Understanding Covid-19 emergency social security measures as a from of basic income: Lessons from Australia

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Abstract
This article examines the changes in social security measures introduced by the Australian government during the first wave of Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020. These measures were basic income-like in that they became both more unconditional and adequate for a reasonable standard of living. This was achieved through a significant supplementary payment, suspension of mutual obligation requirements, and the relaxation of eligibility criteria on a range of unemployment-related payments. Through drawing on the results of an online survey, we examine the impacts of these measures and find that they significantly helped to alleviate poverty and improve wellbeing. These gains were not insignificant for the individuals involved, and offer empirical insights into studies of basic income. While seeing the Australian government embrace more generous and basic income-like measures, we also note that during Covid-19 gendered and class inequalities increased. This reminds us that basic income is never a silver bullet and, alongside implementing basic income payments, there also needs to be a concerted effort to restructure economic relations more generally.

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Introduction
As the Covid-19 pandemic hit, populations around the world lost work and added to the ‘surplus’ populations already experiencing long-term unemployment. Lockdowns and, more specifically, government-mandated measures to keep populations at ‘home’, forced labour out of workplaces, businesses to close, and movement to cease within national borders and between nations. Dependency on state payments and programs was particularly visible; it was a condition of people’s survival as the pandemic intensified. The International Labour Organization (ILO), by considering the number of working hours lost globally, estimated a ‘jobs gap’ increase of 75 million jobs in 2021, taking the global total to the equivalent of 100 million full-time jobs in 2021 (ILO, 2021). This equates to over US$3.7 trillion in lost earnings globally. This shortfall in employment and working hours comes on top of persistently high pre-crisis levels of unemployment, labour precarity and poor working conditions.

It was in this context that governments around the world provided emergency and temporary measures that tried to relieve some of the economic stress people were experiencing. For example, the World Bank and the ILO released a ‘living’ paper during the pandemic that collated the various social protection measures implemented by governments around the world as they responded to Covid-19. Their latest report from May 2021 covers 222 countries and territories, of which 186 had planned or implemented 734 conditional and unconditional cash transfer payments as social assistance measures (Gentilini et al., 2021). These measures were uncharacteristically generous which has led some analysts to see these measures as a form of emergency basic income (Huss et al. 2021; Stahl & MacEachen, 2021).

One such example of a basic income-like measure implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic can be found in the Australian federal government’s initial response to Covid-19, in 2020. During the first phase of lockdowns, the federal government radically restructured the social security system to move towards basic income-like relief (Klein, 2021a). Australia’s social security system had long been thought of as inadequate and punitive – inadequate because the base rates of Australia’s working-age social security payments have been below the poverty line for some time, and punitive because of the use of welfare conditionalities, more commonly called mutual obligations (Cahill, 2014; Klein, 2021b). Australia’s ongoing meagre benefit provisions has led Alston (2018), the (2014–20) UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, to describe Australia’s social security system as providing ‘a right to social insecurity’ (2018, p. 253). In addition to low payments, the Australian social security system has featured punitive welfare conditionalities, where for several decades, unemployment has been framed not as a structural issue of advanced capitalist economies, but a problem stemming from individual behavioural deficiencies (Banks, 2011; Cahill, 2014). This framing resulted in the introduction of ‘conditional’ welfare programs,
where payments are conditional on recipients undertaking ‘mutual obligation’ tasks such as attending training or employment provider appointments, submitting job applications and undertaking ‘work-like’ activities in exchange for their payments (Brady, 2011). Mutual obligations are mandatory, and so people are often met with sanctions, including the suspension or the cancellation of payments, if they do not undertake these mandatory tasks and report them in a timely manner or do not appropriately record them.

Yet during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, the Australian government dramatically changed its approach to social security. Specifically, the Australian government introduced a temporary $550 per fortnight Coronavirus Supplement (the ‘Supplement’) from 27 April 2020 for a period of six months to increase nine working-age social security payments. This affected many recipients, particularly those receiving the JobSeeker Payment, which includes a significant proportion of people who are not so-called ‘employment-ready’, including single parents, people with disabilities or health impediments, older people, and people with other caring responsibilities who are on JobSeeker because of the systematic tightening of eligibility for other payment categories (PBO, 2020). Recognition of the stalled labour market and social distancing regulations triggered by the pandemic also saw the temporary suspension of mutual obligations – including attending regular meetings with providers, regular income reporting, applying for a set number of jobs per month, volunteering and/or participating in Work for the Dole.

Australia’s social security system is notoriously targeted, and the means test is strictly applied, but this was relaxed in this period to make the eligibility for unemployment benefits broadly applicable; specifically, the assets tests and some waiting periods were waived. The actual process of making a claim was also made easier, where government removed administrative burdens designed to deter recipients (Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Claimants initially only needed to make declarations of their income and residency status, rather than providing proof.

These measures together made the Australian social security system more generous, universal and unconditional, and that is why some saw this as a move towards a basic income. Still, these measures were not a ‘universal basic income’, which is understood as regular disbursement to individuals without means testing or other action on the part of recipient (BIEN, 2020; Johnson & Roberto, 2020). The Coronavirus Supplement and suspension of conditionalities, while providing enough for people to live and removing many conditionalities respectively, were still not regular or universal – two other critical aspects of defining basic income (BIEN, 2020). These measures were not given to everyone who received payments, nor were they regular, in that the cash payments were taken away after six months (Prabhakar, 2020). Nonetheless, similar measures to those Australia implemented have been called a type of emergency or temporary basic income (Gray Molina, 2022; Stahl & MacEachen, 2021), and some scholars have argued that these signal a significant policy shift. For example, Karl Widerquist, cited in Stahl and MacEachen (2021), argued that the emergency measure can be:

a better experiment to learn from than the previous pilot projects, which were all limited in scale either by singling out specific groups such as the unemployed, or focusing on a limited geographic area. An emergency UBI [Universal Basic Income] would allow for observation of effects on the community level, albeit under extraordinary conditions. (cited in Stahl & MacEachen, 2021, p. 4)
This article aims to take up the important task of observing the effects of the emergency UBI on people receiving it, and understanding what can be learnt about unconditionality and basic income from this unprecedented period in Australia’s social security system.

A limited number of studies of the Australian welfare measures implemented during 2020 reveal how life-changing these were for people who had lived on the more hostile social security system before the pandemic. This article will outline results from one such study, which examined the impacts of these measures on people’s lives, but it will also consider what else can be learnt from the Covid-19 period in thinking about making such a program more permanent and more like basic income going forward. This includes observations around the increase of inequality, housing insecurity, and racial and gendered inequality, which were also observed during the lockdowns and while the 2020 measures were under way. These observations point to important lessons from the Covid-19 period, and broader complexity around what needs to be considered when implementing a basic income.

**Studying Australia’s Covid-19 basic income**

The $550 Supplement and suspension of mutual obligations were an unprecedented shift in Australian social security policy. This moment provided a ‘natural experiment’ to examine the outcomes of a more supportive and caring social security system compared with pre-pandemic settings. An online survey, which ran from 20 October to 1 December 2020, was used to examine if and how social security recipients used not only the Coronavirus Supplement, but also their time as a result of increased income and the reduction of mutual obligations. To allow comparisons, the survey was open to people who received the Supplement as well as those who did not, including people who do not receive social security payments. The primary research questions were:

1. What were the impacts of the $550 Supplement to recipients of income support payments?
2. What were the impacts of temporarily suspending mutual obligations?
3. Did the temporary cessation or reduction of mutual obligations and the increase in payment change the way respondents used their time?

The survey was promoted through Twitter, Facebook and via the public platforms of social welfare agencies and individuals linked to the researchers, using a snowball method of recruitment. The survey was voluntary and took about 15 minutes to complete. Questions were both multiple choice and short answer to ensure respondents had an opportunity to share their thoughts further. All aspects of the research were reviewed and approved by the [blind] ethics panel.

The data were collected anonymously through Qualtrics and resulted in 173 full responses which were included in the analysis. Of these, 146 received a social security payment, while 27 people did not. Among the 146 respondents receiving social security payments, 92 received the Supplement and 54 did not. This analysis focuses specifically
on the responses from the 92 people who received the Supplement. Of the 92 people, 38 of them indicated they had a partial or full suspension of mutual obligations.5

To understand the impacts of the $550 Supplement and suspension of mutual obligations, respondents were asked about both positives and negatives experienced due to the temporary changes. We present a summary of the findings in the next two sections but note that changes brought about by the suspension of mutual obligation requirements cannot be wholly disentangled from the improved economic security brought about by the $550 Supplement and vice versa, and very much see the impacts of an increased income and removal of conditionality interacting together.

**Impacts of the $550 Coronavirus Supplement**

Respondents reported various positive changes from receiving the $550 Supplement when asked: ‘What has been a positive change in your life, if anything, because of the Supplement?’ From the responses, three themes emerged in response to this question.

First, respondents reported improved financial security and their ability to meet basic material needs. For example, one female respondent from New South Wales, aged 45–54 years and receiving the JobSeeker Payment for between 1 and 5 years, said: ‘I was able to pay bills on time, buy medical supplies for my health conditions, attend medical appointments without financial impact on [my] budget and was able to keep fridge and pantry full of food.’ While a female respondent from New South Wales said: ‘I could buy more groceries and not worry about paying bills in the same week’ (Female, 25–44 years, parenting payment single (PPS), 1–5 years).

Second, respondents reported an improvement to their psychological wellbeing. For example, one female respondent, aged 45–54 years and receiving the JobSeeker Payment, said: ‘I was able to redirect my thoughts away from the constant worry and calculation of every penny to productive and creative activities and thinking.’ Another female respondent, aged 35–44 years, from Western Australia and receiving the JobSeeker Payment for over five years, noted that:

I’m a single parent that was working part time but have still received part payment of JobSeeker as my wage was not high, I have felt more dignity whilst receiving the extra Supplement as I’ve been able to buy enough food and pay my bills on time.

Third, respondents also reported that they had the resources to better look after children. A female respondent, aged 45–54 years, receiving the JobSeeker Payment and from South Australia, said: ‘I’ve been able to pay bills and necessary items for my children instead of getting a loan to make ends meet’ Another female respondent, aged 35–44 years, from South Australia and receiving the JobSeeker Payment for more than five years, said: ‘I was able to give my family things we usually go without.’ We also asked people about what the negative impacts of the $550 Supplement were. Respondents overwhelmingly said there were not any negative impacts, while a few respondents noted that a negative impact was that the Supplement would end.
Changes from the suspension of mutual obligations

In the survey, we also asked people what a positive change in their life has been, if any, because of the temporary reduction of mutual obligations activities. Three themes emerged from the respondents: (1) the improvement to psychological wellbeing, (2) the freeing up of time, and (3) being able to undertake activities that were important to them.

First, people again reported an improvement to their overall psychological wellbeing, for example a female respondent from Victoria, aged 65–74 years and receiving the JobSeeker Payment, said there was: ‘No anxiety. No waiting to hear if you got an interview. No knock backs which impacted on my self-worth.’ Another female respondent, aged 55–64 years and receiving the JobSeeker Payment for over five years, said that she had ‘noticed an improvement in my physical health, reduction in insomnia’.

Second, people reported having more time available, which had been usually taken up by mutual obligations activities such as appointments, job applications and other requirements. For example, a female respondent aged 45–54 years, receiving the Parenting Payment for between 1–5 years, said: ‘I can focus on my health conditions that impact me physically and my children’s health conditions too, attending appointments.’ Another female respondent, aged 55–64 years, living in South Australia and receiving the JobSeeker Payment, said that there were: ‘no more useless activities and jumping through hoops … no more fear of being cut off’.

Third, people reported being able to use this freed-up time for activities that were important to them. For example, one female respondent, 45–54 years and from New South Wales, receiving the JobSeeker Payment for between 1 and 5 years, said: ‘Because instead of doing busywork ticking off boxes, I could really focus on study and what I needed to do to get where I wanted to go. And I was able to make progress for the first time in a couple of years towards that goal.’ Another female respondent, aged 45–54 years, from Victoria, receiving the Parenting Payment Single for less than six months, said that she ‘was able to focus 100% on remote learning for 6yo twins during lockdown as well as my own mental health and wellbeing’.

People were also asked about the negatives of the reduction in mutual obligations; most responses said there were no negatives, while several people expressed concerns that it was only a temporary measure, for example one responded that there was, ‘No positive change, knowing the system in place will return is already taking effect on my mental health and epilepsy’ (male, 35–44, Victoria, JobSeeker).

While our sample size was small, our exploratory research suggests that low payments and mutual obligations in social security policy are working against people by creating barriers to work. Such barriers include compromising physical and mental health, reducing self-worth and wellbeing, providing inadequate financial resources for basic living needs, reducing capacity to focus on anything other than survival, and disregarding people’s long-term goals, unpaid care work and community support (Klein et al., 2022). The shift towards a basic income reversed these trends and supported people in significant ways, including providing an economic base to not just survive but also improve their wellbeing and engage in various productive work which included preparing to re-engage with the labour market, but also other forms of work, such as unpaid care work, community support and care.
These findings are reflected in other studies that examined the impacts of the Covid-19 policy measures. For example, other studies have noted a significant although temporary change in physical and mental health that emerged from receiving the Supplement and/or experiencing a temporary suspension of mutual obligations (Gerards & Welters, 2022). Further, prior to the Supplement, people receiving working-age payment types were highly likely to be living in poverty (Davidson et al., 2020; Temple et al., 2019). Yet, Phillips Gray and Biddle (2020) found that individuals receiving Newstart Allowance (now JobSeeker Payment) or Youth Allowance with the $550 Supplement were estimated to have had the largest reduction in household poverty, with poverty rates falling from 67 per cent to 7 per cent.

These welfare reforms had similar positive impacts outside our study site. The recognition of the stalled labour market and social distancing regulations triggered by the pandemic also saw the temporary suspension of Community Development Program (CDP) activities – a remote Work-for-the-Dole program targeting First Nations people in remote areas of Australia. CDP has been devastating for remote First Nations communities causing widespread harm to the 30,000–40,000 people forced onto the program, with its negative impacts being felt not only by program participants, but also reverberating far and wide across family and kinship networks (Jordan, 2016; Staines & Zahnow, 2021). CDP has thus been examined as an example of a policy that continues settler colonialism in Australia – both through the material deprivation that is part of its design, its disregard for First Nations self-determination, as well as its assimilationist approach, requiring First Nations peoples to take on settler norms and livelihoods (Altman, 2018). While our survey did not directly target people living remotely (and thus our results did not capture experiences by people subjected to CDP), other studies have suggested how both the $550 Supplement and suspension of CDP had significant positive impacts on First Nations peoples living remotely. Markham (2020) estimated that, in very remote areas, the Supplement increased the total income flowing to First Nations individuals by 26%, and expected that in these areas, where over 50% of Indigenous people live below the poverty line (Markham & Biddle, 2018), impacts of poverty would also have significantly decreased. Research examining the impacts of a range of government measures during Covid-19 lockdowns across the Kimberley found that people were able to use the time and money to go back on country and undertake important cultural activities there (Thorburn et al., 2022).

**Not permanent and not universal**

Responses from people receiving the two measures describe them as life-changing, however, this Covid-19 basic income was not available to everyone, and it was only given for a temporary period. Non-citizens were excluded from the measures, including international students stranded in Australia because of border closures and the increase in the price of airline tickets. People receiving the Disability Support Pension, which was paid at lower rate than payments that were linked with the Coronavirus Supplement, were also excluded, as too was the Aged Pension. Other forms of conditionality continued during the pandemic, including compulsory income management, where some
recipients of social security compulsorily have portions of their social security quarantined onto an issued ‘debit card’ to reduce their ability to withdraw cash and restrict purchases of alcohol. Compulsory income management has been shown to have negative impacts on people’s financial and emotional wellbeing (Roche et al., 2021).

As the pandemic wore on in Australia, the government’s Covid-19 measures were dramatically wound back. In September 2020, six months after the introduction of the measures, the $550 Supplement was reduced by $300 to a rate of $250 per fortnight. The measures were wound up altogether by April 2021 and replaced with a much more conditional and targeted emergency measures. Many of the gains that people experienced during the first lockdown were taken away (Klein et al., 2022). For example, when people in our survey were asked, ‘Please tell us any additional changes (positive or negative) that have occurred as a result of the Supplement reducing’, several concerning themes relating to hardship emerged. First, respondents reported having to once again forgo basic needs and deal with economic insecurity. One female respondent, aged between 55–64 years and receiving JobSeeker Payment for between 1 and 5 years said that she was, ‘Back to rationing food and medication.’ Another female respondent, aged 45–54 years and receiving the JobSeeker Payment, said that her ‘money worries are back. After Dec I will be back to scrimping and avoiding debt collectors’ phone calls’. Second, the reduction in the Supplement – and the pending removal of the Supplement altogether – increased people’s stress and reduced their psychological wellbeing. For example, a male respondent, aged 35–44 years and receiving the JobSeeker Payment, said that, ‘The payment has given me sanity. The threat of the old system returning, with harsh mutual obligations and reduced payment, makes me very anxious.’ Another male respondent, aged 25–34 years and receiving the JobSeeker Payment for more than five years said that, ‘I became more stressed and my studies suffered because of it.’ Third, respondents reported that the reduction, and looming cessation of the Supplement made it harder for them to undertake labour market activities that they were able to do while receiving the full $550 Supplement. A male respondent, aged 55–64 years and receiving the JobSeeker Payment said that, ‘I had to start counting my pennies again. It reduced my horizons.’ Another female respondent, aged 45–54 years and receiving a JobSeeker Payment for more than five years, said that, ‘My plans for creating for myself self-sufficiency through a home business have pretty much evaporated and now I am back in the netherworld of constant fear and worry about poverty. It’s like life has stopped again.’ A male respondent, aged 35–44 years, receiving a JobSeeker Payment for more than five years, said that: ‘It reduced my options for my future career – because I have to prioritise survival. It made me feel more alienated because my income separated me from others.’

The government messaging around their generous lockdown measures is also important to note. Initially, the federal government introduced these measures under the discourse of need – jobs were lost because businesses were forced to close, and workers locked down. This was acknowledgement that members of the working middle class were losing work for conditions that weren’t of their making; a discourse in stark contrast to one that the government has long weaponised against the welfare class where unemployment is viewed as behaviourial, despite there also not being enough jobs (Martin et al., 2022). When the positive impacts of their Covid-19 measures on the
welfare class started to be more widely acknowledged through the media, the government used public appearances to again stigmatise people receiving social security payments. In an interview on radio station 2GB, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, instead of talking about how the Coronavirus Supplement of $550 had meant people could now go a week without skipping meals, cited anecdotes of people using it to refuse work. Morrison also said that: ‘What we have to be worried about now is that we can’t allow the JobSeeker Payment to become an impediment to people going out and doing work, getting extra shifts’. Government Members of Parliament travelling to regional areas cited anecdotes in the media as to how the additional cash in remote First Nations communities was causing increased drug and alcohol use (Marchant & Pedler, 2020) – a narrative long deployed to discredit First Nations people, and to justify punitive programs targeting them (Bielefeld, 2018).

**Persisting and increasing inequalities**

As currently understood, particularly within social policy and development debates, basic income measures are not necessarily systemically transformative, and can often be used as an efficient solution to poverty within the political economy of neoliberal capitalism. Yet, the literature has long argued that without measures that radically restructure mechanisms of distribution, a basic income merely acts as a stopgap measure without contending with the structures that produce the poverty and inequality in the first place (Fouksman & Klein, 2019; Nilsen, 2021). Fouksman and Klein (2019) warned that while basic income scholars present a basic income as justice-enhancing, with the ability to fundamentally shift the structure of economic and social power, and perhaps even challenge our underlying assumptions around the value of work, productivity and time-use, the radical redistributive potential is not a given. Kapoor (2017) argues that this may be because basic income models do not necessarily confront the power of the transnational corporate sector and that basic income programs risk underpinning consumption within capitalism, leaving processes of exploitative production processes, continued production of socioeconomic inequalities, and environmental destruction largely unchanged. Nilsen (2021) has also argued that cash transfers do little more than financialise the poor and that what is needed is not a politics of distribution that works according to neoliberal logics (like many basic income models), but an ‘oppositional political project centred on radical decommodification and advanced through a counter-hegemonic process of non-reformist reform’ (Nilsen, 2021, p. 21). These insights from the literature are not new to basic income scholars, and are important to consider alongside the measures introduced in 2020 in Australia and what should also be considered important measures alongside basic income measures in the future.

We see, from the Australian case, that the measures implemented by the government were never about restructuring foundational economic relations. For example, decommodifying labour was never the goal of the measures used by governments during the pandemic. Instead, many measures were used to privilege workers over those chronically unemployed, as was the case in Australia. Also, by the very fact that many of these measures were given as ‘temporary relief’, shows the policy intent that the labour market would return to some ‘normality’ where labour was needed as a commodity.
Further, while these Covid-19 measures did provide substantive relief of poverty, persistent inequalities linked to structures within the Australian economy continued. The Covid-19 lockdown measures, while impacting the majority of the global population, excluded those that could buy their movement, including the rich, who were able to charter their own travel (including space travel), pay for expensive hotel quarantine, and purchase exemptions (Springer, 2020). Business was often counted as a legitimate reason for ongoing movement and activity of elites while workers were forced to stay still (Fellner & Gladstone, 2021). In Australia, the federal government paid out a massive wage subsidy program called JobKeeper to business, to keep workers connected to their jobs when they were forced to stay at home. Yet many businesses have overclaimed this payment while making profits during the lockdowns (Khadem, 2021). For example, about $6.2 billion in wage subsidies was paid to businesses with more than $10 million in turnover that did not experience the minimum 30 per cent fall in turnover in the first six months of the scheme (which was the criterion to be eligible for the subsidy) (Khadem, 2021). The government did not attempt to recoup these overpayments but has doggedly pursued up to 11,000 people who, they say, may have overclaimed unemployment benefits totalling $32 million (Terzon, 2021).

The ‘asset economy’, and specifically housing and home ownership, is a critical source of inequality in Australia as well (Adkins et al., 2020). For example, there is a growing divide between those who invest in the housing market and/or own their own homes, and those priced out from home ownership and who rely on renting and social housing. Despite a downturn in the economy during the Covid-19 crisis, house prices in Australia continued their upward trend – supported by government monetary and fiscal policies that were introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic that acted to secure liquidity for investors (Adkins et al., 2021). This has meant that those priced out of home ownership continue to be excluded, while those investing had their property values increased.

While the Australian government showed the ability to swiftly move towards more generous changes, they were only temporary, and the move showed little commitment to making these permanent. Moreover, governments continued to provide avenues for the elite to maintain significant power and privilege – signalling government’s ongoing commitment to neoliberal governance, described by Peck (2016, p. 1) as a commitment to a: ‘programmatic set of pro-market policy measures; to a rationality of small-government transformation; to a political-economic philosophy of “market fundamentalism”; and to a historically ascendant ideology (and pattern) of capitalist development’. Such commitments underpinned the government’s commitment to uphold unequal structures rather than using the pandemic as an opportunity to restructure economies more equitably. Furthermore, this inequality was exacerbated along gendered and racialised lines, where women undertook the brunt of unpaid care work leading to what commentators have called the ‘pink recession’ (Duke, 2020), where the majority of those losing jobs during the lockdowns were women, who were also expected to undertake the majority of unpaid care work that increased because of the lockdowns (Risse and Jackson, 2021). Matthewman and Huppard (2020, p. 697) argued that this pink recession has the potential to undo much of the ‘hard-won progress that women have made to increase their representation in the paid workforce’. Moreover, First Nations people continued to bear the consequences of years
of policy neglect, particularly in the health sector, where populations were exposed to poor health responses to Covid-19, including vaccination delays and inadequate treatment resulting in a disproportionate number of deaths. However, while the initial health response by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs) was incredibly successful (Moodie et al., 2021), the subsequent government-led response was far less so.

Conclusion

In conclusion, when policies are not used to challenge structures of inequality, they can uphold these structures and further exacerbate inequality. Covid-19, while seeing the Australian government embrace more generous and basic income-like measures, did not fundamentally restructure economic relations. Rather, the pandemic, amplified and extended these inequalities, and this is an important observation to note for any proposals for basic income in Australia in the future. Nonetheless, the pandemic also shows what gains can be made in people’s lives when government reconfigures social security in more generous terms. This includes moving people above the poverty line, as well as removing controlling and surveillance aspects of welfare. These gains were significant for the individuals involved, and offer empirical insights into what can be achieved with some adjustments, into a basic income in practice.

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Supplemental material

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Notes

1. In April 2021, after the government removed their temporary Covid-19 basic income-like measures, they raised the base rate of unemployment benefits by a meagre $50 per fortnight. Before this minimal raise, the base rate of benefits had not increased in real terms since 1997, setting the level well below both the Henderson (established by the 1973 Henderson poverty inquiry) and the relative poverty line (calculated as half of median household income) (Services Australia, 2021). Even after the meagre $50 per fortnight raise, the unemployed ‘JobSeeker’ payment is the second-lowest employment benefit in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Coates & Cowgill, 2021).
2. The payments were: JobSeeker Payment (formerly the Newstart Allowance), Partner Allowance, Widow Allowance, Youth Allowance, Austudy, ABSTUDY Living Allowance, Parenting Payment, Farm Household Allowance, Special Benefit (Services Australia, 2021).

3. Specifically, the suspension of mutual obligations was initially in place from 23 March to 27 April, and was extended and reimplemented at various points throughout 2020 depending on state-based restrictions, with a gradual reintroduction commencing from 9 June 2020 (Ruston & Cash, 2020). The Supplement was reduced by $300 to a rate of $250 per fortnight from 25 September to 31 December 2020 (Department of Social Services, 2021), and ceased on 31 March 2021. On 1 April 2021, the government gave a small permanent increase of $50 per fortnight to the base rate of the JobSeeker allowance while at the same time, ramping up mutual obligations.

4. A detailed description of the study, including the recruitment methods and sample characteristics can be found in Klein et al (2022).*NIR chk*

5. An extended analysis of these impacts including gendered impacts and a deep discussion of the methodology are published here (Klein et al 2022) and here (Klein et al. 2021).

6. While compulsory income management such as the Cashless Debit Card were functioning at the time of this ‘natural experiment’, it is unlikely that CDC recipients undertook our survey. This is because the trial sites are limited in Australia, and we had no responses from the Northern Territory – where the biggest compulsory income management program is located.

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