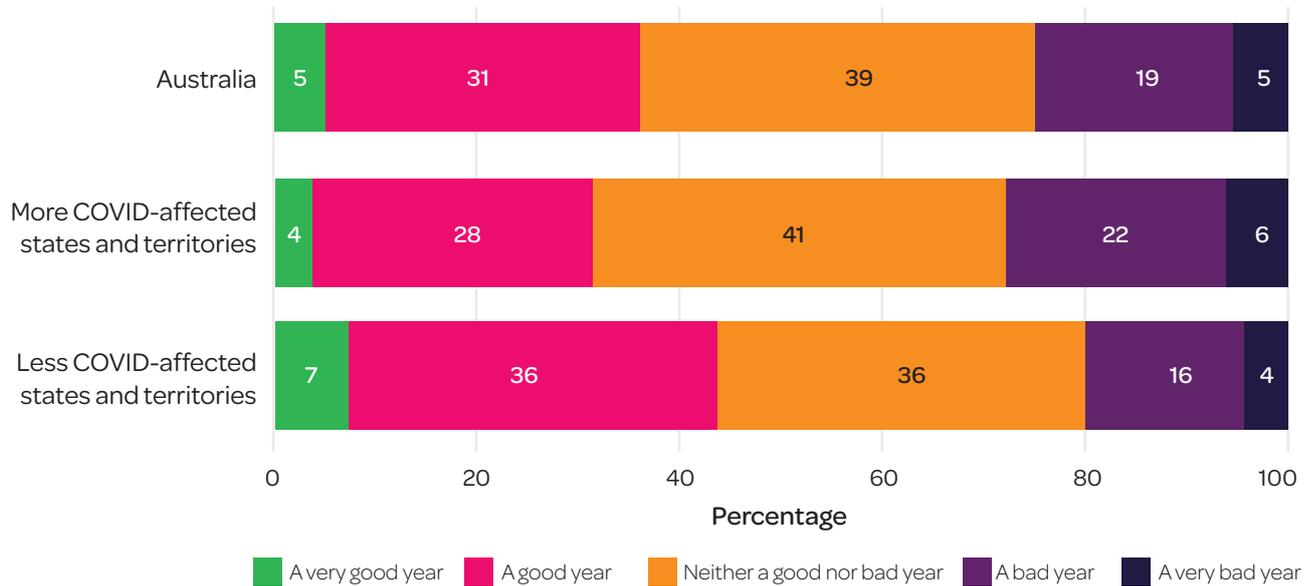
COVID-19 AND ASSESSMENTS OF THE YEAR

This section considers one key difference that was likely to contribute to respondents' assessments of the year: that of which state or territory they lived in. In 2021 there were three states and territories – NSW, Victoria and the ACT – that experienced significant protracted lockdowns, particularly in the second half of the year. Those in other states and territories, while experiencing fewer lockdowns, were still living with the impacts of COVID-19 in different ways, including having constraints on visits to or visits from family living in other jurisdictions or overseas.

Analysis showed that those in one of the more locked-down states and territories were slightly more likely than those in other states and territories to report it had been a bad or very bad year. They also less often reported 2021 as a good or very good year compared to those in other states and territories (Figure 1).

¹ More information about the survey is found at the end of the publication. Of particular note, the survey respondents are predominantly female (86%), and the sample under-represents young Australians and lower socio-economic families. Findings have not been weighted to adjust for the bias in characteristics of the sample relative to the characteristics of all parents or families. Care should therefore be taken in interpreting these findings, as they may not be generalisable to all families, particularly those that are not well represented by the Families in Australia Survey. This report uses responses from those who answered the final survey questions about 'looking back' and 'looking forward'.

Figure 1: Reflections on families' 2021, by whether in a more COVID-affected state or territory



Notes: The question asked was 'All things considered, for my family 2021 was ...'. The more locked-down states and territories are NSW, Victoria and the ACT ($N = 3,332$) compared to $N = 2,003$ for other states/territories. Australia includes eight participants with missing location information.

As seen in Figure 1, the most common response for both locked-down and less restricted states and territories was to rate 2021 as 'neither a good nor bad year' for their family.

That word languishing well describes 2021. We had good health, were ok with remote learning, kept our jobs and had nothing really to complain about. But with all the sadness overseas and others were experiencing it made it a bit meh.

Female, aged 39, Australian Capital Territory

It's hard to say what's good and bad, if I think of the time I've been able to spend with my kids it's a good year, if I think of how accomplished I feel I'm terms of work it's a bad year, if I think in terms of how things are with my partner, it's a terrible year.

Non-binary, aged 44, New South Wales

Although my mother died, a daughter married and had a baby. This made it a good year despite other challenges.

Female, aged 66, New South Wales

As these comments indicate, families had varied experiences in 2021, as is typical in any year. This is explored in the analysis below – with impacts of changing health, work and relationships among the bigger factors contributing to families' reflections on 2021.

WHAT HAPPENED TO FAMILIES IN 2021?

COVID-19

The dominant story of 2021 for many families was the continuing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Only a small proportion of respondents (<1%) reported that either they or someone they lived with had tested positive for COVID-19 in 2021. A larger proportion of respondents reported knowing someone who had been diagnosed with COVID-19; 12% reported that a family member or friend who lives elsewhere had tested positive and 4.6% reported being a close contact of a positive case.

The impacts of COVID-19 were apparent from a wider perspective than only that of the health of participants or their friends and wider family. Comments from respondents highlighted a range of impacts on activities, incomes, employment and contact with others. For example:

While neither of us lost jobs or income, managing remote learning while both working full-time was a major strain, particularly on me.

Female, aged 39, Australian Capital Territory

COVID made it difficult to travel interstate as borders were closed and, consequently, I was unable to see my daughter and young grandson. I missed his developmental milestones.

Female, aged 60, Tasmania

Touching on how people have been unable to attend social gatherings has impacted on overall wellness. I have been unable to attend birthdays, funerals and other significant events due to COVID, and this has left me feeling isolated from family, and it has been noted the whole family feels less connected due to not having these regular opportunities to celebrate and bond.

Female, aged 31, Northern Territory

Some participants were able to identify positives amid the challenges of diminished activities and contacts, reporting that the ongoing pandemic restrictions had allowed them to slow down and re-evaluate their lives.

Working from home has allowed me to connect with my new born baby and be at home for moments like her first word, or crawling. The only part that is sad, is my mother and sisters aren't able to be in Australia to share those moments.

Male, aged 36, New South Wales

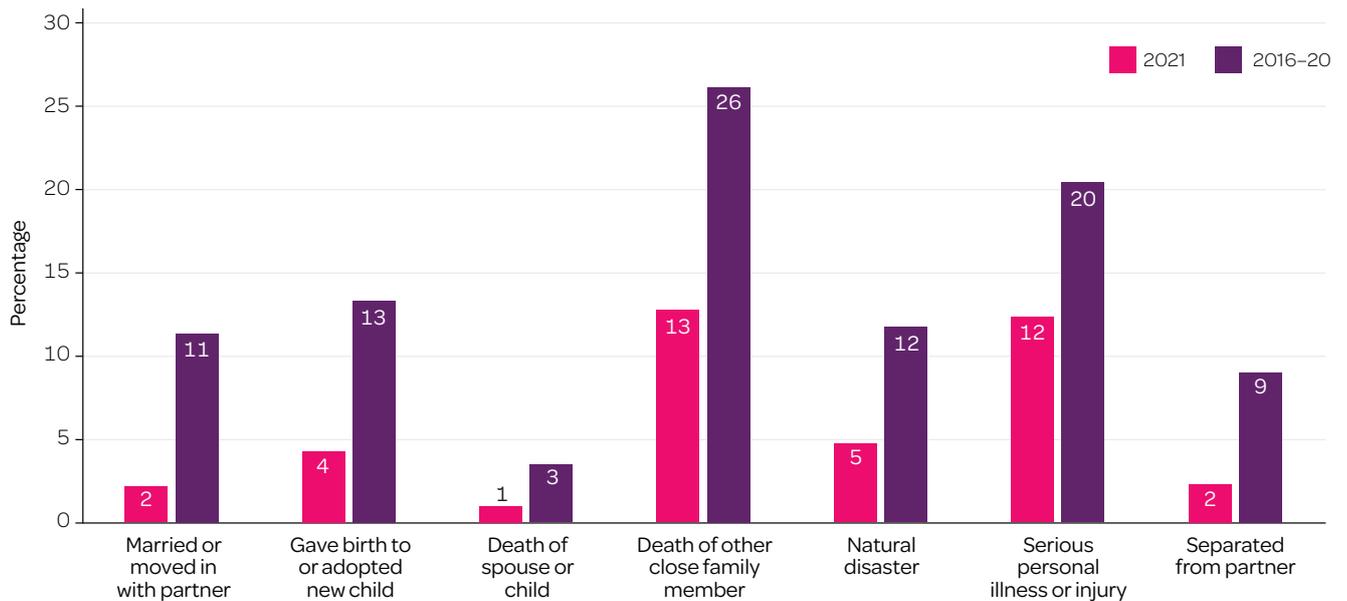
2021 has generally been a great year for my family. We didn't get to physically see each other but found ways to connect online. We slowed down, found a new sense of appreciation for what we have and re-prioritised. My son actually wanted to go back to school!!

Female, aged 51, New South Wales

Other life events

COVID-19 was not the only significant event in families lives in 2021. There were also other more personal events. These included positive experiences such as families welcoming new babies or relationships beginning. They also included more challenging circumstances such as injury, relationship breakdown, natural disasters and death.

Figure 2: Proportion reporting that they (or their partner) experienced a life event in 2021 or in the previous five years



Notes: Participants were presented with a list of possible life events and asked to indicate if any had happened to them in 2021 or in 2016-20. Results are presented as the proportion of those who had completed the final survey questions regarding 2021 and expectations for 2022 (N = 5,333)

The experience of some life events varied by age group, reflecting different life stages. Respondents under the age of 35 were more likely to report moving in with or marrying a partner and having a new baby, while older participants were more likely to report the death of a spouse or child. Other experiences such as the death of other family members and personal injury were more universal. Experiences of natural disasters were more common among those living in regional and remote areas of Australia.

Some of the participants commented further on the life events that affected them in 2021. New babies in the family were a common theme for those who rated 2021 as a good year.

2021 was a good year because we had a new baby born and that seems to have trumped everything else that went wrong.

Female, (no age given), Queensland

For more on experiences of pregnancy and new parenthood during COVID see also the report from the Families in Australia Survey [Becoming a new parent in the COVID-19 pandemic](#).

Difficult life events added to family challenges. For example, participants reported, among other things, their own or others' diagnoses of serious illness, the loss of a pet, the ongoing impacts of drought, and the bushfire recovery.

The death of my pet cat at age 16 after 16 years together was a major event. I really miss him.

Female, aged 54, New South Wales

A gumtree fell on my parent's house in 2021, which was devastating and very traumatic for our family.

Female, aged 30, Victoria

The 2020 summer fires had a huge impact on my family, which is agricultural by trade. The after-effects are still being felt emotionally and financially. It has been very hard.

Female, aged 27, New South Wales

As well as dealing with COVID (with lockdowns and travel plans disrupted) the diagnosis and treatment of a serious disease has made 2021 a difficult year for me.

Female, aged 56, Australian Capital Territory

Many comments about the loss of a family member included the mention of COVID-related impacts, with responses reflecting on the limited ability to say goodbye, attend funeral services or support family in their grief.

Father-in-law in the UK died in 2021. We were unable to attend the funeral and my mother-in-law had very little support during this incredibly difficult time because we could not travel.

Female, aged 54, New South Wales

I couldn't go to my sister's funeral in New Zealand. It was heartbreaking and couldn't get comfort from family and friends.

Female, aged 43, New South Wales

I attended the death of my mother via Skype, on an iPad that was propped up on the bed meal tray.

Female, aged 58, Victoria

The isolation resulting from COVID restrictions made the grieving process more difficult after the death of my husband in September 2021.

Female, aged 65, New South Wales

The impacts of COVID restrictions were also felt in comments related to other life events, with lockdowns and border closures making already challenging situations harder.

I feel the lockdowns from COVID made the cracks wider in an already dysfunctional family. The family fell apart under the pressure. Which caused me to fall lower than ever before.

Female, aged 44, South Australia

My brother, sister-in-law and their two children have not been able to meet my and my partner's firstborn (born August 2020) since the pandemic as they may have been unable to return to their state, and my child has a life-limiting condition.

Female, aged 35, Western Australia

The lockdowns have resulted in a backlog for courts, meaning a delay in my and my spouse's legal processes.

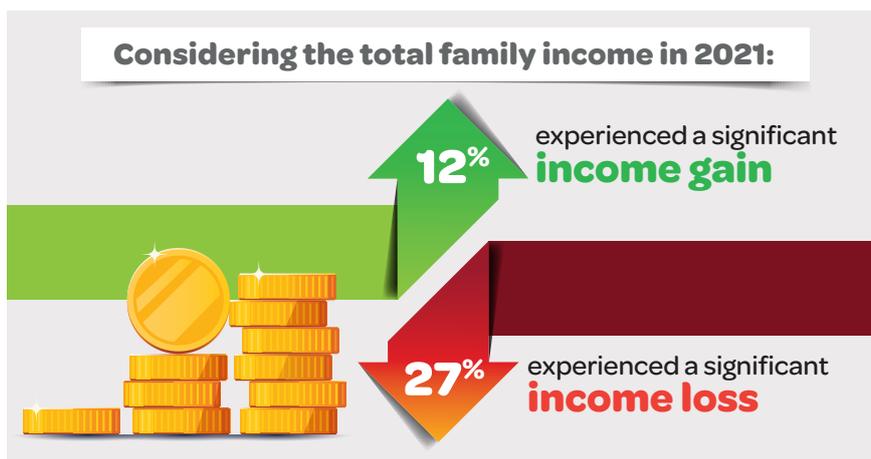
Genderfluid, aged 34, New South Wales

Income and employment

Changes to family members' income or employment was also experienced by many people in 2021. Families, of course, may experience employment or income changes in any year. The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a number of families challenged by this in additional or unexpected ways, as was apparent from the Families in Australia Survey.

Overall, considering the total income of the participant and their partner (if applicable):²

- 27% said they experienced a significant income loss in 2021.
- 12% said they experienced a significant income gain.



For participants and their partners who were employed at some time during 2021:

- 19% said they or their partner lost their job or closed a business.
- 26% reported they or their partner had a reduction in hours or a temporary gap in employment.
- 33% said they or their partner increased work hours, returned to work or started a new job in 2021.

² Questions were not mutually exclusive with some families experiencing both positive and negative income changes or work-related events in 2021.

While not all these changes were due to COVID, comments reflected that the employment impacts of the pandemic were felt differently across different industries.

I am a registered nurse in a local emergency department. The pandemic impacted us in that I had increased hours and security in my job. I am employed by the government and felt safe I would not be at risk of major financial strain due to COVID. My husband works FIFO in the mining industry and it was relatively untouched by COVID so we continued to work and save hard while we couldn't travel. Between this and the ability to pull from our super, we managed to get a house deposit and buy our first home.

Female, aged 31, Queensland

As I and several family members work in the arts (specifically music), the impact of COVID-19 on our employment and that of many of our colleagues and friends has been enormous. It's not only the loss of work and income and meaning at the time, but also the significant loss of less tangible things to do with the continuity of one's artistic practice, maintaining audiences, and social and professional relationships. Admittedly we have also learned new skills, but most of them are skills one would ONLY need during a pandemic!

Female, aged 69, New South Wales

Working from home was also a large feature of 2021 for many with employment, with some finding the experience isolating while others enjoyed the change and hoped to continue the arrangements after restrictions were lifted.

Spouse working from home more often, which is a significant benefit to the overall mental wellness of the home (including our fur-son). I was in and out of working from home and lockdown restrictions.

Male, aged 60, (location unspecified)

COVID has provided the opportunity to work from home. As someone that travels over 100 kms to get to work per day, working from home has brought our family closer together.

Female, aged 52, Victoria

Being made to work from home significantly negatively affected my mental health.

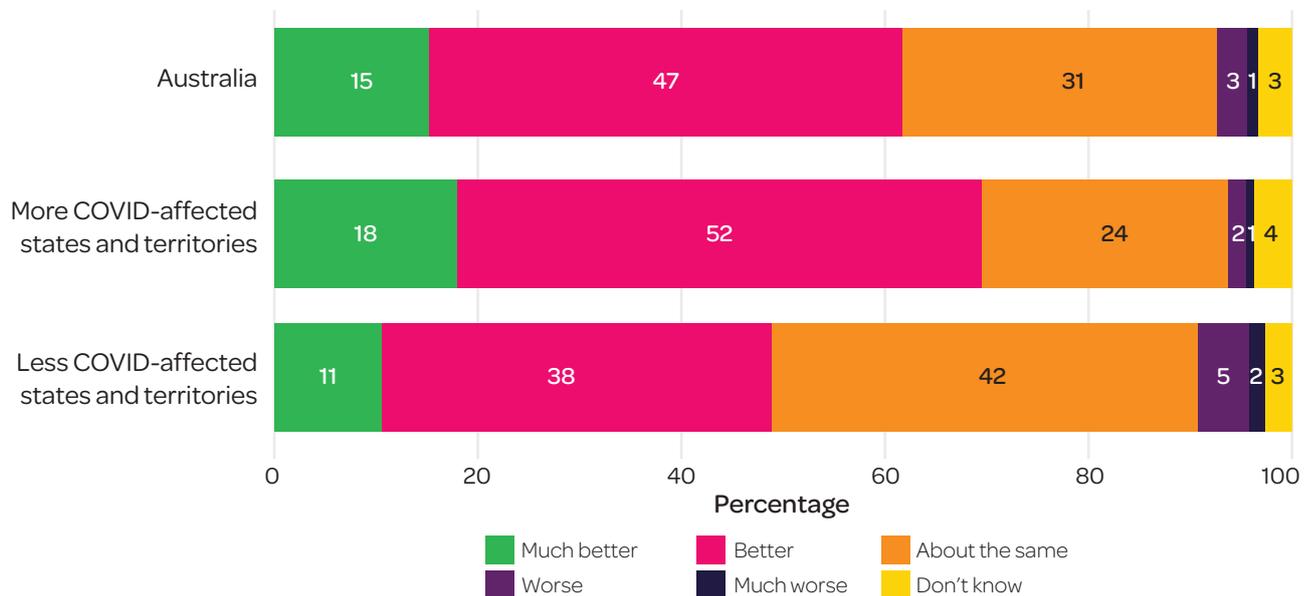
Female, aged 56, South Australia



Predictions for 2022

As well as asking about 2021, participants were asked how they thought 2022 was going to be, compared to 2021. Participants living in the more locked-down states and territories of NSW, Victoria and the ACT were much more likely to suggest 2022 would be a better (including much better) year (67% vs 44% in the other states and territories). In contrast, more (42%) in the other states and territories thought that 2022 would be about the same, compared to 24% in the more locked-down states and territories. While only a minority of participants predicted 2022 would be a worse (or much worse) year, this proportion was somewhat higher for respondents from the states and territories that hadn't, to date, experienced high COVID numbers or associated lockdowns (6.6% vs 2.5%). A small number indicated that they did not know how to rate 2022.

Figure 3: Prediction for family's 2022, by whether in a more locked-down state or territory



Notes: The question asked was 'Compared to 2021, for my family I expect 2022 will be ...'. The more locked-down states and territories are NSW, Victoria and the ACT ($N = 3,332$) compared to $N = 2,003$ from the other states/territories. Australia includes eight participants with missing location information.

The suggestion of uncertainty about 2022 was apparent in some comments. These comments indicated that families were feeling uncertainty because of changing COVID policies. Participants from Western Australia, Tasmania and Queensland, in particular, were concerned about the impacts of opening borders on their relatively COVID-free lives.

We have had no COVID here except at the very beginning of the pandemic. When the borders open people will get sick and die in a way we've not experienced before. I am frightened for my grandchildren who are too young to be immunised. I am also worried for myself in spite of being immunised as I am immunocompromised.

Female, aged 62, Queensland

Living in Western Australia we have had a relatively normal year. I do feel, however, 2022 will be a test for us all as we open up and learn to live with COVID. I feel very uncertain and anxious about what the year ahead will be like.

Female, aged 40, Western Australia

Some also expressed that they were experiencing family challenges because opinions about vaccination and other COVID policies differed within their family. These comments came from individuals that were supportive of government policies as well as from those critical of government policies. These issues were already real for families in 2021, as they anticipated planning family gatherings over the summer period, and there was concern about the ongoing impacts on relationships.

I am very frustrated by misinformation/conspiracy theories believed by some relatives and the effect this has on our relationships.

Male, aged 66, Australian Capital Territory

The life will be much better if the people come to some senses and the COVID and the scary propaganda finish up.

Male, aged 71, Queensland

Different vaccination choices has caused division, stress and heartache within the extended family.

Female, aged 58, New South Wales

Uncertainty about the future was not always connected to comments about COVID. For example, uncertainty was linked to comments about climate change and other government policies.

I think everyone is exhausted by the ongoing uncertainty we are experiencing. I am incredibly grateful that COVID did not affect us as much in Australia as it did elsewhere, but it has nonetheless taken a toll. And I'm worried that climate change will lead to increasingly uncertain lives – and as more natural disasters affect us each year, this kind of uncertainty will be more common. I'm not sure how we'll all manage.

Female, aged 49, New South Wales



Not everyone predicting that 2022 would be worse than 2021 had reasons related to COVID. Several were anticipating challenging life events, such as close family members with terminal illnesses who they expected to lose in the coming year. Others foresaw ongoing family court battles, financial concerns and other family challenges.

Partner has just been diagnosed with stage 3 cancer; treatment to commence.

Female, aged 80, (no location given)

I ticked 'worse' because I expect one of my parents will not live past 2022 and things are going to be very stressful dealing with my siblings and the surviving parent ...

Female, aged 61, South Australia

Among those anticipating a better year ahead, some anticipated positive life events and experiences, including babies, weddings, travel and retirement, that were expected to bring joy in 2022.

We are having a baby, which makes us feel good and excited for the future, despite all the lockdowns.

Female, aged 29, Victoria

Looking forward to 2022. I'm retiring and becoming a grandparent. I feel 'blessed'.

Female, aged 65, South Australia

We enter 2022 with my husband recovering well and now cancer free, both in good employment although I am reducing my hours, our first grandchild to love, adore and spoil, due the week of Xmas. Hoping borders can begin to open and we get to travel in 2022 either to the East or Singapore.

Female, aged 64, Western Australia

Some also reported having made positive lifestyle changes as a result of the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has allowed me to evaluate life and gain a work-life balance. 2022 working part-time so I can explore other recreational activities, will be more important.

Female, aged 49, Victoria

FURTHER RESEARCH

Other research using the Families in Australia Survey will explore families' experiences of 2020 and 2021, including looking at families' help and support to each other and concerns about children's wellbeing.

ABOUT THE FAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA SURVEY

The fourth Families in Australia Survey ran from 4 November to 13 December 2021, with almost 6,000 Australians aged 18 years or over fully completing the survey. At the time, most states were experiencing limited restrictions. With increasing vaccination rates, restrictions were easing across NSW, Victoria and the ACT, although some border restrictions between states and territories remained. The Omicron variant of COVID-19 was just beginning to emerge in Australia and case numbers starting to climb.

The Families in Australia Survey is AIFS' flagship survey series. Its scope is every person in every type of family, with the survey open to all Australians aged 18 years and over.

Families in Australia seeks to find out how families are managing, about relationships, connections and support, as well as about the things families do together or in the community, such as work and study. This survey is not representative of the Australian population, but nevertheless provides useful insights on aspects of Australian families.

The fourth Families in Australia Survey ran from 4 November to 13 December 2021. This follows a series of three surveys. The first was *Life during COVID-19*, which ran from 1 May to 9 June 2020. The second ran from 17 November to 22 December 2020 and the third from 19 May to 30 June 2021.

Find out more about the [Families in Australia Survey](#).

Credits

Authors: Megan Carroll and Jennifer Baxter

Editor: Katharine Day

Graphic design: Lisa Carroll

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