

New Zealand Citizens in Australia: Covid-19 Supplement

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is having unprecedented impacts on global migration patterns. Around the world borders have been closed and travel has either been suspended or severely restricted with quarantine requirements in place in many countries. This short research supplement reports on the situation of a group of New Zealand citizens in Australia, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and their plans for the future. The findings presented here follow research on *New Zealanders in Australia: migration, life and aspirations* (Collins and Nandedkar 2020) that explored the lives of recent New Zealand migrants living in Brisbane/ Gold Coast, Perth and Sydney. The supplement begins with an overview of trans-Tasman migration flows during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic and an outline of methods for data collection. The discussion of findings addresses the employment and financial impacts of Covid-19 on New Zealanders in Australia, access to government and other social support, and plans for the future.

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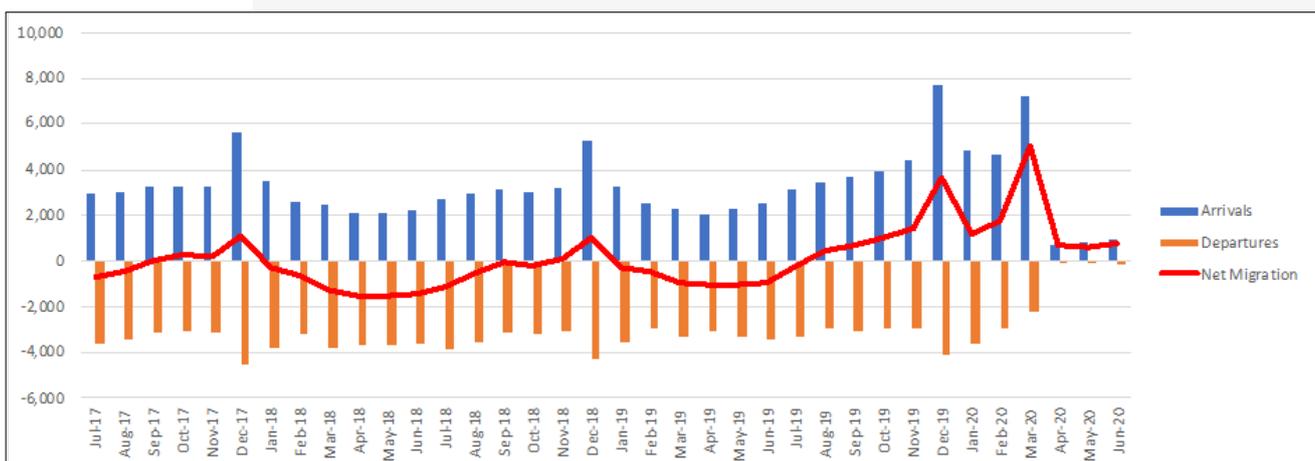
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Covid-19 and trans-Tasman Migration Flows

The Covid-19 global pandemic and the responses of governments around the world have had a notable impact on international migration (Gamlen 2020). In New Zealand, the impact of the pandemic and restrictions imposed in government responses have been apparent in particular since March 2020 when the growing global crisis and the closure of the New Zealand border led to the return of a substantial number of New Zealand citizens and radical declines in departures.

Figure 1 shows the monthly figures for migration arrivals, departures and net migration in New Zealand of New Zealand citizens between July 2017 and June 2020. Echoing longer term patterns (Collins and Nandedkar 2020), these migration flows are relatively cyclical and tend towards net migration losses, with monthly net migration gains in each December, coinciding with the holiday period in New Zealand.

Figure 1: Estimated migration by direction (arrivals, departures and net migration) of New Zealand citizens, 12/16 month rule (monthly July 2017 – June 2020). Source: Statistics New Zealand, Infoshare.

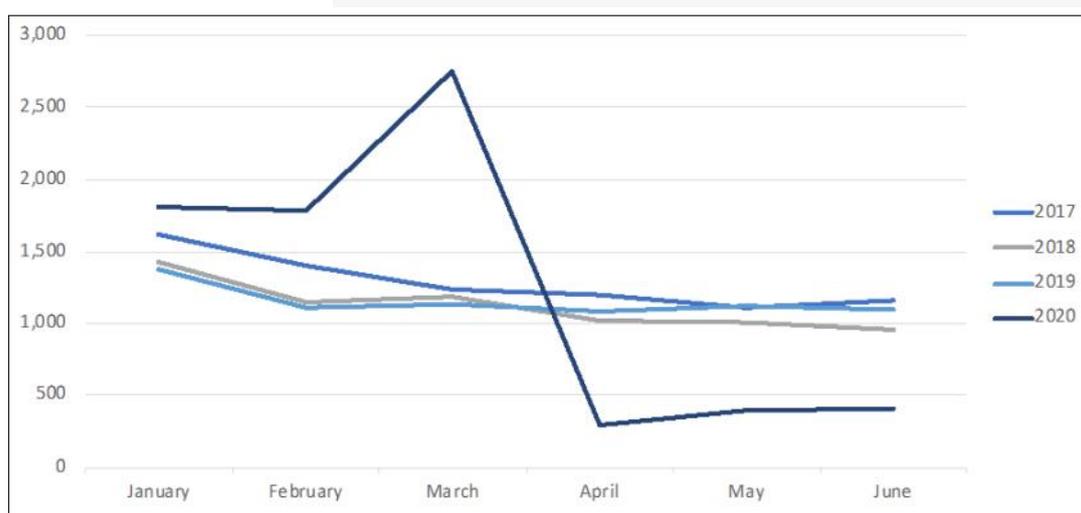


Covid-19 and trans-Tasman migration flows— continued

Prior to the pandemic taking effect, there was a noted increase in arrivals since April 2019 and net migration since August 2019. The first few months of 2020 reveal a very distinct pattern with arrivals growing to 7,202 in March 2020 and departures declining to 2,207 in the same month, a net gain of 4,996.

These are record figures for March months by some margin. Indeed, between 2001 and 2019, the highest level of arrivals for New Zealand citizens in a March month was 2,746 (March 2016), the lowest level of departures was 3,200 (March 2017) and there were no net migration gains in March months during the last two decades (the lowest loss was 651 in March 2016). Between April and June, arrivals plummeted to 741, 767 and 980 respectively, while departures decreased even more to 68, 140 and 195. Migration effectively came to a halt aside from a small number of New Zealand citizens returning and going through the government’s managed isolation process.

Figure 2: Estimated migrant arrivals of New Zealand citizens from Australia, 12/16 month rule (monthly, January-June 2017-2020). Source: Statistics New Zealand, Infoshare.



These patterns are also reflected in changes in arrivals from Australia. Figure 2 shows arrivals of New Zealand citizens for the January to June months 2017-2020. As the figure illustrates, the monthly patterns are relatively similar for 2017-2019, New Zealand citizen arrivals tend to decline from around 1,500 in January to around 1,100 by June. In 2020, arrivals were already higher in January (1,807) and February (1,788) but grew to 2,754 in March before declining rapidly to 300, 400 and 410 in April, May and June following border restrictions coming into force.

Method

This research supplement draws on results from an online questionnaire survey carried out between between the 24th of April and the 17th of May 2020. The respondents had all participated in a semi-structured interview in 2019 as part of the initial research project on the migration and experiences of New Zealanders in Australia. Each of the 61 participants in the original research were sent an email inviting them to complete the survey, with one follow-up reminder one week prior to the survey closing. In total 37 people responded to the survey (response rate of 60.7%) and 35 completed all questions (completion rate of 94.6%). The survey included 13 structured questions and one free text question for participants to provide comments on their “experience in Australia since the Covid-19 pandemic and government response” – 30 respondents provided text, including a few detailed accounts of personal situations. The presentation of findings in this research supplement is purely descriptive and based on a summary of responses and the presentation of examples from free text answers.



Employment and Financial Impacts of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has had wide ranging impacts on social and economic wellbeing in Australia, as it has in other countries. The Melbourne Institute's *Taking the Pulse of the Nation Tracker*¹, for example, suggests that between 20% and 30% of Australians have experienced financial stress, and between 40% and 50% reported feeling depressed or anxious at some stage. New Zealand citizens in Australia are likely to be affected in similar ways, in relation to employment, financial circumstances and their sense of security and safety.

Figure 3: Survey responses: "Has the COVID-19 pandemic and/or government response affected your employment in any way?" (multiple responses possible)

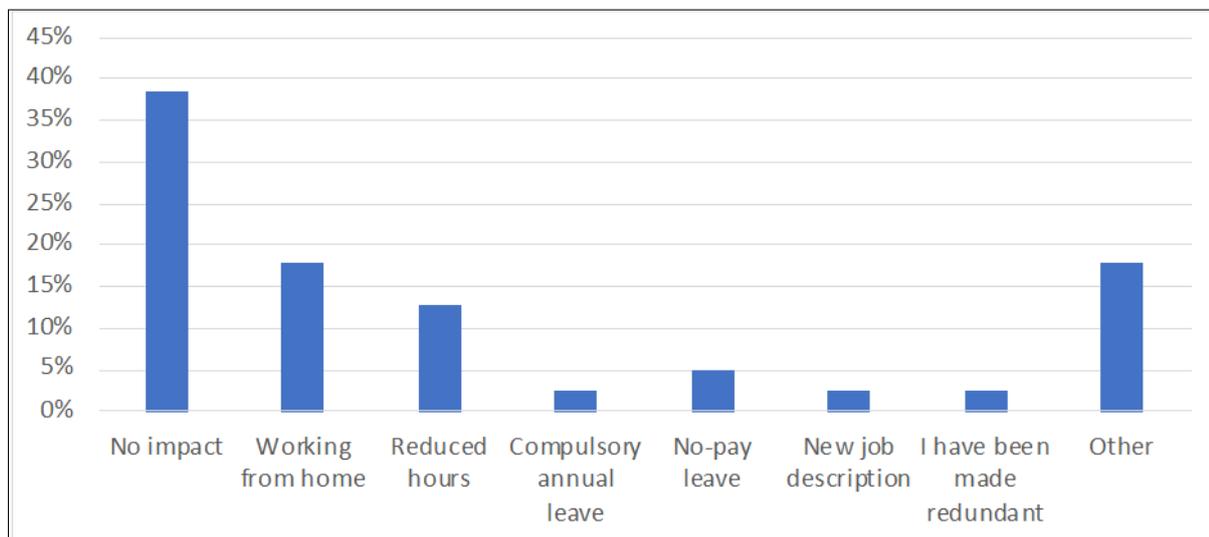
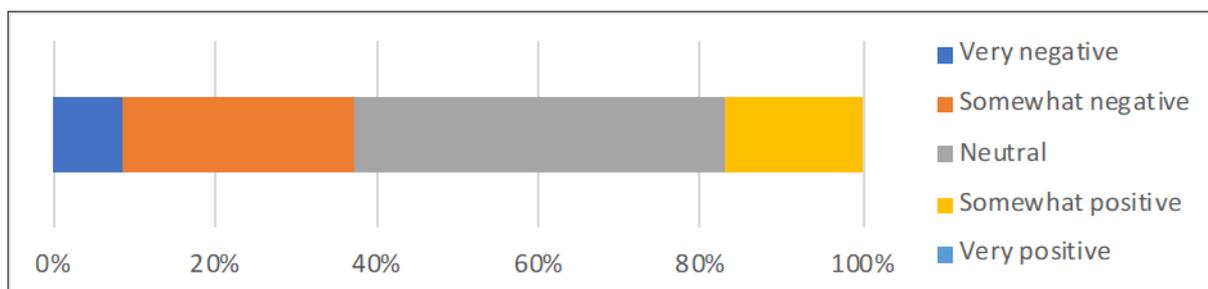


Figure 3 shows information in response to the question "Has the COVID-19 pandemic and/or government response affected your employment in any way?" For 38% of respondents the pandemic had had no impact on their employment; another 18% indicated the main impact of the pandemic was that they were working from home some or all of the time. Amongst others, 23% reported negative impacts on their job, most often reductions in the number of hours available (13%), being on compulsory annual or no-pay leave (8%), and in one case being made redundant. Respondents also described other challenges, including joblessness or work limitations due to recently changing or seeking new employment and reduced turnover in their business.

Figure 4: Survey responses: "To what extent has the COVID-19 crisis affected your financial situation?"



¹ This tracker showcases the full suite of information we have available from the beginning of the 'Taking the Pulse of the Nation' survey, highlighting how Australians are adapting to various changes in Federal and State government policies as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves." Available online at: <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/data/covid-19-tracker>



Employment and Financial Impacts of Covid-19— continued

The impacts of Covid on people’s finances are also mixed (see Figure 4). The majority either experienced no notable impacts on their finances (46%) or suggested they had experienced somewhat positive impacts (17%). Positive impacts came from having additional work hours, more overtime or simply being able to save more money due to spending time at home. Respondents, for example, made comments such as the following: “COVID-19 has not really impacted me”, “I feel safe and financially secure” and “my life has not really changed”.

In contrast, 29% of respondents reported somewhat negative impacts on their financial situation and 9% very negative. These impacts related closely to employment changes – the majority of respondents who reported negative impacts on their finances had also reported being made redundant, losing hours or going on compulsory annual leave. Respondent comments provided further detail. One participant who was employed in the tourism sector was particularly negatively impacted:

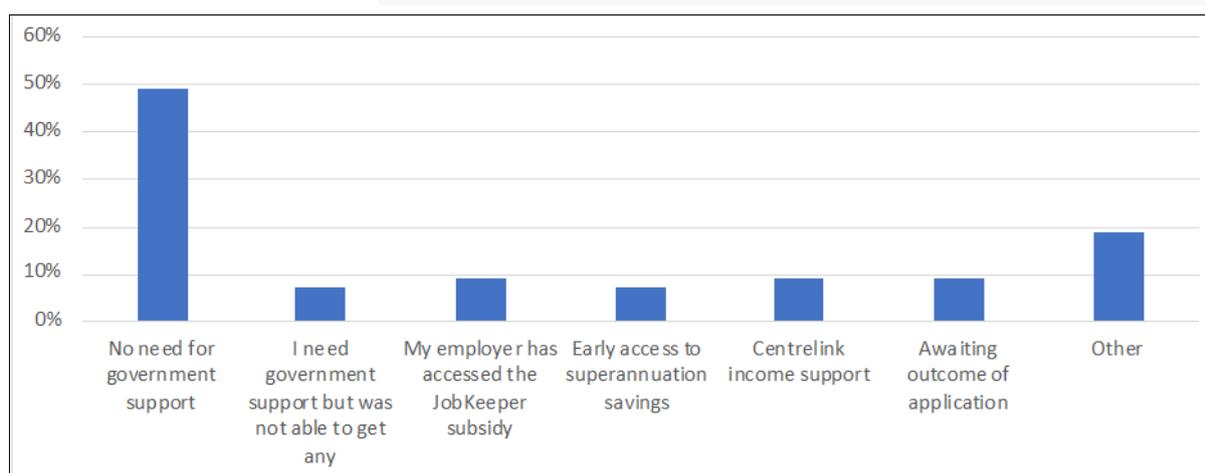
“My experience in Australia since COVID 19 has been hard. [...] I have been asked by my employer to take annual leave or unpaid leave. The longer this goes on the more I will be required to take [...], meaning if I leave and find new employment I will owe them money. [...] I was in the process of looking for new employment, however now this will be put on hold. With the amount of people out of work it will make it harder to find a new job once this is all over.”

Other participants discussed feeling vulnerable in their workplaces due to being employed as frontline essential workers. A retail worker described how “customers have been flocking to [my] work as they ‘are bored at home’, [which] definitely makes me feel vulnerable having to work”. A nurse responded that they were “somewhat worried about exposure and some negative comments from members of the public” and a teacher similarly noted concerns about the reopening of schools and the potential exposure to Covid-19.

Accessing Support

The availability of Australian government social security support to New Zealand citizens has been a topic of considerable media attention in recent years and featured prominently in the original research that this supplement builds on (Collins and Nandedkar 2020). Since 2001 any New Zealand citizens who had not gained permanent residence or citizenship in Australia have been ineligible for access to welfare support payments (McMillan 2017). In the initial Covid-19 response, this pattern continued but on 30th March the Australian government announced a revised wage subsidy wherein New Zealanders were eligible for JobKeeper payments designed to help businesses retain their employees. New Zealanders were also permitted to access their superannuation savings and became eligible for child care support and temporary unemployment support if they had been in Australia for more than ten years.

Figure 5: Survey responses: “Have you accessed Australian government support?” (multiple responses possible)



Accessing Support— continued

Figure 5 shows responses to a question about whether respondents had “accessed Australian government support”. Nearly half (49%) indicated there was no need for government support. Amongst those who did need support, 7% reported being ineligible, 9% had accessed the JobKeeper subsidy, 9% were awaiting an application outcome, and 9% had received other kinds of support through Centrelink (Australia’s social security agency) such as a child care support. Amongst respondents who owned businesses, one out of four had accessed JobKeeper for themselves and their staff. One person also reported accessing community support during the lock down for “food or other essential household items”. Access to government support, or the ability to withdraw superannuation, made a substantial difference to respondents, and for some appeared to come as a surprise given the restrictions New Zealand citizens have experienced in recent years:

“I was initially very concerned about my vulnerability, but being able to access JobKeeper has been a great relief as I would not be eligible for any other government support.”

“I appreciate childcare support for everyone (we weren’t qualified before the pandemic).”

“At first there was a lot fear due to be long unsupported. But once we realised that there are a few options available for us, job keeper, 6 months job seeker, access to super.”

Figure 6: Have you received any financial support from whānau/family or friends since the COVID-19 crisis started

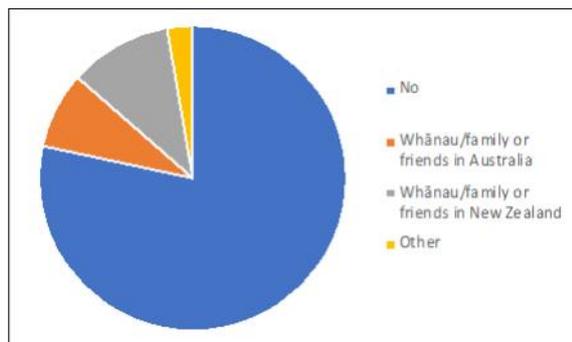
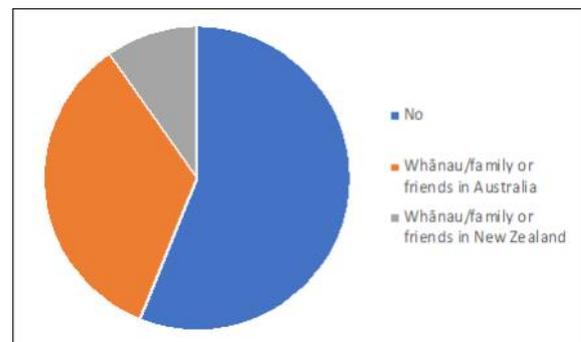


Figure 7: Have you provided any financial support from whānau/family or friends since the COVID-19 crisis started?



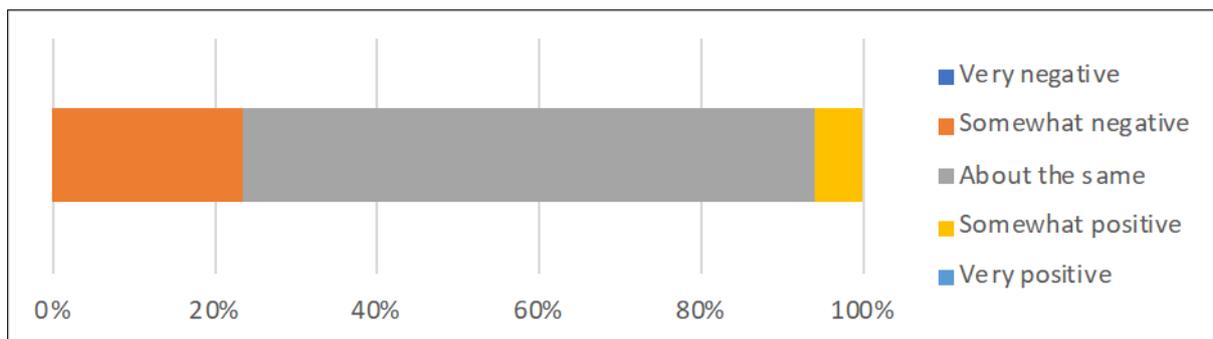
Respondents were also asked about personal support they had received or sent during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Figures 6 and 7). Amongst the 22% who received support, they did so from whānau/family and friends in both Australia and New Zealand. Other sources of support included prior loans from family (before Covid-19 emerged but that made a big difference during the pandemic) and accessing children’s savings funds to manage regular costs. A greater number of respondents reported sending financial support (44%), including to whānau/family in Australia (22%), friends in Australia (10%) and whānau/family in New Zealand (10%). Clearly supporting others was important for a number of the respondents; one highlighted in their comments that “there are many in the community, here and back home in NZ, where lockdowns have put a lot of my whānau personally in a bad situation and where I have felt obliged to assist”. These findings reiterate points made in the original research report about the significance of family and friendship networks to instigating and supporting New Zealanders’ migration to Australia.



Future in Australia

The uncertainties created by the Covid-19 pandemic and the disruption to employment in particular has the potential to influence people’s future plans, especially in relation to migration. Indeed, as noted above, there has been a substantial return of New Zealand citizens since the beginning of 2020 and there are currently very few people departing. In Australia, there has also been some negative political responses to the presence of migrants including New Zealanders. Shortly after announcing the extension of the JobKeeper scheme to include employed New Zealand citizens, the government made more general announcements about the need for temporary visa holders including New Zealanders to return home if they couldn’t support themselves: “For these individuals it’s time to go home, and they should make arrangements as quickly as possible” (Coleman 2020).

Figure 8: Survey responses: “To what extent has the COVID-19 crisis affected how you feel about living in Australia?”



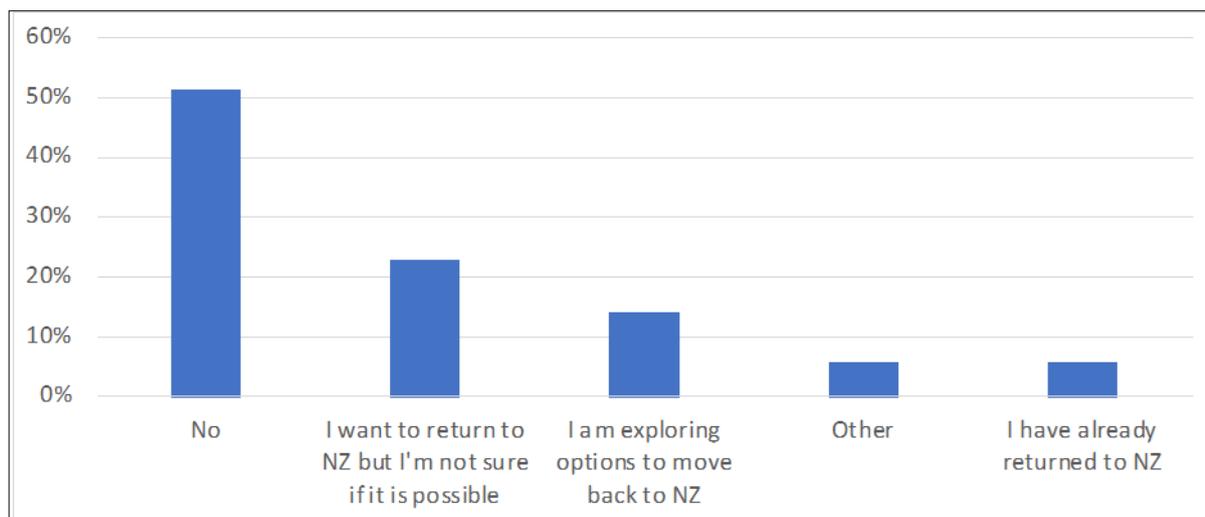
Respondents to the survey were asked “To what extent has the COVID-19 crisis affected how you feel about living in Australia?” As Figure 8 illustrates, only a very small proportion (6%) felt somewhat positive as a consequence of their experiences of Covid-19 while the vast majority (71%) felt about the same. In contrast, 24% of respondents indicated that they were somewhat negative about living in Australia as a result of their Covid-19 experiences. These responses generally aligned with responses to questions about employment impacts and financial circumstances, respondents who had been adversely affected were more likely to feel more negative about living in Australia.

Many respondents commented on the Australian government’s response, and tended to do so favourably; for example, “the government has explained very well”, “I felt it worked really well”, “government is looking after citizens and residents” and “there has been strong state leadership and communication”. For others, however, there were concerns that the Australian government were “very slow [to] react/respond to the enormity of this pandemic”, had “poor messaging” and that “information from the government is ambiguous”. Another respondent felt the government response “confirms the general contempt that Australia, especially its government, has for New Zealand”.



Future in Australia—continued

Figure 9: Survey, responses: “Have you considered returning to New Zealand due to COVID-19 concerns?”



In the context of these uncertainties, respondents were asked to indicate whether they had “considered returning to New Zealand due to COVID-19 concerns?”. Figure 9 shows that while 51% of respondents are not considering returning, another 43% either want to return but cannot (23%), are exploring options to return (14%) or have already returned (6%). Another respondent noted that they had “thought about [returning] but would prefer to exhaust all options here first.”

These results contrast with those in the original research report (Collins and Nandedkar 2020), which noted that almost all respondents either intended to remain for between 5 and 10 years or had no definite plans to return to New Zealand. Covid-19, then, appears to have had an impact on many respondents’ future plans. As the following comments illustrate, experiences during the pandemic had added to concerns about the risks of non-citizen status in Australia:

“I am very worried that if I or my husband lost our jobs we would be in strife. We have no family over here, and our family in New Zealand won’t be able to help much. Australia are happy to take our taxes but when it comes to helping us aren’t keen at all.”

“There will be kiwis in Australia not entitled to any government support at all. Some will be forced to go back to New Zealand, some will not be able to due to their children being born in Australia and not allowed to leave. This pandemic should make all New Zealander’s in Australia seriously considering applying for permanent residence and citizenship, for their own protection.”

“After this the only thing that has changed in my mind is I wish the Australian govt would make it easier for New Zealand to get access to support if they have lived here long term like myself, as we are not citizens some are doing it tough I am a lucky one but it would be nice to see the Australian govt make changes around special category visas when New Zealand have lived here long term and contributed to society / tax etc”

Even for those who indicated they were not changing their plans – Covid was acknowledged as being influential. One respondent noted that “I am unable to [return] as my family are all here, but if they hadn’t I would’ve. It [Covid-19] reinforced my fears of being in a vulnerable position of not having citizenship.” Another noted that “if there was no [government] support at all I would have considered moving back a lot sooner than expected”.



Summary

This research supplement highlights some of the impacts and consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic for New Zealand citizens in Australia. While the sample size is relatively small, the responses to the survey and comments offered by respondents highlight a number of important points:

- At the time of this survey the majority of respondents had not experienced significant adversity in their employment or financial situation due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- A substantial minority, however, are worse off financially as a result of reductions in working hours, reduced business, compulsory leave or loss of employment.
- Eligibility for JobKeeper and other forms of government support, or the ability to access superannuation, have been critical supports for respondents facing financial difficulties.
- Respondents who have been less affected by the pandemic are actively supporting whānau/family and friends in both Australia and New Zealand.
- The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted respondents' views about living in Australia as non-citizens and plans for future migration. Many more are now considering returning to New Zealand and even amongst those who are not, some wish that they were able to.

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