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Pushed back, pulled forward: Exploring the impact of COVID-19 on young adults’ life plans and future mobility

Alexa Delbosc a,*, Laura McCarthy a

a Department of Civil Engineering, Institute of Transport Studies, Monash University, 23 College Walk, Clayton, Victoria, 3800, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to how people live, work and travel. There has been a recent outburst of research on the short-term impacts that the pandemic has had on travel behaviour. However, the long-term impact of the pandemic on travel behaviour is still uncertain and difficult to predict. In particular, young adults are facing some of the most significant disruptions from the pandemic; these disruptions are likely to have long-term impacts on their lives. This study aims to unpack the direct and indirect effects that COVID-19 may have on the travel behaviour of young adults. It does this through in-depth interviews with 26 young adults living in Melbourne and Victoria, Australia. Interviews suggest that while the pandemic has had significant impacts on the short-term travel behaviour of all young adults, the long-term impacts are more complex and mediated by how they are moving through key life milestones. Many respondents are relatively unimpacted by the pandemic. Others have faced a significant disruption to their lives. Those who had planned to live or work overseas have found their life plans ‘accelerated’, which may also accelerate their dependence on the car. In contrast, those who have lost work are facing a significant delay to their life plans. We propose a framework for how COVID-19 may directly and indirectly impact travel behaviour in the short- and long-term. The strongest impacts on mobility, through changes to life stage transitions, are indirect and unevenly spread across the population of young adults.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the experience of stay-at-home orders has had a profound impact on society. In response, there has been a recent flurry of research on the impacts of COVID-19 on travel behaviour. Initial findings are that overall rates of travel plummeted during stay-at-home orders, especially for trips on public transport (Beck and Hensher 2020; de Haas et al., 2020).

However, what is not clear is whether these changes are short-lived and will be reversed when vaccination rates provide populations with herd immunity. In many cities, car travel quickly returned to pre-pandemic levels when domestic travel restrictions eased (Sipe 2020). Even public transport has seen significant recoveries in places like New Zealand where infection rates are extremely low (Ipsos 2020).

Any lasting impacts on travel behaviour are likely to play out indirectly through changing the upstream influences on travel behaviour, such as home and work location, lifestyle and preferences. Already it has been shown that COVID-19 is having a disproportionate impact on young adults, who are more likely to have lost their job (Blundell et al., 2020) or face negative mental health impacts (Pieh et al., 2020).

Prior to the pandemic, young Australians already faced a precarious economic future. Compared with older generations, they are more likely to be underemployed, make up a disproportionate share of the casual labour force and have experienced stagnant income growth in recent years (Productivity Commission 2020; de Fontenay 2020). In addition, in many countries young adults are taking longer to obtain their license, are more likely to use transit and own fewer cars (Kuhnimhof et al., 2011; Delbosc and Currie 2013). In part, this has been attributed to delays in reaching ‘adulthood’ milestones, such as starting full-time work, buying a home and having children (Grimsrud and El-Geneyidy 2014; Hjorthol 2016; Delbosc and Naznin 2019).

Young adults are at a formative period cementing their future lifestyle aspirations, and in particular, on the cusp of making long-term decisions regarding housing and employment. As such, the impacts of COVID-19 are likely to be more pronounced among this group.

Using the results of 26 qualitative interviews with young Australians, this paper seeks to explore whether the pandemic has compounded or alleviated the delays in reaching ‘adulthood’ milestones. Further, it

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: alexa.delbosc@monash.edu (A. Delbosc).

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seeks to understand how the pandemic may have shaped future lifestyle aspirations and, in turn, how these changes may influence travel behaviour into the future. Although much of this paper explores how the pandemic has impacted the lives of young people beyond travel and transport, the findings provide valuable context for transport decision-makers. It also builds upon a popular framework that characterises the relationship between life events and travel behaviour (Müggenburg et al., 2015), providing guidance for transport researchers looking at the relationships between COVID-19 and travel behaviour.

After firstly discussing relevant literature and the approach to conducting the interviews, this paper outlines how the pandemic has had one of three different effects on the life course of young adults. It then discusses enduring changes to lifestyle aspirations that have been shaped by the lockdown experience. It concludes with some discussion and policy implications of these findings.

2. Literature review

Travel behaviour is shaped by myriad influences, from short-term demand through to long-term mobility decisions, such as housing location and car ownership (Müggenburg et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the spatial and social environment in which young people operate. This is likely to have significant impacts on the short-term travel behaviour of all, and the long-term locational and lifestyle behaviour of some.

2.1. The impact of COVID-19 on short-term travel behaviour

Countries that have enforced stay-at-home orders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have inevitably experienced drastic changes in daily travel patterns. For instance, de Haas et al. (2020), using Dutch panel data, show that the frequency of trips reduced by over half (58%) during the Dutch lockdown period (March/April 2020) compared with the previous survey wave. As a proportion of all trips, walking increased while all other modes decreased. In Australia and Canada, similar reductions in travel were evident during the same period and under comparable stay-at-home orders: trip frequency reduced by approximately 50% in both Australia and British Columbia (Beck and Hensher 2020; Fatmi 2020).

Moreover, attitudes towards private transport have tended to become more favourable while attitudes towards public transport became more negative (Beck and Hensher 2020; de Haas et al., 2020). For instance, an Australian survey conducted in the initial period of the first lockdown in Australia (late March and early April 2020), showed the vast majority of respondents (84%) would feel most comfortable travelling by private car (Beck and Hensher 2020). Similarly, de Haas et al. (2020) found attitudes towards the private car improved while attitudes towards public transport became notably less favourable. Little change was evident in attitudes towards walking and cycling (de Haas et al., 2020).

Stay-at-home orders have had a significant impact on how many people work, shop and socialise. Although it depends on the degree of local travel restrictions, surveys suggest that between a third and a half of workers switched to working from home during the height of the pandemic (Ipsos 2020; Roy Morgan 2020). Travel for ‘non-essentials’ (recreation, socialising and non-grocery shopping) drops significantly during stay-at-home restrictions but tends to rebound quickly when restrictions are eased (Ipsos 2020).

Although the short-term impacts on travel behaviour are now fairly well documented, the long-term impacts are less certain. Moreover, it is unclear how COVID-19, as an unprecedented and sudden event, might interact with cohort and period effects in shaping future travel behaviour. For instance, recent research has shown that US commuters who came of age during the 1970s oil crisis were less likely to commute by car, even decades later. The authors attribute this to the formation of cost-sensitive transport preferences during early adulthood that endure throughout adulthood (Severen and Van Benthem 2019).

However, as restrictions ease and vaccination programs accelerate, lasting impacts (if any) are most likely to be mediated by two broad factors: changes to when and how people transition through life stages and changes to long-term mobility choices.

2.2. Life stage, lifestyle and travel behaviour

A range of research explores the important part that life stage and life transitions play in determining travel behaviour (Müggenburg et al., 2015). In particular, young adulthood is a formative period in which future lifestyle preferences are cemented. Finishing schooling, moving out of the parental home, entering the workforce, buying a house and starting a family are all significant milestones for many young adults. Moreover, for a significant proportion of young adults, travelling overseas (sometimes for years at a time, to live and work) has become a defining part of young adulthood (Delbosc and Nakanishi 2017). In a large-scale qualitative study of teenage Australians’ future life aspirations, over half of respondents’ imagined futures featured travel, typically before ‘settling down’ to start a family (Bulbeck 2005). However, how young people approach these milestones (if at all) varies considerably as young adults have a greater variety of life courses available compared to previous generations (Du Bois-Reymond 1998; Delbosc and Nakanishi 2017).

In recent years, some young adults are making more sustainable travel choices compared with earlier generations (McDonald 2015; Delbosc 2016). This is in part attributed to the ‘delayed’ life course becoming increasingly common, where the transition to ‘adulthood’ milestones associated with increasing car-use, such as starting full-time work and having children, happens later in life, once other activities such as a travel and further education are pursued (Delbosc and Currie 2014; Delbosc and Nakanishi 2017). This delay, in turn, creates fewer constraints on daily travel choices, and, potentially, delays the transition to more car-dependent lifestyles.

The impact of COVID-19 on when and how young adults move through life stages is hard to predict. However, it is quite likely that for young adults (who are less likely to experience the health impacts of the pandemic), the largest impacts on their life stage will be felt through economic recessions that are unfolding in many countries. A breadth of research has examined the economic effects of the Great Recession of 2007–2009 on young adults’ lives. Much of this research, largely undertaken in a US context, shows that young adults were disproportionately impacted by the recession, which in turn, lead to far reaching ramifications. Some researchers found that even before the recession, economic factors were the primary reason for lower driving among American youth (Blumenberg et al., 2016). Fewer employment prospects led to a greater uptake of education (Clark 2011) and more young people returning or continuing to live with their parents (Fry 2013). Moreover, an estimated 2 million fewer births occurred in the US during the five years following the 2007 Great Recession, suggesting that starting or growing a family was postponed or forgone (Sobotka et al., 2011). These findings suggest that COVID-19 may act to delay key life stage transitions, which in turn may delay the transition to car dependence.

2.3. Long-term mobility decisions

Travel behavior is strongly influenced by ‘upstream’, long-term decisions such as where to live and where to work (Salomon and Ben-Akiva 1985). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted working practice and may also be influencing preferences for home location.

Preliminary research suggests that working from home may be an area where enduring changes may occur. In Australia and New Zealand, between a third and half of workers have had to work from home during the pandemic (Ipsos 2020, Morgan, 2020), an unprecedented disruption to workplace location. Several recent studies have demonstrated the
majority of individuals working from home have had positive experiences doing so and would want to work from home more in the future (Beck et al., 2020; Rubin et al., 2020). However, it is premature to determine whether working-from-home rates will remain high in the long term (Beck et al., 2020; Mokhtarian 2020).

Potential long-term impacts on housing preferences are even less clear. The preliminary research on this topic tends to focus on modelling housing prices in response to the economic shock of the pandemic (e.g. Allen-Coghlan and McQuinn 2020; Evans et al., 2020). Other work looks at how the unfolding economic crisis is making housing more precarious and unstable, especially for renters or people living in share housing (Raynor and Panza 2020). For those with the means to purchase a home, housing prices in 2020 and early 2021 continued to rise in many countries, driven largely by low interest rates (The Economist 2020). However, initial reports that people were fleeing apartment and inner-city living for suburban and rural homes have proven to be more nuanced. After dropping in 2020, housing in inner-city areas of many American cities saw a strong rebound in early 2021 (Gopal and Wittenberg 2021); in contrast, apartments in inner areas of Australian cities have seen significant price drops due to the decrease in demand from the international student market (Eddie and Booker 2021). The impact that these price changes will have on young adults is likely to depend on whether they were already in a position to take advantage of historically low interest rates.

2.4. Summary

Short-term changes to travel behaviour as a result of travel restrictions introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic are now increasingly understood. However, what is still unclear is the impact that these changes present for long-term mobility. Understanding the long-term impacts on young adults is particularly important as they are at a formative period of their lives. The housing and employment decisions that they make now are likely to have long-term effect on their mobility. As such, this paper seeks to address this gap by exploring the impact of COVID-19 on young adults’ life plans and their future mobility.

3. Method

3.1. Study location

This study was conducted in Victoria, Australia. Greater Melbourne, Victoria’s capital city and the location where the majority of interviewees were based, comprises a large land area of just under 10,000 square kilometres and, in 2020, a population of 4.9 million. On average, there are 1.7 motor vehicles per household. Reflecting the high rates of car ownership the city has a predominantly sprawling, car-dominated urban environment. Nearly two-thirds of residents (67%) travel to work by car compared with just 16% travelling by public transport and 5% walking or cycling (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

3.2. Interview approach

Interviews were conducted during late July and early August 2020. During this period, Australia recorded the highest number of COVID-19 cases since the first recorded case was reported in January 2020. In Melbourne, Victoria, where most interviewees were located, stay-at-home orders were in place throughout the interview period. Midway through the interview period, mandatory face covering policies were introduced and stay-at-home orders increased in duration and restrictiveness. These changes, and an upward trajectory of reported case numbers, may have compounded a sense of uncertainty towards the future plans among participants.

As stay-at-home orders were in place, interviews were conducted either over the phone or by an online video meeting. Interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to an hour.

3.3. Interview participants

Twenty-six interviewees were recruited from participants of the Millenial Mobility Panel, a three-year study exploring the prospective life plans and travel behaviour of Australian millennials. The survey panel consisted of 885 residents of Melbourne and regional Victoria aged between 21 and 25 when recruitment began in 2017 (aged 24–29 in 2020). Once a year, for three years, they were surveyed about their travel behaviour, life stage and plans for the future. See Delbosc and Farhana (2019) for more information about this survey.

Panel members were contacted and asked to participate in interviews about the impact of COVID-19 on their travel behaviour. We aimed for the participants to be broadly representative of Victorian Millennials in terms of gender, housing and employment status. However, as the interviews progressed we deliberately targeted specific demographics to reduce the chances of missing key themes. These groups included people without a driving license (as their mobility experience is likely to differ from those who can drive), people without a university degree and people who had lost their job.

Interviewees were in a range of housing and employment situations (see Table 1). Most interviewees had moved out of home and were now living independently, with flatmates or a partner. Over half of interviewees were in full-time employment, and generally within in the early stages of the career. The remaining interviewees were either unemployed prior to the pandemic, had lost work as a result of the pandemic and were currently unemployed, or were studying. A minority of interviewees had purchased their first home, but the majority aspired to home ownership, even if this was presently a very distant prospect. Only one respondent had a child, two respondents were planning on having a child in the next few years and the remainder either were not planning on having children or had no firm plans.

3.4. Analysis approach

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis of the interview material was conducted following the process set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). After analysing 23 interviews, initial themes were discussed within the project team. A further 3 interviews were conducted to further develop the preliminary themes identified and to broaden the demographic range of participants. After 26 interviews no new themes were emerging and we considered data

| Characteristic                  | Group     | N  | %  |
|--------------------------------|-----------|----|----|
| Gender                         | Female    | 14 | 54 |
|                                | Male      | 12 | 46 |
| Housing situation              | Living with parents | 6  | 23 |
|                                | Living alone or with flatmates | 12 | 46 |
|                                | Living with partner | 8  | 31 |
| Car ownership                  | Do not own a car | 8  | 31 |
|                                | Own a car  | 18 | 69 |
| Employment status              | Unemployed | 11 | 42 |
|                                | Student   | 2  | 8  |
|                                | Employed  | 13 | 50 |
| Highest education              | Less than Year 12 | 1  | 4  |
|                                | Year 12   | 1  | 4  |
|                                | Trade qualification | 7  | 27 |
|                                | Bachelor’s degree | 12 | 46 |
|                                | Post-graduate degree | 5  | 19 |
| Current location               | Melbourne | 21 | 81 |
|                                | Regional Victoria | 3  | 11 |
|                                | Other state in Australia | 2  | 8  |

Participants in the panel survey were originally recruited from the state of Victoria but some, including these two interviewees, had since moved to another state in Australia.
4. Results

Interview participants focussed extensively on how the pandemic impacted their lives in the short-term. Through the course of coding the discussions, it became evident that these short-term impacts had diverging effects on the life course pathways that young adults were pursuing. This, in turn, is likely to have differing impacts on their long-term mobility choices. The next three sections unpack these three themes.

4.1. Short-term impacts on travel behaviour

Short-term changes in interviewees’ travel behaviour echoed recent findings in COVID-19 travel literature (de Haas et al., 2020). All respondents reported, unsurprisingly, a reduction in the amount that they travelled since the stay-at-home orders were in place. As a proportion of travel modes used, some reported driving, walking and cycling more whilst most also reported marked reductions in using ridesharing and public transport. The vast majority of interviewees anticipated returning to the travel modes that they used prior to the pandemic once travel restrictions eased.

Interviewees described a breadth of activities that had formerly been conducted in-person which had been replaced with online versions. Work and study were largely conducted from home. Furthermore, interviewees engaged in a range of recreation activities online, such as catching up with friends and family and even attending festivals and volunteering. However, with the exception of some work and retail shopping, most interviewees reported they were likely to return to in-person versions of these activities once restrictions ease. This was particularly the case for social activities which nearly all interviewees commented did not replace in-person interactions.

“I don’t really do them much [online social video chat] unless it’s someone’s birthday because I don’t like them … It’s just not quite the same and it also just seems to always go on forever and then I don’t always feel more connected to people after them.” F25_Stable.

Moreover, there was an element that online social activities gradually reduced in frequency as the novelty wore off. As one interviewee describes:

“I think initially during that first wave I was on zoom and all the things that everyone else was getting on … but now I think I mainly only use those sort of chat things for special occasions like if it’s friend’s birthday or something.” F27_Stable.

Furthermore, the experience of stay-at-home orders and restrictions on gatherings with friends and family had a profound impact on all interviewees. The majority of interviewees expressed that they found the experience of lockdown socially isolating, with many reporting deteriorating mental health. This, in turn, appeared to reinforce the importance of in-person social contact.

“It’s just made me feel a lot more alone because, I mean, sure I’ve been living on my own but before the pandemic I could still see my friends whenever I wanted to see them … I went through months without hugging anyone and even that – like even that was something that took me to a really bad place.” M25_Delayed.

Overall, interviewees said that short-term changes to their travel behaviour and activities were unlikely to result in enduring changes to the way they travel. However, subtle changes to housing preferences and employment practices, discussed in the final part of this section, may end up instigating changes to their long-term mobility.

4.2. Changing pathways and adulthood milestones

Study participants were in different stages of life before the pandemic. Some were living with parents or studying; others were living with partners or working full-time; a few had already purchased a home. The COVID-19 pandemic influenced how young adults approached these life stages in different ways, resulting in three distinct categories of disruption: Stable, Delayed or Accelerated. The largest group of respondents (18 interviewees), referred to throughout as the ‘Stable’ typology, did not experience a significant disruption to their life course. The remaining two groups experienced a significant disruption in their lives prompting either an acceleration or delay in their life course.

The unifying characteristic of interviewees in the ‘Stable’ typology was that they did not experience a significant economic disruption as a result of the pandemic. They were not all at the same stage of life: although nearly all members of this group were in full-time employment or education, some were not in the workforce due to mental or physical health. Rather, the defining feature is that their economic circumstance had not changed. As a result, only subtle changes were apparent in the future plans of the Stable typology. These ranged from slight education and career progression delays to, in some cases, financially driven milestones (such as buying a home) being brought forward due to savings accruing more quickly.

In contrast, the remaining eight interviewees experienced a significant disruption in their lives as a result of the pandemic. Most commonly, the disruption was propelled by losing employment and difficulties finding new employment. However, for one interviewee working overseas at the start of the pandemic, the disruption was prompted by returning to Australia in response to the government’s requests for citizens to return. Overall, the effect of this disruption was either to accelerate or delay their movement through life stage milestones. Although these two ‘groups’ were quite small (4 participants each), they shared a range of characteristics that warrant discussion.

The common characteristics among those interviewees in the ‘Accelerated’ group (4 respondents) was shifting their focus from living and working overseas to starting a career or further studies in Australia. This, in turn, created new long-term commitments in Australia that meant plans to live and work overseas became increasingly unlikely.

In contrast, among the ‘Delayed’ group (4 respondents), the impact of losing employment and difficulty regaining employment prompted significant delays in their life course. Most commonly, delays were anticipated in the career and home ownership steps.

One’s life path includes changes to one’s career, travel, housing and family milestones. The next sections discuss how (if at all) the pandemic has changed these milestones among the Stable, Accelerated and Delayed typologies.

4.2.1. Career

Stable interviewees, by definition, did not experience a significant disruption and therefore their career milestones were largely unaffected (at least in the short term). However, they frequently reported concerns about anticipated career delays due to an increasingly uncertain labour market. This made several interviewees more reluctant to change jobs and, as another interviewee expressed, meant that there were fewer internal opportunities for progression:

“We have our promotion cycles and I think that at the moment because the industry is incredibly vulnerable and also uncertain. I think that may not be many promotions this year, although you may be performing quite well, so I think that maybe will come into effect and maybe in two or three years’ time you’ll have a lot of people fighting over positions because there’s a lag as well coming through.” M25_Stable.

Of Stable respondents in education, the majority were studying a professional qualification part-time alongside full-time employment while three were studying full-time and working part-time. Several interviewees reported delays to their study due to in-person components,
such as placements and practical coursework, being postponed. “What was supposed to be a six-month course at [university] and that’s just been prolonged again and again because of delays in teaching and delays in being able to, I guess, offer examinations for things so that’s actually still ongoing” F28_Stable.

Among the ‘Accelerated’ respondents, however, study plans were typically brought forward. For instance, two respondents had planned on taking extended overseas trips prior to commencing postgraduate studies. International travel bans have brought forward these study plans by, in one case, several years. “Everything that was future has become current if that makes sense. So, you know, the plan to move [back] to Australia and commence study and everything that was supposed to happen next year and it is happening now instead.” M26_Accelerated.

In contrast to the ‘Stable’ and ‘Accelerated’ interviewees, interviewees in the ‘Delayed’ segment experienced pronounced career disruptions. For one interviewee, a job loss immediately prior to the pandemic was compounded by changing expectations regarding necessary skills to undertake the role, as a result of the pandemic. “I lost my job in January … The pandemic has really just made it hard to get any job because I’m a teacher. So once everything was online, nobody was hiring … Especially because now a lot of interview questions are around distance education and online learning and because I haven’t had a job, I don’t have any experience doing that.” F27_Delayed.

One interviewee reported delays to not only entering the workforce but to returning to study. “I know whatever I want to do, I have to go back to study and the couple of things I have looked at is there is no online version, so it is going to have to wait until things reopen … I’m definitely nowhere near where I thought I would be 2 years ago, 5 years ago, 10 years ago.” F25_Delayed.

Moreover, for one interviewee, difficulty finding employment during the pandemic not only prompted career delays but also goals to attain financial independence from their parents. “The main reason that I want to get full-time work is to be able to pay all [my rent and bills], so that my parents don’t have to anymore.” M25_Delayed.

Overall, most interviewees (regardless of which segment they were in) expressed prioritizing stable and secure employment more than they had done previously. Several interviewees expressed adjusting their career aspirations towards industries perceived as more secure: “I’m no longer thinking about academia as a likely career. It’s more just something I’m interested in whereas I’d previously thought that was something I definitely wanted to do and would try and do.” F24_Accelerated.

4.2.2. International travel

International travel (both for recreation and for work) is an important milestone for many young Australians. The restrictions on international travel was experienced differently between the three segments of respondents. For those in the ‘Stable’ group who had firm plans to live and work overseas, they continued to aspire towards these goals, albeit at a later date than originally planned. The timing was highly dependent on the feasibility of overseas travel resuming. As one interviewee describes: “The original plan was to be the latter half of this year [2020] or early next year. Clearly that’s not going to really happen, well, there is always opportunity, but, it doesn’t look likely now. But yeah definitely still in the short to medium term future hopefully.” M25_Stable.

Stable respondents with less concrete aspirations to live and work overseas appeared less certain that these plans would now eventuate. Reasons that interviewees gave for no longer aspiring to live and work overseas were generally due to the perception that this was now a riskier prospect. As one interviewee describes: “I don’t want to move and have to deal with, let’s say, visa issues and stuff like that when there’s uncertainty about a job or an ability to get government support, so staying in Australia would be better for just having that security, that if something were to happen I’d be supported.” F25_Stable.

These considered responses are in stark contrast with those in the disrupted category, whose plans to live and work overseas were completely forgone. Among disrupted interviewees, a desire for stable employment and housing became more pressing and, as one interviewee described, there was less willingness to lose their present housing and employment stability: “At the moment my partner has a good job and our house is great and all those kinds of things so if we were to leave and had to come back, they’re things like we’d have a loss of stability there and I don’t think prior to the pandemic that would have bothered of us so much because the likelihood of us then being able to find another house, another job that would be good, the chances of that would be much higher.” F27_Delayed.

Similarly, among the ‘accelerated’ group, travel was forgone rather than postponed. This was generally due a shift in focus from living and working overseas to starting a career or further studies in Australia. This, in turn, created new long-term commitments in Australia that meant plans to live and work overseas became increasingly unlikely: “I would still really like to do the travel but I think because it’s so hard to see when it could happen … I have full time work coming up again next year, the plan was always to [travel] whilst I still wasn’t tied down to a full time job … It’s actually pretty disappointing.” F27_Accelerated.

4.2.3. Housing

While the pandemic prompted slight delays in career and travel milestones, for many interviewees in the Stable group the goal of home ownership actually became more attainable. As one interviewee describes: “I guess it’s mainly helped a bit with savings at the moment not really going out and I’ve been saving up probably a bit more. So, I think hoping to hopefully buy a house in maybe the next two years.” F27_Stable.

The prospect of home ownership also became a more likely prospect among one of the Accelerated interviewees as travel plans were forgone. This prompted plans for home ownership to be brought forward as they planned to live in Australia for the foreseeable future: “[Buying a home is] probably something I’m considering more now than I have been, because of not being able to travel. So, the thought I’m going to be stuck here.” F29_Accelerated.

In contrast, all interviewees in the Delayed group reported delays to housing aspirations. The lack of a stable income impacted not only the ability to save for a home but, as savings were accessed to support an unexpected period of unemployment, it prompted home ownership to become a more distant prospect for several interviewees. “So last year we thought we would be in a position to, around this time this year, actually put a down-payment on a house. That was also under the assumption that, where I was working last year, was going to be ongoing. And then it turned out that it wouldn’t be and I lost my job … now we just have, we have no idea.” F27_Delayed.

Furthermore, for several interviewees, the experience of losing employment in an uncertain economic environment appeared to have long-term impacts on moving out of their parents’ home. For instance, one interviewee had been just about to move out of their parent’s home when they lost their job: “It was like I was moving out. That was going to be very soon and now that is not even a thought now … and that was something that I really, really wanted to do.” F25_Delayed.

Finally, several interviewees reported mixed experiences of living with flatmates or living alone during a pandemic. Several interviewees described feeling fortunate to be living with others rather than alone during lockdown, which was perceived as an even more socially isolating experience. However, for a minority of interviewees frictions
and unease between housemates came to the fore prompting several interviewees to move. As one interviewee, who moved in with her partner during the pandemic, describes:

“I [now] don’t have to worry about living with housemates who like, while they were great people and very trustworthy, you don’t know where they’ve been or who they’re seeing and that kind of thing. It would kind of worry you during a pandemic … I probably just get a bit impatient with people so being locked down with my housemates even though they’re lovely, I just started getting a little bit stir crazy.” M28_Stable.

4.2.4. Starting a family

The pandemic had a significant impact on finding and living with a partner. Among those who were single before the pandemic, stay-at-home orders have significantly delayed that process.

“Well, I was single before COVID and that’s certainly not changing and with COVID going on it’s certainly doesn’t look like it will be changing any time soon so yeah that’s particularly frustrating, when you are single and you know, you can’t really do much on that.” M28_Stable.

In contrast, several interviewees in a relationship but not living with their partner prior to the pandemic, brought forward plans to move in together. Typically, moving in together was prompted by the need to minimise travel while stay-at-home orders were in place but this was generally viewed as a permanent change in their living arrangements.

“During the restrictions that have come in … my partner has moved in to stay with us, so we haven’t had the need to travel in between our houses” F26_Stable.

Among several interviewees there was a recognition that sharing the extraordinary lockdown experience had cemented their relationship more quickly than would otherwise have occurred.

“Even when you move in with someone you still have your time apart, whereas now you’re sort of like compacted together, and it’s like you better learn to really be liking them or you know, if you have any problems or little quirks with each other, you’ve really got to be vocal about it and talking about it.” M23_Stable.

Although interviewees were aged between 24 and 29, for most the prospect of starting a family was either not envisioned or was a very distant prospect. Among interviewees who were considering starting a family, most felt this would occur in a sequential order only after secure employment (stable career) and housing (home ownership) had been achieved. A delay in either the career or home ownership step, in turn, may prompt delays to starting a family. As one interviewee describes:

“Financial factors would affect that [getting married and having a child] so if that’s something that was on the cards in the future, it’s probably even more in the future now and even more delayed” F27_Delayed.

4.2.5. Summary of life stage impacts

Overall, the extent that life plans were altered as a result of the pandemic typically depended on whether the respondent economic livelihoods were disrupted. So-called ‘Stable’ respondents, whose employment was unaffected by the pandemic, showed subtle adjustments to planning future stages in life. Among interviewees, whose plans to live and work overseas were indefinitely postponed, showed more pronounced changes to their future life courses. Among the ‘Disrupted’ respondents, the changes suggest either an acceleration of reaching some milestones, as careers are prioritised over plans for overseas travel or, in the case of some respondents, delays are exacerbated due to growing financial insecurity.

Table 2 summarises the impact of the pandemic on interviewees’ attainment of milestones by each typology.

4.3. Long-term mobility changes

All respondents, regardless of whether they had experienced a disruption to their employment or life plans, were affected by stay-at-home orders. The experience of spending extended periods at home was shown to shape participants’ future aspirations for housing and employment. This, along with subtle shifts in attitudes towards private transport, are likely to impact long-term mobility decisions such as housing location and car ownership.

4.3.1. Car ownership

Attitudes towards car ownership tended to elicit differing responses depending on the interviewee’s car ownership status. Overall, the response to the pandemic appears to have confirmed, rather than altered, interviewees’ decisions to own (or not own) a car. As one interviewee describes, in response to a question about whether the pandemic had changed his preferences about owning a car:

“No, not really. I have [found more need for a car] but still not quite enough to justify the expense of buying a car. But that’s always been the thing that, sure a car would be useful but not useful enough to justify the expense.” M27_Stable.

Among several interviewees, perceptions of car ownership had become even more positive as a result of public health campaigns discouraging public transport use (to allow those who required to use this mode sufficient space to physically distance). This was most apparent among those who recently purchased a car, as they could more readily draw on their previous experience without a car. As one interviewee who recently became a car owner for the first time describes:

“I’m definitely happy to have a car because I realise that some people are in a bit of a pickle now that transport is a bit – all the changes have meant owning a car is very useful in Melbourne whereas previously you could very easily get around without needing one” F24_Accelerated.

In contrast, interviewees carless by choice typically expressed a level of validation about their decision not to own a car. As one interviewee describes:

“… when you are on restrictions and you can’t really travel much, having a car just sitting in the driveway or the street just wouldn’t make sense to me” F25_Stable.

Although the pandemic generally reinforced beliefs about car ownership, for some interviewees changes to work practices prompted them to reconsider the importance of their car. For instance, one car commuter who anticipated that remote working would become a permanent feature of his employment, was prompted to reflect on selling a car given the lack of use.

“We’re considering dropping to one car between me and my girlfriend, because we don’t really need to own two cars at the moment because, you know, she works in a hospital so she needs to drive there but I work from home so I don’t need to drive anywhere.” M26_Stable.

1 Although population-level data on voluntary vs involuntary carlessness is not available for Melbourne, in these interviews only one respondent was involuntarily carless.
Overall these discussions suggest that the pandemic largely reinforced existing beliefs about car ownership. However, in the long term the use of the car may shift in response to changes in home or work locations.

4.3.2. Housing preferences and employment practices

Overall, those in the Stable and Accelerated groups were more likely to have experienced remote working during the pandemic and be approaching a financial position in which to contemplate purchasing their first home. In contrast, for those in the Delayed group home ownership had become a considerably more distant prospect. Further, their focus tended to be on the more immediate concern of obtaining employment rather than the ways in which their future employment would be different to pre-pandemic. As such, much of the material in this section draws on interviewees in the Stable group.

Among those in the Stable group, changes in long-term mobility are likely to be propelled by subtle changes in housing preferences and employment practices. Among interviewees yet to purchase their first home, the experience of spending extended periods at home shaped their preferences for the type of home they would buy in the future. Several interviewees reported a shift to prioritizing space over location and buying a home with some ‘greenery’ and a ‘back yard’. As one interviewee describes:

“It’s certainly made me rethink any sort of thoughts I would have had about purchasing an apartment and I guess a house and land or townhouse property, is certainly looking more appealing” I2_Stable.

For a minority of interviewees, it prompted an aspiration for a ‘tree change’ to a more rural area. The appeal of a rural area was attributed to the scenic outlook, more affordable housing, but also, given the rapid pace in which pandemic events unfolded and growing uncertainty, greater space to become self-sufficient:

“I would really like to have a bit of land to grow a bit of food. If not just for my own peace of mind. But I mean that’s something I’ve always considered, but it’s just made it a bit more to the forefront of what I would choose now.” I3_Stable.

The shift in housing preferences for some interviewees was linked to the anticipated widespread adoption of remote working practices. Early literature examining the impact of COVID-19 on remote working practices suggests that for most people, where remote working is an option, a combination of home-based and office-based work is preferred (Rubin et al., 2020). This sentiment was largely shared by the interviewees who reported a range of positive and negative experiences of remote working. As one interviewee describes:

“Definitely no commute time is extremely nice. Then being able to fit life admin around it like being able to check on laundry and like eat whatever I want out of my own kitchen, just like home comforts … I definitely miss being physically with other people working on something together.” I13_Accelerated.

Many interviewees anticipated a combination of home and office working becoming the norm, or at least something they would request from their employers. This, in turn, prompted some interviewees to consider moving further away from the city centre due to the prospect of commuting less frequently.

However, some interviewees still valued the benefits that inner-city living provided, such as proximity to work and social activities, at least in the short term:

“I think my preference while I’m in my twenties would be to still stay in the inner suburbs rather than moving let’s say an hour or 40 min out … [It’s] just a social thing more than anything.” I26_Accelerated.

Takenn together, these discussions suggest that for young people who are able to work from home, purchasing a home with more space (but farther from their workplace) may be more appealing in the long term. However, these attitudes are by no means universal.

5. Discussion

A number of conceptual models of travel behaviour explore the relationship between long-term processes (lifestyle, life events, home location decisions) and short-term travel behaviour (see for examples Salomon and Ben-Akiva 1983; Van Acker et al., 2010; Müggenburg et al., 2015). Fig. 1 draws upon the framework of Müggenburg et al. (2015) to illustrate how COVID-19 is potentially influencing travel behaviour through its impact on life events, long-term mobility decisions and short-term travel behaviour. As this framework has emerged from discussions with young adults, Fig. 1 emphasises life events relevant to this age group.

Both from these interviews and other survey research, the direct impact of COVID-19 on day-to-day mobility is considerable. However, those impacts are likely to be short term; longer-term impacts are mediated by the potential influence of the pandemic on life events, long-term mobility decisions and, potentially, long-term processes affecting travel behaviour, such as new norms regarding remote working.

The interviews suggest that in the short-term COVID-19 has a weak and uncertain impact on long-term mobility choices like where to live/work and whether to own a car. For most interviewees, home and work locations became ‘locked in’ place because of a strong desire for stability (although a few participants moved to more stable living locations at the start of the pandemic). In the longer term, some interviewees expressed a preference for larger and more rural housing, though these wishes were not universal and whether they translate into reality is still uncertain. Although it was not expressed in these interviews, other research suggests that the recession caused by the pandemic is already increasing housing stress and instability, especially among renters (Raynor and Panza 2020); people under housing stress are unlikely to be able to act on a desire for spacious housing.

Rather, it appears that the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 may be driven more strongly by uneven changes to life stage transitions. The majority of interviewees were relatively stable with few major disruptions to their lives; their progression through life stages was largely untouched and long-term changes to their mobility choices are likely to be driven by subtle shifts in preferences for home location, or for working from home, that play out in the future.

In contrast, other interviewees faced a major disruption to their life course trajectory, which charted a different pathway to mobility changes. For those who were ‘Accelerated’ through their life plans (generally because plans to live overseas were cancelled), life milestones such as starting a career or purchasing a home have been moved forward. Based on past research about the impact of life stage on travel behaviour (Kitamura 2009; Busch-Geertsema and Lanzendorf 2017), this is likely to accelerate car dependence, especially if home and work locations are chosen while the pandemic is still active.

Conversely, for those who have lost work because of the pandemic, this financial disruption is likely to delay life milestones and restrict choices of home and work locations. The delay in life milestones, in turn, may postpone the shift towards car dependence. Moreover, if income is unstable or uncertain, it is difficult to act on a desire for a larger home; when unemployment is high there are fewer job locations to choose from. And many of the jobs that have been lost cannot (such as retail and hospitality) be conducted from home, reinforcing the need for jobs and housing to be co-located.

6. Policy implications and future research directions

As qualitative research, this study has its limitations. Recruiting from an existing survey panel meant that the study could be conducted quickly, targeting young adults who are likely to feel considerable impacts of the pandemic due to their stage in life. However, this also means that it may disproportionately recruit people in a more stable life situation, compared to young adults who had ceased participating in the panel survey. For this reason, the size of the response typologies should
not be used to represent the proportion of the population in Stable, Delayed or Accelerated life segments.

Furthermore, the long-term travel behaviour impacts discussed in this paper should be considered informed speculation. There is still much that is unknown about the impact of COVID-19: how often cities will face additional virus ‘waves’ and lock-downs, how extensive international travel restrictions will be, the depth of economic recession and how long until a viable vaccination is developed and distributed. But at this stage it appears safe to say that long-term processes such as housing decisions and life stage transitions will be disrupted, at least for some portion of young adults. This suggests several policy implications and areas for future research, discussed below.

6.1. COVID-19 as an opportunity for travel behaviour change

In a ‘business as usual’ situation, the dominant mobility regime is strongly entrenched by socio-technical regimes – technology, policy, governance and habits (Geels 2012). An extensive body of work has demonstrated the capacity for travel behaviour change in response to significant disruptions (Marsden et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is a dramatic example of a shifting landscape that disrupts the dominant regime and opens a potential window for change. This presents an unprecedented opportunity to encourage the widespread adoption of more sustainable travel choices in a post-pandemic world. However, the pandemic has already resulted in more favourable attitudes to private transport (Beck and Hensher 2020; de Haas et al., 2020). If significant changes to policies and infrastructure do not occur, it is likely that the dominant regime of car dependence will re-crystallize as the pandemic eases.

In this study, the Delayed group faced a significant economic disruption (generally a job loss) which constrains their ability to choose where to live and how to travel. For this group, low-rent housing close to job opportunities will not only help them economically but can also support sustainable transport choices. Many cities are already transforming their transport systems in ways that will benefit these young adults. Successful examples including investments in active transport infrastructure, including reallocating road space to walking and cycling (Barbarossa 2020; De Vos 2020) and reducing speed limits to favour ‘slower’ modes (Katrakazas et al., 2020). Furthermore, ensuring that public transit is frequent and reliable (to reduce overcrowding) can make it a safe and viable option for those who cannot afford a car (De Vos 2020).

In contrast, young adults in the Stable and the Accelerated groups are the most at-risk of quickly returning to car dependence. Prior to the pandemic, the Accelerated group may have delayed this transition because of plans to live and work overseas; instead they are more rapidly moving to a stable career and home ownership in Australia. Stable and Accelerated respondents were also more likely to be interested in moving farther from work in order to enjoy a larger home and outdoor space.

If urban living is to remain attractive to these young adults, long-term policies should aim to better accommodate the needs of households as they move through life stage milestones, purchase homes and start families. For instance, increasing the supply of family-friendly housing, outdoor space, quality schools and childcare in urban areas may help curb a potential shift to the suburbs (McLaren 2016).

Furthermore, encouraging businesses to support work-from-home practices after the pandemic may help reduce travel demand. Although these policies are likely to reduce peak-hour travel demand, there is still a great deal of disagreement in the literature over whether the reduction in commute travel is compensated for by increases in local travel (see for example Zhu 2012; Shabanpour et al., 2018; Hook et al., 2020). And if these work-from-home policies encourage more people to relocate to more distant suburban homes, this has flow-on effects in how planners manage increased local travel demand in more auto-oriented housing locations. Recent research on the travel behavior of American millennials found that the majority of young adults in suburban areas were heavily reliant on driving for their daily travel (Ralph et al., 2016).

COVID-19 has significantly disrupted the transport landscape in the short-term. Although much is still uncertain, times of change also provide the opportunity for cities to re-think the future of their transport systems.

Fig. 1. Potential impacts of COVID-19 on travel behaviour processes.
Source: adapted from (Müggenburg et al., 2015)
6.2. Future research areas

This study opens up possibilities for future research using quantitative methods. It identified that not all young adults are facing the same impacts from COVID-19. Future survey research might measure the extent to which COVID-19 has impacted different areas of young adults’ lives. In turn, this information could be used to estimate future demands on the transport system or design policies to support young adults facing disproportionate impacts.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alexa Delbosc: Research conception, research design, data collection, interpretation, paper writing. Laura McCarthy: Research design, recruitment, data collection, interpretation, paper writing.

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